

# Sweetpotato support platforms to build a community of practice

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Three Sweetpotato Support Platforms (SSPs), located in Uganda, Mozambique, and Ghana are developing tools and strategies for sharing information and efficiencies to create a dynamic and cost-effective community of practice among researchers and development agents across multiple disciplines and countries. Through the Reaching Agents of Change project, launched in June 2011, they also aim to raise the profile of vitamin A-rich sweetpotato through advocacy and integrate “everything you ever wanted to know about sweetpotato” training efforts into the platform agenda.



■ **Near-Infrared Spectrometer** in Mozambique enables quick determination of nutrient composition of breeding materials.



## ✦ What is the problem?

Compared to its value relative to other food crops in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), there has been a major underinvestment in sweetpotato. Research or extension staff is rarely fully dedicated to sweetpotato (with notable exceptions in Uganda and Kenya). In Eastern and Southern Africa particularly, a disproportionate share of agricultural budgets is devoted to maize research and dissemination and to non-food cash crops. Sweetpotato is typically viewed as a poor person's food or a woman's crop for home consumption only. It does not suffer from attention-grabbing catastrophic disease problems such as brown streak virus in cassava and is essentially left to do “more” with “less.”

Many policy makers, donors, professors, scientists, and even practitioners are unaware of the nutritional and agronomic benefits of sweetpotato or how to integrate it in to their programs. Key bottlenecks to the full potential utilization of sweetpotato have been identified, but there is a dearth of researchers addressing those problems and development agents knowledgeable in good sweetpotato production and post-harvest management techniques.

## ✦ What do we want to achieve?

We want to see a growing and vibrant community of practice, with sweetpotato researchers and development agents able to obtain and apply sweetpotato knowledge effectively. By developing tools, such as common protocols for data collection, and sharing information among researchers and development agents from different countries and disciplines, we want to build synergy and avoid unnecessary duplication of effort.

More broadly, we want to increase breeding capacity to ensure the continuous production of high yielding, disease-resistant, nutritious varieties that are adapted to local agro-climatic conditions and consumer preferences. We also want increased access to those materials for any African country for use in their country programs. We want to change the image of sweetpotato from being a crop of the poor to being a healthy food for all.

We want to reach the Sweetpotato for Profit and Health Initiative's (SPHI) goal of enhancing the lives of 10 million households in 16 SSA countries by 2020 through the effective and diversified use of sweetpotato. The SSPs are integral to fulfilling that goal.

## ✦ Where are we working?

To ensure access to germplasm and technical backstopping, SSPs have been established within each major sub-region of SSA. For East and Central Africa, the SSP is hosted at the National Crops Resources Research Institute (NaCRRI) in

Support for the establishment of the Platforms and the holding of SSP meetings is provided by the Sweetpotato Action for Security and Health in Africa Project, led by the International Potato Center with over 26 collaborating partners.

Uganda and the Kenyan Plant Health Inspection Service (KEPHIS). For Southern Africa, the SSP is based at the Agrarian Research Institute of Mozambique (IIAM) in Maputo. The West Africa platform is located at the Crops Research Institute (CRI) in Kumasi, Ghana.

### ✦ How are we making it happen?

Building the next generation of sweetpotato breeders is core to this effort. Working in close collaboration with the Alliance of Green Revolution (AGRA), CIP breeders based at each SSP are backstopping national program breeders in 12 SSA countries and co-supervising PhD candidate breeders being trained in AGRA-sponsored programs in South Africa and Ghana. Annual sweetpotato speedbreeder meetings are held to learn the latest methods and share findings. Our goal is to have at least 6 new sweetpotato breeders in SSA by 2016 and all national programs using the Clone Selector Excel-based program to record and analyze their sweetpotato trial data based on a common protocol.

At each SSP, capacity will exist to conduct virus testing and produce disease-free planting material and provide all national programs within SSA access to that material. Each SSP will have a quality laboratory, capable of quickly screening breeding material to determine its nutrient composition, including essential vitamins and minerals for human health.

A core group of critical stakeholders were identified and have been participating in SSP meetings held every six months since June 2010. These meetings are an opportunity to update stakeholders on any new knowledge gained from SASHA or other relevant sweetpotato projects. It also provides a forum for sharing new skills among community of practice members. Core to this effort was the establishment of the Sweetpotato Knowledge Portal ([www.sweetpotatoknowledge.org](http://www.sweetpotatoknowledge.org)) in November 2010 – a website that enables SSP members to contribute their own knowledge, references, and stories as well as learn from others. Standardized survey models for conducting baseline surveys for interventions using sweetpotato as a key entry point have been developed and tested in SASHA delivery system studies. They will be shared with all SSP members.

Funding for the Reaching Agents of Change project received in June 2011 will enable the expansion of SSP activities to include communication, advocacy, and training components. The Vitamin A for Africa (VITTA) effort linked to the SSP will focus on the advocacy for the development and promotion of pro-vitamin A



orange-fleshed sweetpotato and the training of development agents in effective dissemination methods. The emphasis will be on developing a trained cadre of Africa advocates and establishing an annual training course on everything you wanted to know about sweetpotato in Tanzania, Mozambique, and Nigeria.

### ✦ What have we achieved so far?

Each sub-region has a functional SSP, holding meetings twice per year. Quality nutrition labs are already functioning in Uganda and Mozambique. Two SSP meetings were held in each sub-region in 2010 and are on track for 2011. The Sweetpotato Knowledge Portal is operational, with 3100 visits received from 1700 users since it was launched in November 2011. Breeders have been trained in the first version of Clone Selector, with an improved version available on the Knowledge Portal. One PhD breeder has graduated, and an additional 7 are in the pipeline. Facilities have been rehabilitated at KEPHIS to support quality germplasm exchange. Additional funds have been raised to support the underfunded areas of advocacy and capacity strengthening in production and use of pro-vitamin A-rich sweetpotato.

The Reaching Agents of Change (RAC) project, led by the International Potato Center in close collaboration with Helen Keller International, seeks to ensure the capacity of African institutions, advocates, and implementing organizations to generate awareness, obtain funding, and effectively implement medium- to large-scale programs to combat vitamin A deficiency (VAD) and food insecurity by exploiting the potential of orange-fleshed sweetpotato (OFSP). The five target countries are Tanzania, Mozambique, Nigeria, Ghana, and Burkina Faso.