

Empowering Rwandan Women through the Rwanda Sweetpotato Super Foods Project

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The Rwanda Sweetpotato Super Foods Project is assessing the relative efficiency of sweetpotato product value chains and their potential to increase farmer income, especially for women farmers who dominate sweetpotato production in Rwanda. Income-wise, there were greater benefits from personal plots than group plots, but women saw groups as platforms for sharing technical and personal information.



■ Groups also provide a social outlet (credit K. Sindi)

The Rwanda Sweetpotato Super Foods Project (RSSFP), a proof of concept project being implemented by the International Potato Center (CIP), seeks to assess the relative efficiency of sweetpotato product value chains and their potential to increase farmer income and equity. The project, which started in 2010, facilitates a linkage between sweetpotato farmers and Urwibutso Enterprises which offers a premium price for roots used in making processed products such as biscuits and mandazis (fried donuts). Since the crop is largely grown by women farmers in Rwanda, the project seeks to investigate whether an improved sweetpotato value chain can improve women's income and empowerment. A second objective of the project is to "compare different models for inclusion of the poor and women in the

development of new market chains for high value SP products". This objective focuses on two organizational models, working with existing farmer's groups and individually contracted farmers to produce sweetpotato roots. A study was undertaken in 2013-2014 to address the lack of detailed information about intra-household decision-making processes and to investigate how project households benefited from the project, who in the household benefits from project interventions, what the effect of increased income from sweetpotato are on women's decision-making power and control over income and what effect if any does group membership have on women's decision-making power and control over income at household level.

The study focused on 49 informants (30 women and 19 men representing 30 households) from four beneficiary groups (Turwanyubukene, Kotemu, Tuvemubwigunge and Dufatanye) and 19 informants representing eleven households (8 male headed and 3 female headed) involved in contract production of sweetpotato roots for Urwibutso Enterprises.

✦ Benefits from project participation

The most important benefit from the project mentioned by all categories of farmers was income from root sales (Table 1). Contract farmers rarely mentioned other benefits from the project besides income.

Table 1: Most important benefits from the Rwanda Sweetpotato Foods Project, by farmer category (frequency)

	Group members			Contract farmers			Total
	Married men (n=19)	Married women (n=19)	Single women (n=11)	Married men (n=8)	Married women (n=8)	Single women (n=3)	
Income from sweetpotato grown on personal plots	6	9	6	7	7	3	38
Learned new production skills	2	7	0	--	--	--	9
Access to new sweetpotato varieties	5	1	1	1	1	--	9
More roots for household consumption	2	2	1	--	--	--	5
Learning how to make mandazis from sweetpotato	3	0	1	--	--	--	4
Income from group sales of roots	0	0	2	--	--	--	2
Other	1	0	0	--	--	--	1



Helen Keller
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■ A few groups started making and selling their own fried doughnuts (credit J. Low)

Average earnings from project varieties in 2013 by both individual group members and contract farmers were considerably higher compared with earnings from local varieties due to premium prices offered by Urwibutso Enterprises. Group members earned a mean of \$56 in season A and \$53 in season B from project varieties and \$27 and \$36 from local varieties in the two seasons, respectively. Contract farmers earned on average \$85 and \$52 from project varieties in season A and B, respectively, compared with \$55 and \$48 from local varieties. Notably, informants reported receiving \$3-\$30 from group earnings since the start of the project. Although average earnings from the sale of project varieties grown on personal plots appear minimal, these earnings were used for a range of household expenditures, the most common being annual mandatory health insurance for each household member, food, school fees and clothing.

Mainly women mentioned new production practices as an important benefit due to the existing gender division of labour. Men appeared to be more excited about accessing new varieties possibly because it is the notion of new/modern varieties, and their marketability which allows them to justify being involved, directly as group members or indirectly as spouses of group members, with a low status crop traditionally associated with women. Informants mentioned a number of non-tangible benefits associated with participation in the project, namely, advantages of working in groups, stronger social skills, and social capital. While most women, except for the poorest, did not perceive significant financial benefits from working in groups, they highlighted the importance of groups as a platform for sharing both technical and personal information.

❖ Benefits of working in groups

All household members benefited from the project through access to surplus roots and increased income used to purchase food, pay for school fees, health insurance, clothing and purchasing livestock. For the most part, in beneficiary households male

and female input into production related decisions on sweetpotato cultivation on household plots was the same for local and project varieties and had not changed due to the project. Respecting cultural norms, wives informed or consulted their husbands regarding varieties to be planted and the sale of large quantities of roots. However, in some households, group membership increased women's decision making power with regard to the quantity of project varieties grown on personal plots to be sold possibly because of the tendency to view the output as belonging to the group. The study concludes that given the "pooling" behaviour characteristic of Rwandan households, the male dominant pattern of decision-making around expenditure and the relatively small amounts of earnings from sweetpotato, increased income from root sales has not necessarily enhanced female empowerment. However, organizing women into groups for training, production, sale and distribution of earnings is likely to enhance their decision making power and control over earnings at household level by virtue of the authority vested in the groups themselves. Whether or not an improved value chain benefits women specifically and what effect it has on female empowerment depends on households' livelihood strategies and wealth status. For most contract farmers associated with the project sweetpotato is a secondary source of income and therefore most decisions about production and allocation related to the crop are made by married women independently, with husbands focusing on more lucrative sources of income.



■ Getting access to new varieties is important benefit for group members (credit K. Sindi)

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