Dietary diversity to deliver better nutrition

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The solution to many problems of nutrition, diet and health could be growing in peoples’ fields and gardens. That was the message of several presentations at the 18th International Nutrition Congress, which took place in Durban, South Africa from 19 to 23 September. Researchers from IPGRI reported on initiatives that seek to tackle the double burden of soaring rates of obesity, diabetes and heart disease – usually associated with over-eating – and malnutrition diseases caused by a lack of essential micronutrients. “Both have been linked to the consumption of simplified diets,” affirms Dr Francisca Smith, an IPGRI Honorary Fellow.

IPGRI’s strategy is to mobilize indigenous and traditional crops to deliver a more diverse diet that is more nutritious and healthier. This is based on several pilot studies around the world, which showed the many positive impacts of boosting agricultural biodiversity.

Successful survey on Beta nana

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The wild beet Beta nana is a rare, endemic and red listed species of Greece, only occurring at high elevations (1800 m to 2600 m). The first survey of M.F.G. Dale collecting Beta nana on behalf of the IBPGR in 1980/81 suggested that the species is endangered by genetic erosion.

Almost exactly 25 years after Dale’s first survey the distribution area was visited by Rich Hannan and Barbara Hellier (USDA/ARS), Stelios Samaras (GGB) and Lothar Frese (BAZ) from 22 August to 5 September 2005 to reassess the conservation status of the species. Beta nana was detected on the Taygetos, Vardoussia, Giona, Parnassos, Chelmos and Olympos mountains.

The number of plants per population ranged from a few on the Taygetos up to a thousand plants on the Olympos, where genetic erosion came to a halt owing to a sustainable management of the nature park area. The geographic coordinates of individual populations were GPS recorded to create a better data baseline for monitoring the species in future. With the collected material, urgently needed seed multiplication procedures can now be elaborated to rescue the germplasm once gathered by Dale and stored since then under long-term conditions in Greece and Germany. Using the same material the geographic structure of genetic diversity of B. nana will be analyzed by the US partner to provide in situ conservation projects with information if the need arises. Only at the end of the travel in the remote and rough areas, the members of the team admitted that they had worried about a possible failure of the mission. Good teamwork and preparation, and a share of good fortune, made the survey surprisingly successful. This is good news for Beta nana, a crop wild relative of the sugar beet!