

# Reaching Communities through School Children – Students as Agents of Change

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The International Potato Center (CIP) conducted studies in Nigeria and Ethiopia among school children to understand their response to information they receive about orange-fleshed sweetpotato (OFSP). The studies used experimental methods, to introduce OFSP along with nutrition information designed to nudge children to regularly consume OFSP as part of regular school lunch meal. OFSP was introduced alongside normal local popular food or regular school lunch meals. Consumption of OFSP was measured using the plate waste method – that is, the proportion of OFSP left uneaten – over several weeks. Results demonstrated that the nutrition messages that tout the benefits of OFSP increased consumption of OFSP.



Fig 1. Students learning to plant OFSP (Credit V. Atakos)

## What is the problem?

The major goals of the Sweetpotato for Profit and Health Initiative (SPHI) are to improve access to quality clean planting material of sweetpotato, increase production and consumption (or sales) of sweetpotato and improve the quality of the diet of vulnerable households. The households of particular interest to Sphi are those at greatest risk of vitamin A deficiency, especially those with children under the age of two years and pregnant/lactating women. To date, most efforts have focused on reaching such households directly with quality planting material coupled with nutrition education and, in some cases, market linkage. To supplement these efforts, a few projects and initiatives have targeted primary schools, usually with the aim of using school children as agents of change. These initiatives introduce orange-fleshed sweetpotato (OFSP) to the school children through multiple channels,

including school gardening (Fig. 1) and school lunches/meals. But how responsive are school children to messages designed to reach them? How can this mode of reaching vulnerable households be strengthened?

## What do we want to achieve?

The primary aim of this initiative is to use schools as channels of disseminating clean sweetpotato planting material and nutrition information about OFSP to schools and surrounding communities. Secondarily, it aims to understand how school children perceive information they receive about OFSP, their response to such information and the extent to which they transmit such information (about OFSP) to their families. Lessons from this initiative can be used to calibrate the type and nature of messaging targeting school children to stimulate them be effective agents of change.

## Partners

- Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences
- Cornell University Center for Behavioral Economics in Child Nutrition Program
- Ministries of Agriculture
- Ministries of Education
- Various Sweetpotato Project Implementing Partners



Fig. 2 School girl in Nigeria enjoying OFSP porridge (Credit V. Atakos)



Fig. 3 Food Vendors at AUD Elementary School ready to serve pupils with OFSP (Credit V. Atakos)

### How are we going to make it happen?

Quite a few sweetpotato projects have or are currently targeting school children in their interventions. Some (especially those on school feeding) do so with food security and/or nutrition objectives. Others are targeting the wider communities. These initiatives use a combination of the following strategies:

- a) School feeding in which OFSP is introduced into existing school lunch programs alongside some structured or non-structured nutrition information/education provided to children in-class or during school gatherings (Fig. 2). The nutrition information is provided by area sweetpotato project staff, teachers or both.
- b) School gardening in which OFSP is introduced into school gardens managed by student clubs. Students grow, observe and learn about OFSP from their teachers and project staff (Fig. 1). They are, in some cases, invited to take some roots and vines to their parents during harvest. This interactive initiative is aimed to create knowledge and stimulate life-long interest in OFSP. Smith (2002) argues that many of our notions of what is good or acceptable, which can influence future food choices and consumption practices, are determined in the early years of life. Moreover, studies have shown that school gardens can increase consumption of nutritious foods.
- c) School-based demonstration plots – where projects establish a demonstration plot within the school premises for the purposes of reaching school and surrounding communities with information about the benefits of OFSP, basic agronomic practices and vines. These plots can be used for vine multiplication; hence a source of vines to school and surrounding communities.
- d) Cooking demonstration: this strategy is often combined with b) or c), but can be stand-alone. It aims to introduce different OFSP recipes to communities and diversified use of OFSP, and to practically show how to prepare OFSP foods.
- e) School-based OFSP-focused school educational teaching materials. This relatively new addition to the list of strategies for reaching school children and teachers (and subsequently their households) uses pre-designed school (science) books to systematically introduce OFSP to school children through in-class teaching. It has been piloted in two Sub-Saharan African countries.

### What have we achieved so far?

CIP has recently conducted studies in Nigeria and Ethiopia among school children to understand their response to information they receive about OFSP. The studies used experimental methods, to introduce OFSP along with nutrition information designed to nudge children to regularly consume OFSP as part of regular school lunch meal (Fig. 3). OFSP was introduced alongside normal local popular food or regular school lunch meal. Consumption of OFSP was measured using the plate waste method – that is, the proportion of OFSP left uneaten – over several weeks. Results demonstrated that the nutrition messages that tout the virtues of OFSP increased consumption of OFSP, but the longevity of such effect depended on the nature of the message: Messages that promoted OFSP based on its experiential attributes (such as taste and color) produced longer lasting effects, while those that focused on nutritional/health effects (also known as instrumental attributes) did not. Moreover, the studies found positive the effects of behavioural nudges regardless of food security status of children.

### Who are we working with?

CIP is undertaking this research with multiple partners in collaboration with advanced agricultural research institutes and national school authorities. Other national partners include the department of agriculture and national curriculum development centers.

### What's next?

Current and future efforts are focusing on understanding how behavioural nudges can be used in further promoting the consumption of OFSP among school children, and in different contexts. Lessons learned from various initiatives will be valuable in designing strategies that more effectively use schools as channels of reaching communities with clean quality sweetpotato planting material, and to strengthen the use of school children as change agents.

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