

MEDIA RELEASE

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NUTRITIONAL POWER OF VEGETABLES FOR HEALTHIER LIVES, MORE RESILIENT LIVELIHOODS

It's time for agriculture to ensure what's on the plate is nutritious as well as filling. One sure way to achieve the needed dietary balance is to tap the nutritional power of vegetables.

This will be a key message of Dr Marco Wopereis, Director General of the World Vegetable Center (WorldVeg), in his address to *"Reshaping Agriculture for Better Nutrition: The Agriculture, Food, Nutrition, Health Nexus"*, the 2018 Crawford Fund annual conference in Canberra on 13-14 August. Dr Wopereis will be joining other international and Australian specialists to consider how to reshape agriculture to address the increasingly urgent and competing needs of the hungry and the over-nourished, and the finite resources of our environment.

"Now is the time to prioritize investments in vegetables, from the household to the national research and development policy levels," Wopereis said. "It is the surest route to provide healthy diets for all and increase economic opportunities for smallholder farmers."

"Having sufficient calories is no longer enough, and sometimes it's too much. With an estimated 2 billion people lacking the micronutrients needed for good health and another 2 billion people overweight or obese, we need a major shift in our thinking, our investments and our diets."

"Vegetables are an important source of vital micronutrients," Wopereis said. "Iron to alleviate anemia, vitamin A to counter blindness in young children, folates for pregnant and nursing women—these are among the critical nutrients vegetable crops contribute to human health and well-being."

Wopereis acknowledges that changing dietary preferences is a long process, but a necessary one. "Knowledge comes before demand," he said. "When consumers understand the role of nutrients in health, they start looking for high quality vegetables for their families. With the right seed, skills and support, farmers can capitalize on that demand."

"Increasing the production of nutrient-dense vegetables also generates good income for farmers, gives consumers more and healthier food choices and is a prerequisite for health."

Dr Wopereis noted the significance of breeding activities by the WorldVeg genebank, supported by Australia through the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR). "We house one of the world's largest public collections of vegetable seed for use in the improvement of globally popular crops such as tomato and pepper, and less well-known but equally important traditional vegetables like amaranth and jute mallow. We are pleased to share these with Australian breeders."

WorldVeg plant breeders have introduced 607 improved vegetable varieties in 68 countries around the world, with profound impact. For example, two-thirds of Myanmar's mungbean farmers plant two virus-resistant varieties developed by WorldVeg which benefit about 425,000 farm households. Ongoing research into this important legume is supported by ACIAR through the International Mungbean Improvement Network.

Wopereis explained that WorldVeg also works with communities to develop home and school gardens, follow good postharvest management practices, and improve food safety and market access.