Growing the list of cropping staples to fuel the world

Over the past 50 years rice, wheat and maize helped to end a growing hunger crisis in many countries. But new challenges loom on the nutritional, economic and climate front and experts are working to add to the list of global staples. The Big Three crops were entrenched during the Green Revolution which culminated in the 1960s when scientific breakthroughs in rice, wheat and maize delivered dramatic yield growth, producing far more food than ever before.

But as these modern varieties moved in, backed with huge investment from government and non-government institutions around the globe, traditional crops moved out. Traditional crops of sorghum and millet in particular were displaced in population powerhouse countries in Africa, Asia and the Indian Subcontinent.

Agricultural research institute the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) said now the world is better equipped to feed itself, international effort must turn to the “hidden hunger” nutrition deficit that goes with cropping monocultures and diets based around them. ICRISAT assistant director general Joanna Kane-Potaka spoke to the Crawford Fund annual food security conference about the Smart Food initiative, which is mounting a case for sorghum and millet to become part of a Big Five.

“We need to grow our list of staples to feed the world of the future. We’re building a scientific case on how that can be good for you, good for the planet and for the farmer,” Mrs Kane-Potaka said. “Once we overcame hunger we realized what we've been doing is just feeding quantities of food and not looking at the quality.

“People may have enough to eat but not actually getting the nutrients which is which is affecting everything from the mental capacity through to the physical issues and even more dire health problems. Read more