

Increased promotion and utilization of orange-fleshed sweetpotato as part of the food based approaches to combat Vitamin A deficiency in sub-Saharan Africa

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Sweetpotato is one of the most important staple crops in densely populated parts of eastern Africa and is fast becoming an important supplementary staple in the southern part of the continent. Sweetpotato is vital to destitute, small-scale farmers with limited land, labor and capital. One of its greatest assets is its ability to be harvested piecemeal as needed for home consumption or income generation. At present, the predominant sweetpotato cultivars in eastern and southern Africa are white-fleshed varieties that contain negligible amounts of beta-carotene, a micronutrient that the body uses to produce Vitamin A. Orange-fleshed sweetpotato (OFSP) varieties are believed to represent the least expensive, year-round source of dietary vitamin A available to poor families in the region. Studies have confirmed that African mothers can be motivated to accept orange-fleshed varieties, thus dispelling the notion that African tastes preclude the use of all but white-fleshed cultivars. Recent estimates based on geo-referenced data show the magnitude of the potential impact of replacing white-fleshed varieties with high dry matter orange-fleshed cultivars in six East and Central African countries. Overall, some 50 million children under the age of six stand to benefit. More precisely, *ex ante* analysis showed that each increase of one kilogram in per capita production of orange-flesh sweetpotato results in a 1% rise in the attainment of requirements up to about 25 kilograms per capita. The challenge is to maintain sweetpotato's status as a food security crop, and, at the same time, stimulate its transition into a market-oriented commodity that local people can use to generate cash income and improve family welfare. The availability of improved varieties and the distribution of high quality planting materials will provide the foundation needed to achieve this objective. There has been a steady increase in both acreage and consumption levels of OFSP. For example OFSP are currently estimated to occupy 1-2% in the lake zone of Tanzania, 5-10% in Central Uganda, 10-15% in W. Kenya and 15-20% in Southern Mozambique. Studies have further shown that consumers are primarily concerned with taste, texture and dry-matter content, and not with colour *per se*. Children have a special liking for a food that is not only good for them but actually is nutritious. Adults, though cautious are adapting to the new item in their diets. Under the VITAA (Vitamin A for Africa) umbrella, 40 partner agencies from the health, nutrition and agricultural sectors have agreed to work together to extend the impact of orange-fleshed sweetpotato in seven partner countries: Ethiopia, Mozambique, Ghana, Kenya, South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda. The goal of this initiative is to alleviate vitamin A deficiency among young children and pregnant and lactating mothers. VITAA represents an opportunity for the countries to tackle one their most pressing public health problems using an existing technology that has proven to be both effective and sustainable. Activities include: breeding and selecting varieties for high dry matter and high beta-carotene, participatory testing of varieties for adaptation and acceptability, community-based sustainable seed multiplication and distribution, nutrition education, post-harvest processing for market and for home consumption, promotion through social marketing, and monitoring of impact on nutrition and health. Principal beneficiaries are children and their mothers, the two groups most at risk for Vitamin A Deficiency or VAD. Implementation strategies concentrate on women because of their central role in the production and marketing of sweetpotato and other food crops used in the family diet. The signs are that OFSP will rapidly gain a place in the affections of African consumers. This paper analyses the experiences and achievements as well as strategic forecasts in the production and utilization of OFSP in SSA.