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## **A Case for Eating Your Vegetables**

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Parents have always had a hard time getting kids to either their vegetables—whether they live in Beijing, New York City, or Johannesburg. But in a small town in Arusha, Tanzania, a research center is helping Africans gain access to nutritious—and native—sources of vegetables.

As hunger and drought spread across Africa, however, there's a huge focus on increasing yields of staple crops, such as maize, wheat, cassava, and rice. And while these crops are important for food security, providing much needed calories, they don't provide much protein, Vitamin A, Vitamin C, calcium, iron, riboflavin, thiamin, niacin, other important vitamins and micronutrients—or much taste. “None of the staple crops,” says Dr. Abdou Tenkouano, the World Vegetable Center's Regional Director for Africa {[ADD LINK](#)}, “would be palatable without vegetables.” And vegetables, he says, “are less risk prone” than staple crops that stay in the field for longer periods of time. Because vegetables typically have a shorter growing time, they can maximize often scarce water supplies and soil nutrients better than crops such as maize which need a lot of water and fertilizer.

Despite the focus on staple crops, vegetable production generates more income on and off the farm than most other agricultural enterprises. And unlike staple crops, vegetable production is something that benefits urban and rural farmers alike. In addition, vegetable production is the most sustainable and affordable way of alleviating micronutrient deficiencies among the poor. Often referred to as “hidden hunger,” micronutrient deficiencies—including lack of Vitamin A, iron, and iodine—affect some 1 billion people worldwide, even in the United States. Although at least 50 percent of the U.S. population is considered obese or “overfed,” many people suffer from some of the same micronutrient deficiencies as malnourished people here in sub-Saharan Africa because of overconsumption of high-fat and highly processed foods—yet another ironic thing Americans and Africans have in common.

And micronutrient deficiencies, in rich and poor countries alike, lead to poor mental and physical development, especially among children, and cause poor performance and work and in school, further crippling communities already facing poverty and other health problems.

But by growing more food in urban areas and food deserts—many American cities lack affordable grocery stores carrying fresh fruits and vegetables, forcing the urban poor to rely on fast food—in the U.S. and elsewhere rates of obesity and micronutrient deficiencies can be decreased. Growing more indigenous crops—breeds and varieties that are adapted to local weather and temperatures, pests, and diseases—can help farmers everywhere become more resilient against climate change. Perhaps most importantly, these traditional vegetable varieties taste good, encouraging people to eat more of them.

But simply growing or selling these more nutritious foods is not enough. In both developed and developing countries, people—because of urbanization, poverty, and “McMeals”—children are growing up without knowing how to cook and prepare foods. Many NGOs, including Slow Food International, are helping communities restore these culinary traditions. In Uganda, the Developing Innovations in School Cultivation Project (DISC) teaches students and teachers not only how to food, but also teaches them cooking skills, as well as how to process foods and save seeds. In

California, the Berkeley Community Gardening Collaborative, integrates organic gardening and cooking into school curriculums, so that a passion for food is handed down to the next generation.

When children, and their parents and teachers, grow vegetables — whether in the village outside Kamapala, Uganda or on top of a building in Los Angeles — it nourishes not only their bodies, but helps build culinary and cultural traditions that will last a lifetime.

Bernard Pollack and Danielle Nierenberg are blogging about their travels at Border Jumpers [[www.borderjumpers.org](http://www.borderjumpers.org)]. BorderJumpers.org began in October 2009 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia — when Bernard Pollack and Danielle Nierenberg began a journey to visit nearly every country in Africa. At every stop they are meeting with farmers, community organizers, labor activists/leaders, non-governmental organization (NGOs), the funding and donor communities, and local, regional, and international press. With a Sony handycam, a 8-year old laptop, and sporadic internet connections – their goal is to bring stories of hope from across the region to as large an audience as possible. They will tell the stories that aren't being told—from oil workers fighting to have a union in Nigeria to innovative ways farmers and pastoralists are coping with climate change. They have regular columns on Huffington Post, Worldwatch's Nourishing the Planet, DailyKos, FireDogLake, MyDD, and WorkingLife.