As Asians get rich and healthy, 'smart crops' replace rice on future menus

TAIPEI (Thomson Reuters Foundation) - Lunchtime in Taipei’s Ximending district is a test of wills and patience as tourists and locals jostle at restaurants and street stalls to choose from steamed and fried dumplings, flat and thin noodles, stuffed pancakes, grills and desserts.

In this foodie haven, one item makes only an occasional appearance on menus and on plates - rice.

Once a staple of Taiwanese diets, rice consumption per person has fallen more than two-thirds in 50 years, according to the United Nations’ Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), as “smart crops” and “super foods” muscle their way onto plates.

It is the steepest drop in Asia but a trend across the continent as urbanization, rising incomes, climate change and concerns about health and food supplies drive a push for alternatives for the future such as millets and more protein.

“I ate a lot of rice when I was younger but now I eat more vegetables, fish and meat. It’s healthier,” said Guan-Po Lin, 24, who moved to Taipei for university.

“People are spending more on food, and they want to eat healthy, and rice is not seen as a healthy choice.”

About 90 percent of global rice production and consumption is in Asia, home to 60 percent of the world’s population. Yet, as trends in Taiwan, Japan, South Korea and Hong Kong show, consumption is set to drop significantly as diets change. Per capita consumption has fallen about 60 percent in Hong Kong since 1961, and by almost half in Japan. In South Korea, it has slid 41 percent since 1978, FAO data showed. Read more..