



SPHI Seed System Community of Practice

Summary of Discussion Topic

Title: TOPIC 11 “Free sweetpotato vine distribution-opportunity or illusion”

1. Summary of participation statistics

Table 1 shows the summary of participation statistics under this topic.

Duration	Lead discussant; institution & country	No. of contributions	No. of unique respondents	No. & type of institutions	No. of countries
33 days 7 th July-8 th Aug 2016	SOME Koussao - INERA, Burkina Faso	37	16 (12 Male, 4 Female)	NARI (5), CIP (9), University (2)	10

2. Introduction

The top “free sweetpotato vine distribution-an opportunity or illusion” was proposed for discussion because it is a practice that seems to be going on in many of the participating countries in SSA, while there are divergent views about its objectives, suitability/benefits as well as effectiveness. The topic sought to obtain from members their own experiences with free/subsidized distribution of planting materials, sharing evidence of success, failures and challenges; views either supporting or not supporting and what lessons can be learnt from the experiences. It is one of the topics that had a considerable contribution from economists who, provided different perspectives and suggested market-based models based on theory and practice, which could be tried/adapted to sweetpotato seed systems. The topic ran for 33 days, attracted 37 contributions from 16 unique respondents from 10 countries. This summary highlights the key points, any areas of consensus, disagreement, and any ideas suggested that members could consider to try/test in their work to further learning and inform development/practice in sweetpotato seed system.

3. Key points and areas of consensus/disagreement.

A sample of experiences with pros and cons on free vine distributions from countries

Virtually all countries have an experience of free-vine and/or subsidized vine distribution at some stage in their sweetpotato seed systems work. In most it has been used to introduce and promote new varieties often OFSP varieties; Emergency response after natural disaster; Government policy to address food insecurity; To address problems of high level of malnutrition (Vitamin A deficiency); As part of promotion effort to elevate sweetpotato crop from purely subsistence, and there are examples of both success and challenges:

Successful experiences noted: It has contributed to dissemination and adoption of new varieties, (especially OFSP among countries in SSA) made OFSP accessed by nutritional vulnerable households/people and food insecurity.

Challenges noted: Conflicting approaches where other projects/partners are providing free vines, it makes it hard for those trying to promote market oriented approach in the same country; Where

the objective of the approach being used (e.g. voucher system) is not clear, then implementation becomes a challenge.

Key areas of consensus: Though not all contributors are against free vine distribution, most seemed to agree on the following:

- Free or subsidized vine distribution destroys the entrepreneurial efforts/capacity of existing multipliers.
- Free vine distribution makes farmers not to value the planting materials (they do not appreciate and in turn do not manage it well). The perception/notion of under valuation of vines, makes it challenging to understand the correlation between issues like “quality” (variety/ healthy) of planting material and other services that benefit the customer and “price” (a key measure of value to a product).
- The large institutional buyers (who distribute vines free of through subsidized vouchers, though believed to also provide a market for small multipliers (e.g., DVMs), this system is project dependent and not sustainable.

Key areas of disagreement: Though not by many contributors, the following seemed to be points of disagreement:

- That free distribution (especially those involving huge volumes of planting materials) is viable approach to get farmers access new varieties. This disagreeing view it as misleading thesis, which instead tends to harm the farmers rather than benefit.
- Free or subsidized vine distribution distorts market. Those against this notion are of the view that as far as sweetpotato (and especially OFSP) is concerned, there is actually no market to be distorted (it is more of a “try first” approach of reducing risk when introducing a new product; Also, that OFSP is often distributed to target the nutritional vulnerable and poor, who cannot be reached through market-based approaches.

Concluding/summary key points: Sweetpotato seed value chains in SSA have multiple objectives, which free or subsidized vine distribution can contribute to them

- a) Market oriented/value chain development, where it is used to introduce an innovation, create threshold of roots to develop a market for product (e.g. puree etc.,) that can later drive market for vines. However, could learn from strategies used by private sector (attach the new product to a commonly purchased one, so avoid concern of “free is not valued”.
- b) Resilience oriented, where free distribution is used as a disaster –response activity (post flood or severe draught or other calamity).
- c) Nutrition oriented, where it is used as social objective aimed to reach nutritional (Vitamin A deficiency) vulnerable people, who otherwise cannot be reached through market approaches. Suggested that it may require effective targeting.

In a concluding contrast in support for market orientation: There is evidence of thriving informal vine multipliers and traders (without benefit of presence of large institutional buyers) in some countries, notably in northern Uganda. Scientists should look out for these and study to understand their structure and other dynamics. Other examples of viable commercial seed system shared (from Zambia), which involved an integrated value chain system where both supply side (e.g. capacity development to produce quality vines) and demand side (e.g. product development/introducing OFSP to markets and linking root producers to a profitable urban market) benefited from project support.

4. Status on suggested follow up actions on emerged ideas or techniques (to updated at CoP meeting)

Table 2: Status of suggested follow up actions on ideas or techniques

Suggested idea for action	Follow up action taken	Where (country) & institution	Feedback to CoP
A rigorous study of the farmer system (of purchasing			

vines)-e.g., using a conceptual framework that examines things like availability, access, quality, variety and stability			
Study opposite spectrum of commercial (market oriented) seed systems, which can be vertically integrated: those that operate without subsidy and contrast with the most common where there is some subsidy (either in supply side or demand side)			