

Improving women's access to quality sweetpotato vines

AUG
2012

All of our delivery system efforts depend on vines getting to the right people at the right time. In Year 3 of SASHA we focused on better understanding of how gender affects the production and access to sweetpotato vines for planting ("seed") in the Lake Zone of Tanzania where the Marando Bora project was operating.



■ Tanzanian women producing sweetpotato vines and roots commercially in wetland areas of Magu District (credit R. Adam).

✦ Why the need for a gender analysis of seed systems?

The principal function of any seed system is to supply quality seed of desirable varieties at the right time and in the right quantities. The lack of quality and timely availability of planting material is considered to be a principal constraint in sweetpotato production in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). Because seed systems are embedded in social systems, it is critical to assess how gender affects the production and access to seed with the aim of reducing bias in women's access to, availability of, and use of adequate, quality planting materials. Recognizing that women are the main producers of sweetpotato in many parts of Eastern and Southern Africa, a gender analysis of seed systems addresses the question: what gender-related constraints do women face producing and accessing vines? Key

questions addressed by a gender seed systems analysis include:

- **Gender division of labour:** Who produces sweetpotato and specifically who is responsible for producing, conserving and sourcing vines?
- **Growing objectives:** Different household members may have different seed needs according to whether they are growing the crop for home consumption, the market or both.
- **Varietal diversity:** Do farmers grow a few varieties or several for multiple uses?
- **Quantity of seed required:** What amount of planting material do women require, depending on growing objectives and reasons for vine loss?
- **Reasons for vine loss:** Are any factors related to constraints faced by women?
- **Access to land and labour for production and seed conservation:** How does women's access to land and labour affect vine conservation and sourcing?
- **Access to cash or other arrangements for accessing seed:** How does women's more limited access to cash affect vine sourcing?
- **Mobility to be able to source vines:** How does women's more limited mobility affect access to vines from off-farm sources?

✦ Local sweetpotato seed systems: what can we learn from them?

Studies carried out in the Lake Victoria region of Tanzania have helped to sharpen our understanding of concerns specific to women that need to be addressed when designing improved seed systems. Two local systems for vine production were identified: on-farm production and off-season vine production by groups and individuals in wetlands or near the lakeshore.



Smallholder sweetpotato production in the Lake Victoria area is characterized by production primarily for subsistence on small plots managed by women. Typically, women cultivate 4-5 varieties, with an average of 6-7 varieties in some areas. Women use several vine conservation approaches including leaving roots in the field to spout, and planting a small area near a water source. Drought, cattle grazing in sweetpotato fields and the practice of mixing several varieties together in the same field contribute to vine loss. The practice of mixing several varieties in the same field, which leads to a problem when harvesting vines, appears to be strategy used by women use to maximize labour and time, major production constraints. When women lose their vines and they need additional planting material or new varieties, they first look to relatives, neighbours and friends in the same village to obtain vines.

If farmers cannot find vines within their community, as is often the case in drought prone areas, they go to nearby communities or furtheraway to wetland areas or areas near the lakeshore. When the sweetpotato vine giver has strong social ties with the vine receiver, the transaction takes the form of gift or exchange of a token of appreciation. Farmers use cash or in-kind payment to obtain vines when weak or no social ties exist between individuals. The local seed system is flexible enough to allow women to

obtain the quantity of vines they need using cash or payment in kind. By regularly purchasing vines from the same supplier, farmers develop strong social relations with wetland vine multipliers. However, some women smallholders may not have the money and time to travel away from their village. In such instances, women seek assistance from their husbands to obtain vines from vine multipliers.

The changing role of men in sweetpotato production in the Lake Victoria region has implications for vine production and sourcing. Whereas in the past, men played an insignificant role in sweetpotato production, declining production of male controlled crops such as cassava and maize due to diseases and pests and erratic climatic conditions, has led to increased male involvement in sweetpotato production at household level. Men now appear to allocate more land to the crop and contribute more labour in land preparation and planting material sourcing.

✦ **Can decentralized vine multipliers (DVMs) improve women's access to vines?**

The DVM system tested by the Marando Bora Project as a better approach for supplying quality seed of local and improved sweetpotato varieties than mass dissemination, addressed a number of vine production constraints faced by women smallholders. By creating a network of vine multipliers (67% women) across the region, the system has the potential to improve women's access to quality planting materials. Similarly, the use of vouchers improves seed access for poor households who may not have cash to purchase vines and women with young children were specifically targeted as recipients. By multiplying both local and improved varieties, DVMs have the potential to meet the varietal needs of women. After the end of the Project in 2012, it will be critical to monitor how the evolving DVM system affects women's access to, availability of, and use of adequate, quality planting over time.



■ Men often haul vines long distances on their bicycles (credit M. McEwan).

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