

Ethiopian enset: Can native plants be improved for economic viability?

Ethiopians have cultivated enset—a cousin of the banana tree—for thousands of years, converting its stalk, roots and leaves into food, medicine, decoration and more.

For all of the merits of sturdy, indigenous crops like enset—and small, diverse farms in general—they are unlikely to raise subsistence farmers out of poverty, which fosters a slew of problems. “Enset is great if a farmer is relying on [their] own production for food, but ultimately you want people to grow their incomes, which means they need to produce something they can sell,” says Paul Dorosh, of the International Food Policy Research Institute.

Many maintain that classic Green Revolution strategies to increase productivity through high-yielding monocultures are the best solutions to food security. Yet agroecologists like Kippie are quick to point out less favorable results of the revolution, such as the loss of biodiversity, soil erosion and a spike in fossil fuels required to operate machinery.

If diversity is the key to small farmers’ survival: How can their native way of life be economically viable? [Researchers suggest](#) the solution is to better integrate native crops into the market—that way they could garner a profit on top of feeding families. That approach has been somewhat successful with another Ethiopian crop, the grain teff.

Another avenue of research focuses on how to improve the yield and robustness of native crops. Scientists with the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture, a research organization focused on hunger and poverty, are evaluating natural and genetically modified varieties of enset that would withstand a blight of enset and banana called bacterial wilt.

Tadesse Kippie, an agroecologist at Dilla University, offers non-tech solutions: greater access to indigenous crops.

Read full, original article: [Solving Hunger in Ethiopia by Turning to Native Crops](#)