

Gender dimensions of sweetpotato production and consumption in Rwanda

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The Rwanda Super Foods Project seeks to assess the relative efficiency of sweetpotato product value chains and their potential to increase farmer income and equity. Since the crop is largely grown by women farmers in Rwanda, the project investigates whether an improved sweetpotato value chain can improve women's income and empowerment. In many countries, when a crop is commercialized, men become more involved in its production and sometimes dominate the income earned from sales.



■ Women selling sweetpotato at a market in Gakenke District (credit S. David).

❖ Current situation concerning gender relations and sweetpotato in Rwanda

In Rwanda sweetpotato is a woman's crop, grown, sold and perceived to be largely consumed by women. Men are only likely to be involved in land preparation, transporting manure to the field or paying for hired labor for land preparation. Men tend to engage more in producing cash crop production and off-farm employment, leaving much of the work in food production to women. Sweetpotato is largely seen as a food for children and women. Men eat less sweetpotato than women, preferring to eat more "manly" foods such as meat. In Rwanda, adults typically do not eat sweetpotato alone for the main meal of the day, but eat it together with other staples (cassava, Irish potatoes etc). On the other hand, women frequently eat sweetpotato alone for lunch, a meal many men do not take at home. Sweetpotato is a popular food for children and is now replacing bread among children 5 years and older who eat it for breakfast and as a snack food all during the day.

Generally in Rwanda, women sell sweetpotato; in some locations people would laugh at a man selling sweetpotato. Since women do most of the work in cultivating sweetpotato, income from the crop is generally considered as belonging to women. Some women keep their sweetpotato income for themselves, while others give some of it to their husbands as a sign of respect. In one location women noted that husbands cannot ask their wives for money for the sale of sweetpotato because they provided no labor. Women's observation that men often come around when they are harvesting sweetpotato with the hope of getting some roots to sell, suggests that an increase in yields could result in domestic conflict around control of roots or income and lead to increased male involvement in growing the crop.

❖ Working with women's group in the Rwanda Super Foods Project

The Rwanda Super Foods Project works with 20 farmer groups in four districts who have signed contracts to provide sweetpotato roots to Urwibutso Enterprises. Women comprise 80% of group members; most groups have a small minority of male members. All groups pre-dated the project and continued to carry out other activities. Most groups cultivate three to four new varieties introduced by the project collectively as well as individually for their own use. Working with groups, rather than individuals has been widely proven as an effective way to empower women economically. Group members may find it easier to access productive resources and credit, use group savings mechanisms to avoid husbands taking control of their income and better able to negotiate with buyers. In post-genocide Rwanda, collective action can also restore social trust and build social capital. Threats to collective action for

value chain activities include the problem of free riding by some group members, conflicts between group members and a lower level of flexibility in responding to demand or market prices. Organizing production, processing and marketing of sweetpotato at both group and individual levels appears to be most beneficial approach. In the project, the agro-processor has directly contracted 45 individual farmers to provide roots for the factory. Of this number, 32 are women (accounting for 71% of all directly contracted farmers) and 13 are men.

❖ Benefits from project participation

In the context of a value chain project, some indicators of women's empowerment include increased income from sweetpotato, control over use of sweetpotato income particularly when such income increases, ownership, access to, and decision-making power over productive resources such as land, livestock, agricultural equipment, consumer durables, and credit and comfort in public speaking and stronger groups.

Interviews carried out with three groups provide preliminary insights on benefits women derive from improving the sweetpotato value chain in Rwanda. The most frequently mentioned benefit was increased income which accrues to both the group and individual members. Groups used collective savings to rent land for growing sweetpotato, buy manure and lend to members. Increased income invariably came from personal rather than group plots and was used for the following expenditures: livestock (cows, pigs, and goats), roofing sheets,

house construction, buying mattresses for their beds, paying school fees and health insurance. Being able to afford health insurance, a mandatory system introduced by the government which cost \$5 per person per annum, was a specific benefit women singled out because this amount has to be paid in lump sum, causing a financial strain on most rural households.

Women also appreciated being introduced to new technologies, specifically new varieties and skills in storing roots and processing. A few farmers highlighted the nutritional benefits from consuming orange-fleshed sweetpotato. Improvements in group cohesion or management were not seen as a key benefit from the project. A qualitative study is planned to further explore the following issues:

- Who in the household benefits from project interventions which includes income from the sale of OFSP, training, new varieties, working in groups versus being contracted as individuals?
- What factors contribute to or are associated with improved welfare outcomes for women, the poorest households, youth?
- What gender-based constraints limit women's ability to benefit from project interventions?
- What specific constraints do youth and youth groups face which may hinder or affect benefits from the project intervention?
- What specific constraints do HIV/AIDS affected individuals face which may hinder or affect benefits from project intervention?



■ Quality planting material has increased yields dramatically with surplus for sale (credit K. Sindi).

Table 1. Benefits from participating in the Rwanda Super Foods Project mentioned by three women's groups* (number of responses)

Reported Benefits (in Order of Importance)	Frequency of mention
Higher income	17
Technical skills on sweetpotato production and processing	13
Ability to pay health insurance	9
Improved nutrition/ eyesight from eating OFSP	6
Access to new varieties	6
Improved social cohesion of group	2
Skills in group management	1

*Interviews conducted with Inkigi-Y'Urogo Group; Kundumurimo Group, and the Abisungangy Groups.

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