

Genetic and Genomic Resources of Grain Legume Improvement: 6. Cowpea

By Ousmane Boukar, Ranjana Bhattacharjee, Christian Fatokun, P. Lava Kumar, Badara Gueye

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Cowpea (*Vigna unguiculata*), an indigenous legume to sub-Saharan Africa, is mainly grown in the dry savanna areas as an intercrop with millets, sorghum, groundnut and maize. Cowpea grains rich in protein are consumed in different forms in several parts of the tropics. The average grain yield of cowpea in West Africa is approximately 492kg/ha, which is much lower than its potential yields. This low productivity is due to a host of diseases, insects, pests, parasitic weeds, drought, poor soils and low plant population density in farmers' fields. Ex situ collection of over 15,000 accessions of cowpea and wild *Vigna* germplasm from different parts of the world were assembled in the IITA gene bank. These genetic resources have been explored to identify new traits and to develop elite cowpea varieties. Many cowpea varieties with high yield potential have been developed and adopted by the farmers. Efforts are continuing to develop better performing varieties using conventional breeding procedures, while molecular tools are being developed to facilitate progress in cowpea breeding.

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