



Learning from experience: MIRACLE organizes exposure tour for Malawi farmer-leaders

On 8 to 10 April, the MIRACLE Project in Malawi organized a farmer exposure and educational tour for 35 of the project's farmer-leaders in Blantyre, Lilongwe, and Nkhataby District. The educational tour familiarized the farmer-leaders about the on-station activities of IITA-Malawi particularly on soybean, cowpea, and cassava breeding, exposed them to the concept of permaculture and compost-making, and helped IITA researchers evaluate promising soybean and cowpea varieties being tested under on-station trials at the Chitedze Research Station.

"The idea of this educational tour is to provide our MIRACLE farmer-leaders the opportunity to observe certain things that are not available in their respective areas such as new crops and new crop varieties, new planting techniques, and modern agronomic practices. This will give them, then, better perspective and more ideas on how to improve the implementation of the project's interventions in their sites," says Paul Zauzau Chunga, MIRACLE-Malawi's research agronomist.

"This is also a good opportunity for them to observe how other people grow food crops outside of their usual environment and pick up some good ideas along the way. In the process, they widen their related skills and knowledge," he added.

At the Chitedze Research Station, the farmer-leaders were exposed to the importance of inoculants, adoption of improved varieties, and using biological nitrogen fixation to enhance their legume production. They were also shown the various soybean, cowpea, and cassava breeding research activities being carried out under MIRACLE. Specifically, the farmers learned about how variety crosses were developed and evaluated on-station. The farmers also saw the newly introduced soybean lines from China that had larger seeds than the IITA lines and the leaves of which can also be consumed as vegetable.

As an important part of the tour, the farmers were taken to an IITA advanced cowpea and soybean variety trials field. Here, they were



Farmers doing an evaluation exercise on one of the soybean trials.

briefed on the origins of the varieties deployed by MIRACLE in the participatory variety selection (PVS) and demonstration plots that involve the farmers. The aim is to make them fully appreciate the processes required to develop such varieties and the importance of their roles in the PVS and demos.

At the Nature's Gift permaculture, the farmers learned about the importance of caring for nature, practicing conservation agriculture, growing different plants for food and medicinal purposes (i.e., pawpaws, guava, moringa, lemon grass, amaranths, aloe, cocoa, yams), making manure compost, producing vegetable (leaf and fruit), and raising livestock (rabbits and chicken). According to the farmers, the visit to this place was very beneficial to them.

Mr Geoffrey Kalombola, a lead farmer from Blantyre who spoke on behalf of the farmers thanked IITA and MIRACLE for organizing such an initiative. "This was a really productive tour. We learned a lot and picked up new and innovative ideas that we could apply when we get back to our own farms, particularly in the areas of soybean and cowpea production and compost making."

"For me, personally, I am excited to implement some of the things I learned in my field to boost the production of my crops and ensure the food and nutrition security of my family. And maybe along the way, I may also be able to impart some of the knowledge that I picked up to my fellow farmers in my community and help them as well. We all win!" he concluded with a smile.

Announcements

Webinar on "Crop pest prevention; better than cure" featuring IITA scientist Fen Beed on CGIAR-supported research on pest risk and surveillance: case study of the CGIAR Research Program on Roots, Tubers and Bananas, to be hosted by the World Bank-coordinated Forum for Agricultural Risk Management and Development (FARMD, www.AgRiskManagementForum.org and Info_FARMD@AgRiskManagementForum.org), Tuesday, 21 May, 14:00 GMT

CGIAR Research Program on Integrated Systems for the Humid Tropics - Action Area Workshop 20-24 May 2013, Horizon Hotel, Bukavu, The Democratic Republic of Congo

Annual Review and Planning Meeting, Achieving Sustainable Striga control for poor farmers in Africa through the Integrated Striga Management in Africa Project (ISMA) 4-7 June 2013, Imperial Hotel, Kisumu, Kenya

Fascination of Plants Day 2013 celebrated in IITA



IITA celebrated the second worldwide Fascination of Plants Day (FoPD) at the IITA International School on 17 May. The highlight of the event was a presentation to school kids on "Plants R Us", by Dr Forest (Deni Bown, Manager of the IITA Forest Project). Speaking on the importance of plants, she said that "everything comes from plants," including the air we breathe; and that "all sweet and good-smelling things come from plants."

She explained how plants, through "magic" (photosynthesis) are able to produce oxygen and maintain life on earth. She pointed out that the largest flower in Africa (P.G. plant) and the largest bean in the world (Entada) can only be found in the IITA forest.

She said that the Ibadan malimbe, an endangered bird species, is now found only in IITA where a patch of forest still exists and remains as a habitat of many birds. The unique nest of this bird is a wonder to the human and animal world. Caution she said, must also be given to ensure that forests and the materials from them are not adversely tampered with as this will result in the extinction of most plants and animals.

During her presentation to the students, she showed products and artifacts made from plants, including a wooden spear, a poison dart, baskets, and other materials. She explained how early men adapted to the forest life and how early inventions from plants came to be.

Carole Inniss-Palmer, head teacher of the IITA International School, was especially happy about the celebration of FoPD because according to her, the students and the school have been working closely with the Forest Project, planting trees and helping conserve the IITA forest. She was optimistic that her pupils have been drawn closer to nature by the event and that the experience is what they need to enhance their learning.

Michael Abberton, Head, Genetic Resources Center (GRC), who is one of the three organizers of the event in IITA, said that the FoPD "provided a great opportunity for the children to learn about plants and appreciate them."

The students also visited GRC to see a colorful exhibition of important crop plants and seeds as well as food products obtained from them that included cassava cake, banana cookies, soybean milk, and more.

At GRC Michael and Badara Gueye, In Vitro Propagation and Conservation Specialist, also talked about plants and why we should be fascinated with them. GRC staff that included Olaniyi Oyatomi, Abigail



Dr Forest talks about the importance of plants during the celebration of Fascination of Plants Day 2013 at the IITA International School.

Adeyemi, and Tope Jekayinoluwa, explained the importance and diversity of seed crops and how they are being managed in the genebank; tissue culture procedures; and the importance of plants to life and the various uses and applications of plants.

Ms Ezurike, who works on postharvest products, explained how food materials were obtained and processed from various crops. Mr Folarin Soyode talked about how some food crops, such as cassava, yam, and plantain, grow in the field, are harvested, and used as food. Mrs Delphine Amah, Regional Breeding Manager, talked about some fascinating things about

plantain and banana: how after harvesting these can be transformed into different edible products.

After a brief tour of the GRC facility and a group photograph, the children were provided with improved seeds for planting.

FoPD is celebrated around the world under the auspices of the European Plant Science Organization (EPSO). This year's EPSO World Coordinator for FoPD 2013 is Prof Trine Hvostlef-Eide, a member of the IITA Board of Trustees. She is a professor at the Department of Plant & Environmental Sciences/ Head of Imaging Centre Campus Ås, Norwegian University of Life Sciences (UMB).

Welcome!

Andrea Gros is IITA's new Head of Communication. Before coming to IITA she has worked for over 20 years as a communication expert in Africa, with long-term assignments in Rwanda, Mali, Kenya, Guinea, and Tanzania. With an academic background in audiovisual communication, marketing, economics, and sustainable development, she is experienced in using media for agricultural development. By developing participatory approaches for the involvement of smallholders in decision making processes, Andrea has carried out successful programs for international organizations, such as FAO, UNDP, and the African Union as well as smaller organizations and consultancy firms. Her technical expertise lies in communication strategy development, qualitative research, print, TV, and radio production, fundraising, monitoring and evaluation. She has also designed and managed event-based campaigns, music tours, and exhibitions in rural



settings in Africa and Asia. More recently she was seconded by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs to the Khmer Rouge Tribunal in Cambodia,

where she held the position of Communications Advisor to the Victims' Unit. Again for the Swiss Cooperation, Andrea worked as Communications Advisor in a value chain development program in Dodoma, Tanzania. In 2011-2012 she co-directed one of the biggest cultural events in East Africa, the 2011 Sauti za Busara festival in Zanzibar and the production of a popular TV and radio show in Tanzania on gender issues, called "The Team". Andrea is a citizen of Germany and Switzerland. She can be contacted by email at a.gros@cgiar.org, Skype at [andrea-gros](https://www.skype.com/en/contacts/andrea-gros), and at extension 2987.