

Improving Diet Quality In Ghana Through Resilient Nutritious Sweet Potato

An estimated 218 million Africans suffer from chronic hunger and malnutrition. Additionally, an estimated 43% of pre-school children in Africa are deficient of vitamin A - a micronutrient needed for healthy growth.

In Ghana alone, available statistics indicate that 12,000 children die every year of under- weight related ailments due to malnutrition (Ghana Health Service (GHS) 2012). 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.

Given the high level of malnutrition in Ghana, the country needs a holistic approach of supplementation, food fortification and dietary diversification to combat malnutrition. One problem that is worrisome is the political will, but feeding the entire population with the required nutrients is very essential to sustaining human growth.

The Resilient Nutritious Sweetpotato initiative of the International Potato Center (CIP) seeks to enable at least 15 million households to improve the quality of their diets and raise their crop incomes over the next 10 years in countries with micronutrient deficiencies in Africa and Asia as well as in Haiti.

Reaching this goal involves increasing the production and utilization of nutritious sweetpotato, starting with biofortified orange-fleshed sweetpotato (OFSP), a proven technology for reducing vitamin A deficiency (VAD) among women and children under the age of five. OFSP has been given a head start in Ghana through the flagship project of the Reaching Agents of Change project (RAC) implemented by CIP and Helen Keller International (HKI).

The development goal of the RAC project is to increase the rates of vitamin A intake by generating new investments to scale up adoption of OFSP. RAC also focuses on capacity strengthening for sustainable up-scaling and out-scaling of OFSP.

Malnutrition reduces the ability to fight infections and means children are at much greater risk of measles, respiratory and diarrhoea infections, decreased growth rate, slow bone development, and decreased likelihood of survival from serious illness, says Rosemond Ohene, a Programme Officer with Farm Radio International.

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According to Rosemond Ohene, in many parts of Ghana, sweetpotato is grown, sold and processed in small quantities by women. 'OFSP offers an opportunity to promote increased marketing and processing of sweetpotato, which will boost demand and ultimately producer income', she notes.

Ohene believes 'the Government of Ghana should create awareness of this crop through the ministries of food and agriculture and health for promotion, consumption and utilization of the crop. Farmers should have ready access to vines and there should be demonstration sites where they can learn good cultivation practices'.

Lydia Sasu, the Executive Director of the Development Action Association (DAA) believes that OFSP needs to be given the needed support by the Ghana government by empowering farmers, especially rural women into large scale cultivation.

Sasu, has been promoting OSFP for more than five years in rural areas of Ghana and believes that the technology is environmental friendly and adaptable to the soil types in the country. She asserts: 'OSFP is capable of addressing malnutrition, as well as providing women farmers with adequate source of income to improve their livelihoods.'

'The Ministry of Health could promote OFSP through the various health facilities in the country and highlight its nutritional benefits'' she adds.

Four new varieties of sweetpotato were developed and released in December 2012 by the Crop Research Institute of the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research of Ghana. In total there are about 8 varieties of sweet potato in the country, one of which is rich in beta carotene.

By promoting OFSP varieties that are early maturing, high yielding, drought-tolerant and high in beta-carotene can contribute to increased dietary diversity, food security, household income and reduction in VAD in Ghana, says Julia Tagwireyi, the Regional Advocacy Advisor for the RAC Project.

'In short, by contributing the multiple food security benefits of sweetpotato plus significant amounts of VAD, OFSP is a winning choice in seeming food for all,' she emphasised.

The RAC project has provided clean planting material (OFSP vines) to 779 households. However, more than 1,000 other households are on the waiting list. To meet this demand, RAC has established 3 primary and 23 secondary seed multiplication sites in the central and northern parts of the country.

The RAC Project Deputy Manager Dr Hilda Munyua recommends that African governments should provide conducive legal and policy framework to support these strategies, especially food-based approaches that are accessible by the rural poor, often encumbered by VAD.

Moreover, 'civil society organizations should support the efforts of governments through advocacy and awareness raising. Farmers on the other hand should be educated to set aside land to grow nutritious foods such as OFSP for consumption and for sale'' says Dr Munyua.

A number of efforts are underway or planned in Ghana to bring the benefits of OFSP to farmers and consumers. Close to 500,000 households in Ghana are expected to benefit from OFSP by 2020 and to achieve this will require a significant effort by numerous

partners.

Among ongoing efforts are awareness and demand creation by a radio project, led by Farm Radio International that has been active in Komenda-Edina-Eguafo-Abrem (KEEA) District of the Central Region as well as in the Kassena-Nankana of the Upper East Region, and is currently expanding its efforts to the Volta and Northern Regions.

Efforts are also underway on pilot basis in the Northern and Upper East Regions, to commercialize OFSP through the pilot project, 'Jumpstarting Orange Fleshed Sweetpotato in West Africa through Diversified Markets.'

Francis Amagloh, Lecturer at the University for Development Studies, in Tamale explained 'Under the Jumpstarting project we are aiming to develop markets for OFSP and products made from it, thus providing farmers with a strong incentive to grow the crop.

'Additionally, we will be working with Ghana Health Service through its Community Health Centers to include OFSP in the nutrition counselling program for pregnant women, further stimulating demand for the crop.'

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