



SNAPPED

WHO?

Claudia Foedde from Germany, third-year Tropical Forestry student at the entrance of Van Hall Larenstein in Velp.

IN A HURRY?

'We're working on a project in a study group, and we have to hand in part today. German punctuality does not really apply to me, like so many preconceptions.'

BUSY?

'Besides my study I work as a bartender at a Hard Rock café, I help with recruiting German students for the school and I also give private German lessons.'

TIME OFF?

'I go to Amsterdam almost every weekend. I lived there for eight years and really miss it.' / **ABr**

USEFUL PLANTS SEEK WEALTHY BENEFACTOR

Prota, a mega project partly initiated by Wageningen University, is going through turbulent times. African organisations are demanding more say in its running and financiers are difficult to find. Despite the praise the project has received for spreading knowledge of useful plants in tropical Africa, donors are increasingly demanding quick and tangible contributions to poverty alleviation. 'Prota needs a philanthropist with a long-term view.'

Prota (Plant Resources of Tropical Africa) started five years ago and focuses on documentation and utilisation of useful plants from tropical Africa. It is the successor of the Prosea project, which resulted in a comprehensive databank and series of handbooks on the useful plants of Southeast Asia, for many Wageningen botanists and tropical plant breeders still regarded as *the* international showpiece.

The latest Prota volume, Vegetable Oils, was presented during an international workshop held in Nairobi at the end of September in the presence of a Wageningen UR delegation led by the rector Professor Martin Kropff and Professor Raoul Bino, director of the Plant Science Group. Dr Dindo Campilan, a Filipino researcher at the International Potato Centre, presented a largely positive external evaluation based on the experiences of users of Prota publications and products. Reason to celebrate, although there were worried faces at the meeting as well.

AFRICAN ENTRY POINT

Malawian Dr. Sloans Chimatiro, speaking as agricultural representative of the influential New Partnership for Africa's Development (Nepad), indicated that he 'completely supports' the Prota project and demands for 'African ownership' of the project. He proposed making the Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa (Fara, which is a part of Nepad) the 'new entry point of Prota'. The Prota board responded that it would seriously consider the issue of African ownership in the coming five years. Vice-chair of the Prota board, Dr Zachariah Magombo, also from Malawi, made it clear however that a transfer of power would also have 'increased African-based funding as a logical consequence'.

It's too early to tell what the consequences of 'africanisation' would be for the Wageningen roots of Prota, said the European project leader of Prota, agronomist Dr Jan Siemonsma. 'It is of course very positive that Africans embrace the project. At present, though, I am concerned about the continuity and the lack of funds. I'm afraid that it's not realistic to think that Nepad and Fara will



The Leafy Vegetables Project in Kenya, part of the Prota megaproject, is intended to stimulate cultivation and consumption of 'forgotten' indigenous leafy vegetables. / photo Prota

solve the money problem quickly. We've been in deep water before now, but never as deep as we are at present,' said Siemonsma.

According to Siemonsma, among western donors Prota suffers from its image of being a 'book project', even though the knowledge dissemination is now starting to bear fruit. Students at the Botswana College of Agriculture in Gaborone made so much use of the Prota online databank that Botswana was unexpectedly top of the website's hit list for a while. But this is exactly Prota's main aim: to make available practical and reliable descriptions of useful plants. Many users still prefer printed publications which are distributed free of charge in Africa under certain conditions by the CTA (Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation).

In the evaluation, users had high praise for the 'high quality and relevance' of the handbooks, according to Campilan. Prota scores less well, however, when it comes to reaching intermediate target groups such as policy makers and the private sector.

The small-scale local pilot projects that Prota has set up, such as those encouraging the cultivation and consumption of 'forgotten' indigenous leafy vegetables in Kenya and Burkina Faso, are proof that the project is making a contribution to poverty alleviation, says Campilan. Although he warns that managing these pilot projects requires an intensive effort, he does regard them as 'an excellent way of collecting evidence that the Prota strategy works'.

SEARCH FOR FINANCE

The pilot projects owe their existence partly to the Dutch Directorate General for International Development Cooperation (Dgis), until now one of the main Prota donors. Poverty alleviation and rural development are important focuses of Dutch development cooperation, but so far Prota has not succeeded in getting Dgis to finance its second phase. A total of 11.4 million euros is needed for 2008-2012. At present they only have 2.4 million euros pledged, of which one million comes from the Dutch ministry of agriculture.

Dr Dennis Garrity, general director of the World Agroforestry Centre, where the

African Prota office is housed in Nairobi, recognises the problem. 'Donors go more and more often for quick success, but the effect is only short-lived. A project like Prota is unique and only comes along once every fifty years. But it can never prove that it makes a direct contribution to poverty alleviation in the short term. It's by focusing on hundreds of intermediaries that you are likely to achieve a far bigger impact in the longer term. Prota provides a fundamental platform that belongs in the public domain. Fund raising in the private sector is tricky I suspect. I would tend to think more of philanthropists, as these are often people that are in for the long run,' said Garrity.

It's a tip that the fundraisers at Prota and the Plant Sciences Group have taken to heart. They have already sought contact with the C&A family Brenninkmeijer and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Time is short. Prota only has funding until the end of 2008, and even that hangs in the balance. / **GvM**

See www.prota.org