

The Reaching Agents of Change (RAC) Project in Nigeria (2011-2014)

Orange-fleshed sweetpotato has emerged from being relatively unknown in Nigeria to becoming part of its Agricultural Transformation Agenda

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ToT participants during a practical session on rapid seed multiplication (credit J. Mkumbira)



Background:

Nigeria is the second largest sweetpotato producing country in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) with annual production estimated at 3.9 million metric tons per year. Sweetpotato is grown in all 36 states, with significant production in each of the six geo-political regions, with around a third of total production concentrated in the North-Central states. According to FAOSTAT, from 2007 to 2011, sweetpotato ranked seventh in terms of aggregate national production in Nigeria after cassava, yam, rice, maize, sorghum and millet. Sweetpotato is the fourth most important root and tuber crop, after cassava, yam and taro. An estimated 41% of Nigerian children under the age of 5 are stunted and 23% are underweight. Every year, an estimated 861,000 Nigeria children die before the age of five. Over a third of these deaths are attributed to undernutrition. Almost 30% of preschool aged children in Nigeria are deficient in vitamin A, a micronutrient that helps young children grow and develop normally and stay healthy.

The orange-fleshed sweetpotato (OFSP) is a vitamin A powerhouse that can address the high percentage of vitamin A deficiency in Nigeria, especially among young children under the age of five and women of reproductive age. In addition, OFSP contributes significant amounts of vitamins C, E, K and several B vitamins. Leaves also have good micronutrient contents and adequate protein (4%) for use as food and animal feed. OFSP can thus be used to cost-effectively improve nutrition, empower women, and increase income earning opportunities, even for the poorest households. Its short maturing period (3-5 months), ability to grow under marginal conditions and flexible planting and harvest times are also driving its expansion.

Despite the comparative advantages in production, there are still many challenges such as drought, floods, low production and consumption of sweetpotatoes. Other challenges include infrastructural and behavior and attitude factors with a perception that sweetpotato is a crop cultivated by women. As a result, the crop has received comparatively little attention.

Findings from the situation analysis conducted at the beginning of the project (2011) revealed that OFSP was relatively unknown among major stakeholders and the general public. Although OFSP varieties had been developed, they were not yet officially released. Sweetpotato was neither a focal crop nor had it been included in the Agricultural Transformation Agenda (ATA). Additionally, most policies targeted root and tuber crops and were not specific to sweetpotato or OFSP in particular.

The Reaching Agents of Change (RAC) project (2011-2014) was a unique initiative that advocated for increased investment in OFSP to combat vitamin A deficiency. RAC worked towards strengthening advocacy, technical capacity and seed systems for successful nutrition interventions using OFSP. The project was implemented by the International Potato Center (CIP) and Helen Keller International in partnership with national research and extension institutions.





ToT participants during OFSP variety taste evaluation at ARMTI (credit J. Mkumbira)



What we wanted to achieve?

The RAC project in Nigeria has been working towards generating new investments to scale up adoption of OFSP as a tool to combat vitamin A deficiency among young children and women of reproductive age. Nigeria was expected to advocate to governments, the private sector, donors and NGOs to achieve new investments totaling at least US\$ 3-4 million for OFSP activities in three years. The project devoted efforts to influencing policy and ensuring OFSP is included as an integral part of strategies that address food insecurity and malnutrition in the country. Project activities in Nigeria focused at the federal level and Nasarawa, Kwara and Benue states.

RAC also worked to build the capacity of national implementing agencies to design and implement technically strong, gender-sensitive and cost-effective programmes that drive uptake of OFSP. The foundation of this effort was the establishment of a 10-day course on "Everything You Ever Wanted to Know about Sweetpotato" – carried out annually over three years. The course was carried out in collaboration with the Agricultural and Rural Management Training Institute (ARMTI), which was committed to conducting the course on an annual basis during and after the project period. RAC also carried out a 6-day learning workshop titled "Engendered Orange-fleshed Sweetpotato Project Planning, Implementation, Monitoring and Evaluation."



What have we achieved?

- RAC has built a cadre of 16 OFSP advocates** (13 at state level and 3 at federal level) to champion OFSP in Nigeria, help generate new investments and influence leaders and policy makers in agriculture, nutrition, and health sectors to accelerate adoption of OFSP as a means to combat vitamin A deficiency and improve food security. Advocates selected include key personnel in media, private sector, donors, government and NGOs.
- RAC advocacy efforts led to the inclusion of sweetpotato in the ATA, paving way for investment in the crop.
- Efforts by the RAC Project in Nigeria led to the birth of the Rainbow Project in 2013, which focuses on the development and utilization of OFSP value chain. Initial funding of \$ 1.2 million for 2014 was released through the Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development and the expectation that there will be 3 additional years of funding. RAC also helped raise additional investments amounting to US\$ 62,479 between 2011 and 2014. Moreover, participants who attended the 6-day "Engendered Orange-fleshed Sweetpotato Project Planning, Implementation, Monitoring and Evaluation" course have developed OFSP proposals amounting to US\$ 67,167. This is quite significant given that OFSP was little known or not known at all in Nigeria at the beginning of the project period.
- Advocacy efforts by the RAC team in Nigeria influenced the inclusion of biofortification and OFSP as a food-based approach into national plans, guidelines and manuals including:
 - The micronutrient deficiency prevention guidelines developed by the Ministry of Health in 2013;
 - The Infant and Young Child Feeding Manual by the Federal and State Ministries of Health which mentioned OFSP as a complementary food for children.
- In Nigeria, RAC focused on creating awareness among decision makers and media practitioners about OFSP as part of a food-based approach to alleviating vitamin A deficiency, and stimulating demand for OFSP through supporting the development of an OFSP value chain strategy. Through RAC's awareness creation efforts, OFSP was featured prominently in three mainstream print media, five online media platforms, two television and three radio documentaries.
- The first year of the project focused on conducting trials to ensure the release of OFSP varieties and preparing for full implementation of the two objectives of RAC. RAC's efforts helped to fast-track the release of two OFSP varieties - King J in December 2012 and Mother's Delight in June 2013.
- RAC has helped put in place a multiplication plan for the production of foundation OFSP seed resulting in the supply of large quantity of clean vine cuttings to the target states. So far, in partnership with the National Root Crops Research Institute (NRCRI) Umudike, RAC has established 6.3 ha and 4.25 ha of disease free primary and secondary materials respectively. Already, 223 households have received OFSP vines.
- The capacity of the training partner, ARMTI, as well as that of 14 national facilitators has been strengthened.
- Three 10-day ToT training courses were conducted in Nigeria between 2012 and 2014 in partnership with ARMTI, and 79 (29 female) secondary trainers have been trained. Some of the 10-day ToT graduates have carried out four step-down courses and trained a total of 128 (51 women) participants.