

New project to boost yam production in West Africa

A new project that will develop new varieties of yam and enhance its breeding capabilities and partnerships in the West Africa region will soon be launched. Smallholder farmers in the main yam-growing areas of West Africa will benefit from this new project.

The 5-year project, called “AfricaYam: Enhancing Yam Breeding for Increased Productivity and Improved Quality in West Africa”, will be led by IITA with key partners in the four main producer countries in West Africa: Benin, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, and Nigeria, and international research organizations and universities.

This crucial staple crop plays a very important role in food security, income generation, and the sociocultural lives of at least 60 million people in West Africa.

“Yam breeding can make major contributions to addressing this situation. The new project will raise the capacity for yam breeding in West Africa by developing high-yielding and robust varieties of white and water yams preferred by farmers and suited to market demands,” said Robert Asiedu, IITA Research for Development Director, Western Africa. He said that important traits for breeding include tuber yield, tuber quality, and resistance to yam mosaic virus (YMV) in white yam and Yam Anthracnose Disease (YAD) in water yam.

The project partners will work towards increasing yam productivity while



IITA scientists inspecting yam plants in the field.

reducing production costs and impact on the environment by developing and deploying farmer-preferred varieties with higher yield, greater resistance to pests and diseases, and improved quality.

The project will be supported with a US\$13.5-million grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and co-financing from participating institutions.

The key project partners in West Africa are the National Root Crops Research Institute (NRCRI) and the Ebonyi State University (EBSU) in Nigeria; two research institutes under the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) in Ghana (the Crops Research

Institute and the Savanna Agricultural Research Institute); the Centre National de Recherche Agronomique (CNRA), Côte d’Ivoire; and the Université d’Abomey-Calavi (UAC), Dassa Center, Benin. Research partners outside the subregion are the Japan International Research Center for Agricultural Sciences (JIRCAS), and the Iwate Biotechnology Research Center (IBRC) in Japan; the James Hutton Institute (JHI), UK; the Centre de Coopération Internationale en Recherche Agronomique pour le Développement (CIRAD), France; and the Boyce Thompson Institute for Plant Research (BTI), Cornell University, USA.

Farmers testify to IITA’s Striga-resistant maize varieties

The IITA Maize Improvement Program coordinated by Dr Abebe Menkir organized a farmers’ field day on 9 October at the Mokwa research station in Nigeria to showcase maize varieties/hybrids that are resistant to *Striga hermonthica*.

The field day drew more than 60 farmers, including policy makers, opinion and traditional leaders, women and youths. Some of the farmers traveled from Kwandegbe village, about 70 kilometers away from IITA-Mokwa station to attend the field day. More about this story coming up in the new online publication called R4D Focus that will be launched soon.



IITA scientists and farmer-participants at the field day in Mokwa.

Got a story to share? Please email it with photos and captions every Wednesday to Andrea Gros (a.gros@cgiar.org), Katherine Lopez (k.lopez@cgiar.org), Jeffrey T. Oliver (j.oliver@cgiar.org), Catherine Njuguna (c.njuguna@cgiar.org), or Adaobi Umeokoro (a.umeokoro@cgiar.org).

IITA participates in Advisory Committee of FAO Forum on Communication for Development

Today, there are more than 500 million family farms out of the 570 million farms worldwide. Consequently, systems-based research for family farming is becoming an important mode of agricultural research in both developing and developed countries as family farms are major players in food production throughout the world. In connection with the International Year of Family Farming, IITA participated in the international Forum on Communication for Development & Community Media for Family Farming (FCCM) at FAO in Rome, 23–24 October 2014. IITA showcased examples of the role of Communication for Development (ComDev) methods and tools as a driver for innovation and farmers' engagement in agricultural research strategies.

As IITA and Humidtropics have made significant progress in communication to engage farmers in agricultural research and make their voices heard in policy processes via innovation and R4D platforms, the FCCM also invited IITA to participate in their Advisory Committee with the aim of promoting new joint communication initiatives as sustained, inclusive, and efficient processes involving farmers and the rural population.

The IITA Head of Communication, Andrea Gros, an experienced ComDev specialist and member of the FAO Advisory Committee, developed and presented relevant CGIAR case studies, one of which was conceptualized together with Moses Chamwada Kivanda of the Western Kenya farmers' organization We RATE. This organization has evaluated N2Africa, Humidtropics, and IITA research and knowledge products via farmers' networks, using mobile phone messages and support as communication tools. "Research communication is often top-down and does not include farmers," Mr Kivanda says. "We, the farmers, need to develop our own communication tools to make our concerns heard in the decision-making offices. I really appreciate this opportunity facilitated by IITA to present farmers' concerns at the UN level."

With IITA and the CGIAR consortium participating in the ComDev Forum, recommendations to improve ComDev for agricultural research worldwide were developed and addressed at the Global Dialog of Family Farming, that also took place at FAO on 27–28 October. The main results of the meetings are as follows:

- Relevant communication experiences were shared and the evidence base for ComDev was demonstrated;
- Multi-stakeholder policy dialogue on communication services in rural areas was facilitated and taken forward in institutional commitments;



Andrea Gros (second from left), IITA Head of Communication, with other ComDev practitioners at the FAO meeting in Rome, including WeRATE farmer-partner Moses Kivanda (rightmost).

- Strategic initiatives to promote rural communication policies and services were identified with donors, decision-makers, development, farmers' and research organizations as well as academia;
- The ComDev networks addressing family farming issues and increased collaboration at the regional and global level were strengthened and planned partnerships were brought forward.

At the end of the meeting the participants agreed on the following recommendations: on **enabling policy and institutional frameworks**: build cross-sectoral alliances to promote and implement law and policy reforms on communication and family farming; provide an enabling regulatory environment for community radios, integrate critical analysis of women's and men's specific needs into efforts to develop rural communication services; on **investments and partnership opportunities**: partner in building the evidence base for rural communication services, urge governments to invest in reinforcing community-based communication services and upscaling good practices, engage in multi-stakeholder partnerships, to embed communication in development initiatives/programs, ensure affordable

access to infrastructure and services for rural communities, particularly to women and youth; on **capacity development**: develop the capacity of rural actors at all levels to engage effectively in rural communication processes, facilitate knowledge, confidence and agency of women and men farmers to voice their needs and concerns, and interact and organize themselves, develop collaborative learning strategies that link directly to rural realities, develop mechanisms and tools for coordination and partnerships ensuring that ComDev principles are evident and operational. The participants also agreed to establish the FCCM as an informal mechanism to advocate for rural communication policies and services and to steer collaboration among relevant actors. The FCCM will be supported by a working group consisting of research and development institutions, farmer organizations, community media, NGOs and universities.

ComDev is now acknowledged as a necessary dimension of agricultural research and new ComDev programs are piloted in the context of the reform of agricultural extension and advisory services to make them more participatory, interactive, and efficient.



Andrea Gros participates in meeting of FAO Advisory Committee on ComDev.

IITA hosts UCLA professor as part of establishing Congo Basin Institute in Cameroon

IITA Headquarters and the West Africa Hub hosted the visit on 13 and 14 October of Thomas B. Smith, Professor of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), for discussions on the UCLA-IITA joint initiative to establish the Congo Basin Institute (CBI) at the IITA Cameroon campus. Prof Smith was accompanied by Dr Rachid Hanna, IITA Cameroon Country Representative. In the meeting with Senior Management, Prof Smith provided an overview of the concept of the Congo Basin Institute (CBI) and showed a promotional video on it. Information on the CBI can be found at: <http://www.environment.ucla.edu/ctr/initiatives/cbi/>. He explained that CBI--a joint initiative in association with several U.S. and local universities and ICRAF's West and Central Africa Division--will serve as a regional nexus for interdisciplinary research, education, training, and technology development focused on critical issues facing the Congo Basin. This has implications for both the developing and developed world such as climate change and its impacts, water and food security, and human and animal health. The CBI will be designed to integrate and expand on the existing IITA campus in Yaoundé, including areas for molecular biology, plant health, soil and plant analysis, plant tissue culture laboratories, and other existing infrastructures. The facility will be transformed into a synergistic research campus that will also include a large conference center, staff and visitor housing, and remote sensing, distant learning, equipment repairs and business incubation facilities.

IITA and UCLA have already signed a "Term Sheet" that paves the way for joint efforts to mobilize resources for the establishment of the CBI. IITA Senior management was represented by Drs Kenton Dashiell (DDG-Partnerships and Capacity Development), Ylva Hillbur (DDG-Research), Kwame Akuffo-Akoto (DDG-Corporate Services), and Robert Asiedu (Director of Western Africa Hub). Also present were Zoumana Bemba (Director of Capacity Building) and Hilde Koper-Limbourg (Head of Project Administration Office).

During his visit, Prof Smith gave a seminar on the challenges and needed actions for biodiversity conservation in the face of climate change and toured



IARSAF members with Dr Rachid Hanna, IITA Cameroon country representative (center in white) and Prof Thomas Smith (in blue) of UCLA in IITA, Ibadan.

the IITA forest and major facilities. He was very impressed with the extensive campus and thought it was a great model, providing additional inspiration for the CBI.

Before his departure, Prof Smith met with a group of students from the International Association of Research Scholars and Fellows (IARSAF) and briefly introduced CBI, emphasizing that one of CBI's main objectives is to create a platform of higher education for increasing students' capacity. He also provided the students with examples of potential funding programs, such as the National Geographic Society and Conservation Action Research Network, among others, which provide funding for African students. He encouraged the students to form a journal club and suggested inviting the senior author

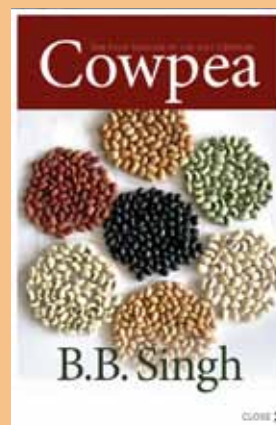
of a selected publication to join the discussion via Skype. Another area that he talked about was the COACH program, a grass-roots organization working to increase the number and career success of women scientists and engineers through innovative programs and strategies and offers training sessions either on-site or through the web (<http://coach.uoregon.edu/coach/index.php?id=7>). In subsequent email exchanges, IARSAF was able to receive a commitment from Geraldine Richmond, the founder of COACH, to give a training session during the upcoming IARSAF symposium in Ibadan in March 2015.

Overall, Prof Smith expressed his gratefulness for the warm hospitality he received from team members, and is excited about the future of CBI and the many possibilities for global change.

Off the press

The Crop Science Society of America (CSSA), Inc. has just published a new book: Cowpea: The Food Legume of the 21st Century. Written by former IITA cowpea breeder B.B. Singh, the book is all about cowpea and how research on the crop, also known as black-eyed peas, has helped contribute to reducing some of the world's biggest problems, according to CSSA. IITA cosponsored the production of the book.

Said CSSA: "B.B. Singh wrote this book to serve as an accessible summary of cowpea breeding, management, and use. He has devoted his life's work to solving the "protein gap" of the Green Revolution in which the emphasis on corn and wheat neglected the protein-rich legumes vital to plant-based nutrition. Today, under his careful



tending, cowpea truly has become the food legume of the century. From genetics to recipes, he gives a full account of how cowpea belongs in our global agriculture and in every diet. Along the way, he shares his inspiring story."

For more about the book and Dr Singh, go to <https://www.agronomy.org/science-news/bb-singhs-quest-make-cowpea-food-legume-21st-century>.