

THE EMERGENCE OF COWPEA AS A MAJOR FOOD LEGUME IN THE 21st CENTURY

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Cowpea [*Vigna unguiculata* (L) Walp.] is emerging to be the most important food legume in the tropics and sub-tropics in the 21st century. This is because most of the new improved cowpea varieties mature between 60-70 days and fit well as a niche crop in the existing cereal and root crop-based cropping systems whereas other food legumes like chickpea, lentils, pigeon pea, field pea and beans mature in 120 days or more and compete with cereals for land which makes it less likely for these crops to occupy additional area in the future. Also, there is a greater opportunity to increase cowpea yields by improved plant type and multiple pest resistance compared to other pulses. Cowpea is well integrated in the local cropping and food systems in over 65 countries and the annual world cowpea production has increased from about 0.87 million tons in 1961 to over 6.3 million tons in 2009. The increase in the last decade alone, from 2001 to 2009, was 73% for cowpea compared to an average increase of only 10% for all the pulses. In the wake of increasing global warming, declining rainfall and increased drought and fertilizer prices, it is expected that cowpea production will increase manifold in future when improved '60-day cowpeas' with tolerance to heat, drought and low-P with 30% protein, high iron, zinc, antioxidants and other health factors become available and grown as a niche crop in the cereals and root crops systems covering millions of hectares in Asia, Africa, southern USA and Brazil. Also, the availability of Maruca resistant 'Bt- cowpeas' would bring a surge in cowpea productivity within the next 10-15 years in Africa and parts of Asia where Maruca pod borer is a major pest. The increased cowpea production would find easy markets as a health food in the developed countries and as a staple source of dietary protein for the masses in Asia, Africa and South America where pulses are widely consumed.