

How to Design an Effort to Combat Vitamin A Deficiency Using OFSP in SSA



Orange-fleshed Sweetpotato (OFSP) has had a positive impact in many communities throughout Africa, and is a welcome source of dietary vitamin A that is especially enjoyed by children.



■ Community theater can effectively create interest (credit J. Low)

Ten steps are critical when designing a successful OFSP intervention:

1. Understand how sweetpotato fits into the current food system. Collect information on: how sweetpotato fits into dominant farming systems; its importance relative to other crops; the extent to which it is commercialized; gender roles in sweetpotato production, marketing, and decision making; consumer and farmer perceptions about the crop (it may be viewed as inferior); and its status in country level food security and nutrition policies.

2. Find out if disease-free, adapted OFSP varieties already exist.

- Are officially released OFSP varieties available? Is there a breeding program developing new OFSP varieties? How do the OFSP varieties compare to the most popular local varieties in terms of yield and

taste. To be competitive, OFSP varieties should perform at least as well as the dominant local varieties.

- If there is no released, competitive OFSP variety, you will need to build in 18-24 months of time to introduce and select varieties to use before you can start a major dissemination effort. Request material to test from your national research center or contact the International Potato Center (CIP).
- Even if there is a good released OFSP variety, if it has never been introduced in the area you plan to work in, investing in one season of on-farm trials is advisable at the beginning of the project.
- Find out if the national program has disease-free foundation material. If it does not, build in a component to get the material “cleaned-up” (which can take up to a year) while you use the best material available in the interim.

3. Determine the extent of the vitamin A deficiency (VAD) problem, how widespread knowledge of the role of vitamin A is and whether combatting VAD and improving nutrition are priorities for the government.

Obtain the most recent data, from the smallest administrative unit possible, on VAD prevalence and rates of stunting (chronic malnutrition) among children less than 5 years old, the group most at risk of VAD. If you find food-based approaches to combatting VAD are not part of existing strategies, build in an advocacy component targeting key decision makers. If knowledge of vitamin A and its importance is low at the community level, take this into account when designing the nutrition education campaign. Prioritize districts for intervention that have high rates of VAD or chronic undernutrition and where sweetpotato is already well-known in the community.



HarvestPlus leads a global effort to breed and disseminate nutrient-rich staple food crops to reduce hidden hunger. HarvestPlus is part of CGIAR Research Program on Agriculture for Improved Nutrition and Health.

4. Decide what dissemination strategy makes sense for your environment.

Sweetpotato is propagated by vines which perish in 2 days if not cared for properly. There are two major dissemination approaches: 1) mass multiplication and dissemination to a large number of households on a given day in a given location and 2) establishing trained quality vine multipliers at the community level from whom farmers pick up vines when they are ready to plant.

The first method can reach larger numbers of households at lower per unit cost faster, but if not well organized, can lead to a high loss of material. The second method is preferred in drought-prone areas, where mechanisms are needed for sustaining access to quality planting material once the project is over. The cost per beneficiary will depend on factors such as population density, quality of infrastructure and availability of good extension personnel.

5. Understand existing vine conservation and exchange systems to decide on whether and how to subsidize vine dissemination.

- Find out how farmers are conserving their vines during the dry season and whether farmers who lack material purchase vines. If vines are sold, find out the price and typical volumes purchased.
- Estimate the cost of producing vines. This helps determine how much it would cost the project to fully or partially subsidize vine dissemination.
- To make an impact on production, a minimum of 200 vines (approximately 4 kgs) should be provided to each household.

6. Decide whether to include a marketing component.

It typically takes 4-5 years to build up successful marketing projects. If your time frame is short (2-3 years), consider focusing on production and consumption of OFSP by vulnerable groups.

7. Choose the major elements to include in your promotion campaign.

Develop a brand image and campaign to promote and raise awareness of OFSP, taking advantage of the color orange. Choose a slogan. Use several promotional approaches to reinforce key messages—consider radio programs or jingles, billboards, community theater, songs, and promotional materials such as t-shirts, depending on your target audience and budget.

8. Build on existing materials when developing nutrition and utilization messages.

- Develop nutritional messages that focus on how OFSP provides vitamin A and reduces deficiency among young children and pregnant and breastfeeding women. Do not have too many messages and keep them simple. Emphasize the importance of diet diversification.
- Check with government and NGO nutritionists to learn what other nutrition training materials are available and can easily be adapted to meet your specific needs. Learn what approaches for changing behaviors have worked successfully at the community level.
- Nutrition messaging should also target men and other influencers of dietary practice (community leaders, mother-in-laws) as they play important roles in child feeding and health care decision-making.

9. Find out who the other actors are in the nutrition and agriculture arena and decide whether you want to partner with them.

Building multi-sectoral programs requires bringing different partners together. Consider whether OFSP can be built into an existing agriculture or nutrition/health intervention, or to approach it as a stand-alone project. Village promoters can be effectively used to expand the reach of extension personnel, but covering more than 30 persons per promoter is not recommended.

10. Determine the essential package of agronomic, post-harvest and utilization messages.

Consider topics such as:

- characteristics of the new varieties
- removing plants with virus symptoms
- adopting cultural practices for weevil control
- harvesting carefully to increase shelf life
- conserving and multiplying vines
- storing fresh roots or dried chips
- making diverse products

The Triple S Method is a new way to conserve roots as a source of future vines that makes sense when the dry season lasts more than 3 months. Demonstrations, as opposed to lectures, are more effective for convincing farmers to change.

The Reaching Agents of Change (RAC) Project advocates for increased investment in orange-fleshed sweetpotato food-based approaches to combat vitamin A deficiency (VAD) among children less than five years old and their mothers. RAC also builds institutional capacity to design and implement gender sensitive projects to ensure wide access and utilization of orange-fleshed sweetpotato in selected African countries. Its efforts contribute to the broader Sweetpotato for Profit and Health Initiative (SPHI) which aims to improve the lives of 10 million African families by 2020.

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