

How new types of vegetable farming benefit communities: evidence from World Vegetable Center projects

Success with Vegetables



Cultivating a taste for traditional African vegetables

Omari Hamisi Gemalao, Zanzibar



Neighbors used to cook vegetables until they became as black as this boot, said Omari Hamisi Gemalao. “Now we know that short cooking times preserve nutrients.”

Many children living on Pemba Island, Zanzibar, Tanzania suffer from malnutrition. Official figures from the Tanzania National Nutrition Survey in 2018 show that about 25% of children in Pemba below the age of five years are stunted. This severely hampers their chances to do well in school and later in life.

This situation was unacceptable to Pemba resident **Omari Hamisi Gemalao**. When he heard that INSIST, a World Vegetable Center (WorldVeg) project, was looking for farmers to form a group to increase vegetable production, earn an income, and improve nutrition, he was quick to join. The INSIST Project is funded by the USAID Feed the Future initiative through the Mboga na Matunda Project of Fintrac.

The INSIST vegetable production groups started in 2019 and called themselves Kutoa ni Moyo, which means “providing something that comes from the heart.” When he joined a group, Omari was growing staple crops such as maize and cassava and only one vegetable, sweet potato leaves.

From the training he received from WorldVeg, Omari realized his farm would become more resilient if he grew several different kinds of crops instead of only three. Diversifying the crops he produced would help provide a stable income—and also provide a range of different nutrients for local diets.

After receiving a seed kit with traditional African vegetables, he started experimenting with African eggplant, African nightshade, Ethiopian mustard, and amaranth. He learned how to plant on ridges, observe proper spacing, and how to use irrigation. He decided to invest in a pump, a generator, and drip irrigation. “I was surprised to see the big leaves of African nightshade,” he said. “This variety was growing vigorously and spreading well. When we cooked it, it tasted much better than the local varieties that I knew, it was much less bitter.”

But there was a problem: African nightshade was not well known in the market in Pemba. Shoppers passed it by, uncertain about what it was and how to prepare it.

Undaunted by the community’s lack of familiarity with the vegetable, Omari embarked on a mission to promote its use and educate his neighbors. He gave the leafy vegetable to people in his community for free. Over time, with Omari’s encouragement and the free samples, people gradually acquired a taste for African nightshade.

Omari Hamisi uses a proven marketing method to develop a customer base for his vegetable crops in Pemba.



He said: “The biggest achievement from my initiative is that people got used to eating African nightshade—that’s my profit!” Through the project, Omari and his wife learned about the nutritional benefits of traditional vegetables and how best to prepare them. “Before the project, we cooked our vegetables until they became black like this boot,” said Omari, hoisting the footwear aloft. “Now we know that short cooking time preserves the nutrients, and the dish is green.”

Omari continues to spread the good news about the nutritional benefits of traditional African vegetables and the need to diversify farm production. In addition to African nightshade, he also began promoting Ethiopian mustard, with similar results. He hopes producing traditional vegetables will soon become profitable for Pemba’s farmers. “The African eggplant variety called ‘DB3’ is very marketable and tastes good, much less bitter than the common varieties,” he said. “I think people will like it.”