

# THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES IN PROMOTING UNDERUTILIZED CROPS: THE CASE OF MASENO UNIVERSITY, KENYA

## **Abstract:**

The role of African indigenous vegetables (AIVs) in poverty alleviation and food and nutrition security in Kenya has not been fully exploited, even though these crops have several nutritive and agronomic advantages. AIVs have been generally neglected and are facing extinction, unless urgent measures are taken. As a result of this situation, the AIVs Research Working Group was formed at Maseno University in 1996 with the aim of promoting the production, utilization, and conservation of AIVs in Kenya. The activities undertaken so far include: major national, regional, and global multidisciplinary research projects funded by various agencies (e.g., Bioversity International, Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency through Lake Victoria Research Initiative (VicRes) and the International Foundation for Science, and the European Commission). Baseline and market surveys were undertaken through these initiatives and priority AIVs were identified. Also carried out were germplasm collection, evaluation, and multiplication. Development of AIVs seed support system at Maseno University was also established and 77 contact farmers have been trained and provided with AIVs seeds. Agronomic studies for these crops were also undertaken and seed production protocols developed. Capacity building at undergraduate and post-graduate levels, increase in students undertaking AIVs researches at undergraduate level from 20% in 2001 to 70% in 2006, establishment of University Botanic Garden in 2001 resulting in 20 AIVs conserved ex-situ, development of AIVs posters and leaflets for teaching, and organization of workshops, conferences and stakeholder meetings on underutilized food crops are all activities carried out by the University in order to promote the production and consumption of AIVS in Kenya. In conclusion, universities can play a vital role in promoting underutilized crops through research, capacity building, conservation, conferences, exhibitions, field days, and outreach programs.