

Promoting OFSP for income, women's empowerment, and nutrition: Lessons from Helen Keller International's Programs in Burkina Faso, Nigeria and Sierra Leone



Fig 1. Primary school children harvesting OFSP in Lagos Nigerian (Credit: B. Chima)

In Burkina Faso, seven Decentralized Vine Multipliers (DVMs) and six Agriculture Extension Officers have been identified, trained, and provided starter vines in 2019 to ensure enough vines are available for supply to beneficiary households later this year. In Sierra Leone, collaboration with the National Program, the variety "Mathuthu" has been recommended for release.

What is the problem?

Inadequate consumption of nutrient-rich foods is one of the major risk factors for malnutrition in most communities. For some families in Africa, there is limited access to these foods because of inability to produce enough on own plots, unavailability of such foods in local markets and/or lack of economic ability to purchase these foods. Moreover, limited knowledge on the importance of consuming nutritious diets, sub-optimal feeding and hygiene behaviors and negative gender norms do compromise intake of nutritious diets.

What do we want to achieve?

In Burkina Faso, Nigeria and Sierra Leone, Helen Keller International (HKI) is working to improve diets of most families by promoting locally adapted varieties of OFSP alongside other crops, within HKI's signature Enhanced Homestead Food Production (EHFP) program, an integrated nutrition-sensitive agriculture intervention. The OFSP intervention is supported by the Hemsley Foundation in Burkina Faso, Mondelez International Foundation in Nigeria and by Irish Aid in Sierra Leone. The specific objectives of these interventions include:

- Increasing the production and consumption of OFSP and other nutritious crops at household level;

The Healthy Lifestyle Project in Nigeria that started in January 2018 has worked to create awareness about the nutritional quality of Orange-fleshed Sweetpotato (OFSP), which has led to uptake of the crop among 4,882 students and their families in urban communities of Ikeja, Lagos State and school gardens established at nine schools (Fig. 1).



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- Improving nutrition and hygiene behaviors, especially of pregnant and lactating mothers;
- Increasing women's involvement in household decision-making and access to resources;
- Increasing income, particularly of women, through the sale of surplus produce and other activities;
- Engaging students in the production and consumption of OFSP, nutritious diets and adopting a healthy lifestyle.

How are we making it happen?

HKI's EHFP program, which includes OFSP, is implemented around 3 core pillars, as: i) Production of diverse foods at the homestead and on group plots; ii) Social Behavior Change Communication (SBCC) on Essential Nutrition Actions (ENA) and Essential Hygiene Actions (EHA); and iii) Gender Empowerment activities.

Key OFSP-related activities include:

- Establishing beneficiary women's groups or mother support groups at the community level and using these as platforms to distribute OFSP vines and promote infant and young child feeding (IYCF) practices.
- Training of families on improved agronomic practices;
- Facilitating farmers' access to vines of improved, locally adapted OFSP varieties by supporting the establishment of DVMs at the community level and strengthening links between DVMs, beneficiary families and families and Crop Breeding Institutes;
- Integrating OFSP into village model farms, group gardens and homestead gardens.



Fig 2. Value addition training for rural farmers (Credit: H. Turay)

- Creating income generating opportunities for women, including trainings for processing OFSP (Fig. 2) and establishing Savings and Internal Lending Communities (SILC).
- Conducting SBCC and gender trainings and activities to improve behaviors for better nutrition and hygiene, as well as address social and gender norms.
- Building capacity of frontline workers, including agriculture extension and community health workers, and in the case of school-based programs, teachers, to provide continuous support to beneficiary families.
- Establishing school-based young farmer clubs to engage students in OFSP production, processing and consumption, and holding OFSP-focused events.
- Introducing “smart” farming techniques, including cultivating OFSP in recycled containers, tires and sandbags in urban areas with limited access to land.

Where we are working?

In Burkina Faso, HKI is presently implementing OFSP intervention across 60 villages in Sissili province, under the “Yazourawonduoi” project. Under HKI’s led Nutrition Lifestyle Project in Nigeria, OFSP has been promoted across 9 schools (focusing on pupils aged 6-11 years) in urban areas of Ikeja, Ojudu and Onigbongbo Local Councils of Lagos State. In Sierra Leone, HKI’s OFSP intervention is scaled-up in communities across 13 of the 14 districts in the country.

What have we achieved so far?

The EHFP project in Burkina Faso started in March 2019. So far, HKI has worked with government and other implementing partners to select the intervention communities, hire staff and conducted trainings to get the implementation underway. To date, seven DVMs and six agriculture extension officers have been identified and

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trained. About 23,700 vines have been provided to the seven DVMs to begin vine multiplication to ensure enough vines are available for supply to beneficiary households. The intervention is targeted to 8,000 families (or 56,000 individuals) who will benefit from OFSP production.

The Healthy Lifestyle Project in Nigeria is a three-year project that started in January 2018. Under this project, HKI has worked to create awareness about the nutritional quality of OFSP which has led to uptake of the crop among 4,882 students and their families in urban communities of Ikeja, Lagos State. In addition, school gardens have been established across all nine schools for students to grow OFSP. Young Farmer clubs have also been established in all schools to promote OFSP adoption.

In Sierra Leone, HKI has worked with the Sierra Leone Agriculture Research Institute (SLARI) to realize complete varietal evaluation of six genotypes of OFSP. Overall, the “Mathuthu” variety outperformed all the other five genotypes and has been recommended to the National Seed Board of for official release for cultivation across Sierra Leone. HKI is using this variety in our programs across 13 districts of the country and has also achieved the integration of OFSP into the national School Feeding Programme, to help address short-term hunger and malnutrition.

What’s next?

HKI’s proposed next steps in Burkina Faso include trainings of beneficiary women on OFSP production and post-harvest handling, securing community plots for group gardening, trainings and activities on SBCC and gender.

The Nigeria program will continue on-going activities. In addition, Home Garden Champions will be identified to support efforts of integrating OFSP into community gardens.

In Sierra Leone, HKI will continue working with SLARI on crossing of OFSP varieties Kaphulira and Chipika with Mathuthu to increase the level of disease resistance. Activities similar to those outlined for Burkina Faso will continue.

Partners • In Burkina Faso, HKI works with the government’s Ministries of Health, Agriculture, Environment, Green Economy and Climate Change, Women, National Solidarity, Family, and Humanitarian Action, and Territorial Administration, Decentralization and Social Cohesion. Other partners on the project include National Institute for Agricultural Research (INERA); 2 NGOs: Medicus Mundi Italia / LVIA and Projecto Mundo, Professional Unions and Private Sector.

HKI OFSP Project partners in Nigeria include the Ikeja Local Government Education Authority (LGEA) and Local Government Area Agriculture Department as well as the Lagos State Universal Basic Education Board (SUBEB), Ministry of Economic Planning & Budget (MEPB), Ministry of Agriculture and the Nutrition Department of Ministry of Health (SMoH). In addition, the Management Committees and Parent Forum Members (Parent Teacher Associations) of the schools as well as Community Development Associations.

In Sierra Leone, HKI’s implementing partners on the OFSP project are the Ministry of Agriculture; Sierra Leone Agriculture Research Institute (SLARI), Catholic Relief Service, Inter Aide, Cooperazione Internazionale (COOPI), Action Against Hunger, World Vision and Ministry of Education.

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