

THE RAINBOW COLOURS OF FOOD IN A HEALTHY DIET

Agriculture's role in development is not just about producing enough calories for the poor. Dr Lindiwe Majele Sibanda explains the crucial roles for tradition, culture, innovation and partnership in making delicious and nutritionally vibrant diets possible for all

BY DR LINDIWE MAJELE SIBANDA

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work towards making food security a tangible and sustainable reality across Africa. Yet, my concept of 'food security' goes beyond sterile notions of calories. Food needs to be nutritious and delicious. From farm to table, a diversity of produce is required in a rainbow of colours, along with the traditional recipes and nutritional wisdom passed down the generations through the bonds forged by shared meals.

I call it the 'rainbow revolution'. It is an approach inspired by a farmer whose food knowledge and recipes were integral to developing this more-nuanced concept of what it means to be food secure. That farmer was my grandmother, a hard-working woman that the local Zulu community nicknamed Gogo Mayembe—the granny who wears man's overalls.

My grandmother was a giant Zulu woman; agriculture was in her blood, and she championed a rainbow revolution on her 1-hectare farm. Gogo Mayembe's farm was brightly decorated with all sorts of cereals—green corn, red sweet sorghum, brown millet. The vegetable patch had yellow pumpkins, sweetpotatoes, green traditional vegetables, tomatoes and onions. There was a fruit orchard with guava, orange, lemon and mango trees. At one end of the farm there was an enclosure for our goats and two dairy cows.

I grew up on that farm in Lower Gweru, Zimbabwe, and I went on to operate a commercial beef farm myself. But I also trained in animal sciences first at the University of Alexandria, Egypt, and then at the University of Reading, England, where I earned my PhD. It was during my time as professor of animal science at the University of Zimbabwe that I experienced the eureka moment that took my understanding of food security beyond the idea of 'closing the yield gap' and on to the nutritional vibrancy of the rainbow revolution.



When Dr Lindiwe Majele Sibanda envisions a food secure Africa, she sees the continent's smallholder farmers at the heart of a 'rainbow revolution' in which tradition and innovation marry to make vibrant, nutritionally diverse foods available to all.

The realisation was born partially of personal experience that arose due to changes in my own relationship to food. This was a time when I married my husband, the man I like to refer to as Mr Handsome, and started a family. We abandoned the traditional fare of my grandmother's cuisine for the convenience of eating out and a Western diet.

We were educated abroad. Given work commitments and sports activities, it was convenient and fashionable to eat out. The only exception was when we started a family. After each of three pregnancies, Auntie Ellis would visit with produce from Gogo Mayembe's farm. For four months she would cook food to nourish my family. Then I would once again taste slow-cooked goat meat stews served with enough starch and vegetables to achieve a sense of satisfaction but "leave enough room for our tummies to breathe", as Gogo would say. Once Auntie Ellis left, it was back to a Western diet: French fries, hamburgers, pizzas and fizzy drinks.

With each pregnancy, I gained 10 kilograms and was unable to shed the extra weight. After the birth of my third child, my weight had ballooned

from 63 to 90 kg. Overweight, I delivered one of three keynote addresses at a London conference where I was meant to talk about African food security. Speaking before me was an Indian researcher who spoke of the challenge of 'hidden hunger' as a result of micronutrient deficiencies resulting from too great a reliance on starch and a lack of food diversity.

I learnt that micronutrient deficiency leads to stunting in children and obesity in both children and adults. Agriculture was delivering empty calories and driving up rates of diabetes and hypertension.

This notion of 'hidden hunger' was a new message. My formal agricultural training was mainly about the green revolution—the urgency was to close the yield gap. The emphasis was on growing staples and having an international market of tradeable commodities to put more money in farmers' pockets.

I was deeply affected by the message and the disorienting extent of its implications, including in relation to my own inability to lose the baby weight. So great was that disorientation that when it was my turn to speak, I left my speaking notes

on my seat, forgot to switch on my preloaded PowerPoint presentation and, to this day, I have no recollection of what I said. I realised I had messed up and felt the need to take the next available flight home.

But I was in for a surprise. Greeting me at home was an emissary from Gogo Mayembe: Auntie Ellis. As she greeted me, Auntie Ellis pulled back and opened her eyes wide and said: "What is this, why have you gone so far?" I dropped my head and said: "Auntie, don't do this to me!" In my mind, I saw a flashback of the London conference and I burst into tears.

Auntie Ellis led me by the hand to the kitchen and said: "Don't worry, my baby, we can fix this. Look at what bounty harvest I brought from Gogo Mayembe's farm". She went to the fridge and pulled out the bottles of soda, shouting: "No more soda in this house". She went to the deep freeze where we had frozen prepacked burgers and French fries and she said: "No more French fries in this house. We will slow cook and grill in our open fire."

Auntie Ellis stayed for four months, cooking and serving nutritious food to the whole family and, within that time, I dropped from a dress size 20 to a size 14 and regained my energy and confidence.

My grandmother's approach to agriculture and food now plays a central role in my professional and family life. At home I have introduced a dining table revolution, where I make sure that at least once a week, we as a family prepare a meal together and sit down to eat slowly as we reflect on the ingredients, recipes and the food we are eating.

In my workplace the 'rainbow revolution' inspires my endeavours as I direct the ATONU: Agriculture to Nutrition project and head Africa's Diplomatic Mission for Food, Agriculture and Natural Resource Policy Analysis Network (FANRPAN).

The ATONU project provides technical assistance to agriculture projects that seek to deliver nutrition outcomes but do not know how to design and implement nutrition-sensitive interventions. FANRPAN coordinates policy research and advocacy programs in 17 African countries, making evidence-based policies available to African agricultural ministers so as to form a sustainable route to a food secure Africa. The network embraces the knowledge and experience of government institutions, the private sector and the research community but, importantly, it also extends to farmers.

I believe there are too many people trying to speak for the affected, while the affected are not

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doing enough to be heard. That is an important part of the reason for continuing problems with governance, poverty, food insecurity, water shortages and malnutrition.

To move forward we must conserve the wisdom of the traditional farming base—its knowledge, food diversity, livelihood, assets and cultural dimensions—but complement it with scientific innovation to improve productivity. That too is the message from farmers: they want investment in agriculture and access to technology and markets, but the food security strategy must first feed and nourish the family and eliminate hunger and malnutrition. Only then can we think of food as a marketable commodity and only then can we start to meet other needs.

At the heart of my work is a concrete, implementable plan and an ethos best captured by a prayer Gogo Mayembe would speak over her grandchildren when I was a child: "Lord, I wish my grandchildren would all grow up to be farmers and feed not only their families but the whole of Zimbabwe."

Gogo Mayembe must be smiling from her grave to see that her granddaughter now works to feed and nourish Africa and the world. In that spirit, I too want to contribute a recipe to this special issue of *Partners* dedicated to the traditional food of smallholder communities around the world and innovations to farming systems that make the sustainable production of this food possible. I hope you enjoy the taste of this African dish called Inkobe (boiled maize, peanuts, cowpeas and Bambara nuts). This is one of my favourite childhood dishes; it evokes nostalgic emotions. ■

**Inkobe (in Ndebele)
Mutakura (in Shona)**

Inkobe is a mixture of maize, peanuts, Bambara nuts (indlubu) and cowpeas (indumba). It is an 'all-in-one' kind of meal that is easy to prepare but requires patience and slow cooking.

Ingredients

- 3 cups dry maize/corn removed from the cob
- 2 cups Bambara nuts
- 2 cups peanuts
- 1 cup cowpeas
- 8 cups water for boiling
- 1 tsp salt for the water

Method

1. Soak all ingredients in separate bowls overnight.
2. Boil the maize in 3 cups of water on medium heat for about 2 hours.
3. When the husks look like they are about to detach from the grain, add the Bambara nuts and cowpeas and about 2 cups of water. Simmer until water is just about gone.
4. Add the peanuts and 3 cups of water. Let it simmer and add water to the desired consistency.

Normal cooking time in a traditional stove is about 3 hours, but pressure cookers and microwaves could do this in about an hour.