**Spy Ghana**

Invest In Orange-Fleshed Sweet Potato

**By Samuel Hinneh**

**The promotion of the production and consumption of orange-fleshed sweet potato (OFSP) in Ghana is regarded as one of the key strategies to reduce vitamin A deficiency in children and achieve food security. The current efforts by both government and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) to spearhead this initiative are encouraging, however, there is more grounds to cover.**

The technical backstopping that NGOs may need from government extension services may be difficult to access in the current resource constrained operating environment. As a result, NGOs who want to invest in OFSP will need to initially invest in some in-house technical capacity to augment government efforts.

They also need to share resources and experience from the field to ensure that there is healthy collaboration among them. The evidence gathered from the experiences of NGOs in this area should facilitate advocacy activities towards more investment into OFSP, by providing information and evidence on best practices to relevant national authorities and other development partners.

***Food availability***

Sweet potato provides higher yields per given area in a shorter time compared to maize and cassava. The crop can be produced on marginal soils and easily integrated into many cropping systems. Again, improved, early maturing sweet potato varieties are ready for harvest in three to months.

Lydia Sasu, the executive director of the Development Action Association (DAA) says given the right investment in sweet potato production and consumption, Ghana can become food secured as well as improving on the livelihoods of farmers.

As a country, there is the need to ensure that farmers have access to the sweet potato vines in large quantities so that the famers can multiply the vines to produce more of the crop, she said.

Sasu noted that the government in partnership with the private sector and NGOs need to put in place policies and programmes that would attract the youth to venture into producing sweet potato.

***Food access***

Sweet potato can easily be integrated into many cropping systems and its relatively low labour requirements compared to other crops, and ability to be stored in the ground for some time, enhances access for producing households. There is huge potential to use sweet potato in agro-processing, for example, for partial wheat flour substitution as confectionary and snack food.

According to Francis Kweku Amagloh from the University for Development Studies, orange fleshed sweet potato is not readily available on the market currently, however, there is the need to introduce the crop to farmers and eventually become available on the market.

In Ghana, women of childbearing age (15 to 49 years) afflicted with night blindness are about 1.5 times higher compared to the maximum cut-off of 5% for classification a of deficiency with public health significance, he said.

Recent research has focused on testing two approaches to improving sweet potato vines, investing in trained community based vine multipliers who maintain quality planting material to serve the surrounding villages and the Triple S approach, a system designed for households in drought prone areas to store small, healthy roots in sand during the dry season and re-sprout them six to eight weeks prior to the inset if the rains.

*Lydia Sasu assisting school children to harvest sweet potato vitamin A*

***Malnutrition***

Vitamin A deficiency is a huge public health problem in Africa, the results of inadequate dietary intake of vitamin A rich foods and frequent infections. The problem affects an estimated 43% of pre-school aged children.

A wide variety of vitamin A rich foods such as dark green leafy vegetables, mangoes, papaya, pumpkin and orange-fleshed sweet potato that can prevent vitamin A deficiency are readily available in Africa.

However, households are often deficient in vitamin A due to lack of awareness of the importance of a diversified diet, high cost of some vitamin A rich foods and high disease load, especially among young children.

“Sweet potato apart from being one of the starchy staples is a source of carbohydrates and the new ones we have developed is very rich in beta carotene- prerequisite for vitamin A which is very good for children eye sight, and nutrition,’’ says Mr Isaac Baning, the Communication Officer of West Africa Agricultural Productivity Programme (WAAPP), at the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research -Crop Research Institute.

Available statistics by the Ghana Health Service (GHS) 2012 indicate that 12,000 children in Ghana die every year of under- weight related ailments due to malnutrition. The statistics also indicate that under nutrition contributes to about half of all child deaths beyond early infancy whilst one out of every thirteen children in Ghana die before their fifth birthday mostly as a result of under-nutrition.

Four new varieties of sweet potato vitamin A were developed and released in December 2012 by the Crop Research Institute, in total there are about 8 varieties of sweet potato in the country, which are rich in beta carotene.

Lydia Sasu, also emphasised that vitamin A deficiency in Ghana is a problem therefore the need to promote sweet potato vitamin A, which helps in providing the right nutrients to solve malnutrition mostly lacking among poor communities in the country to safeguard food security.

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