



PRESS RELEASE

Sweet Potatoes to Address Vitamin A Deficiency

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Sweet things are in the offing for the farmers taking part in of the 'Eat Orange' and 'Marando Bora' projects that promote the cultivation and consumption of orange fleshed sweet potatoes in thirteen districts of Mwanza, Kagera and Mara regions.

T-MARC Tanzania, a local non-governmental organization is partnering with Helen Keller International (HKI) to help improve food security in Tanzania by promoting and facilitating the production and consumption of orange fleshed and white fleshed varieties of sweet potatoes in the lake regions of the country.

One of the goals of the project is to increase agricultural production by providing Tanzanian farmers with higher yielding, virus-free and more robust vines of sweet potato varieties. These new varieties are not only higher yielding, but have higher levels of beta-carotene and Vitamin A, nutrients that are important in combating blindness and nutrient deficiencies.

The project which is on showcase in the ongoing Nane Nane agricultural fair in Mwanza also promotes consumption of nutrient rich varieties of sweet potato and encourages behaviours that enhance good nutrition. Farmers are also connected to income generating activities, and this project will help improve the health status of consumers as well as the economic status of farmers.

Vitamin A deficiency is a problem of public health significance within Tanzania with studies showing that it mostly affects children and women of child bearing age. An estimated 35% of Tanzanian children grow up with Vitamin A deficiency which leads to lowered immunity, frequent ill health and poor growth. The most obvious results of Vitamin A deficiency is progressive damage to the eye, eventually leading to blindness. It is estimated that more than 250,000 preschool children go blind each year.

Sub clinical vitamin A deficiency is a much more widespread problem, contributing to an increased risk of morbidity and mortality from common childhood infections. The prevalence of sub clinical vitamin A deficiency in infants fed breast milk suggests that

lactating women in developing countries may also have insufficient stores of vitamin A.

Young children are at high risk of developing vitamin A deficiency due to their increased need during growth and their vulnerability to infections. Women of childbearing age are also at risk because of their increased need for the vitamin, both during pregnancy and, much more, during lactation. Vitamin A deficiency results from two primary factors: inadequate intake of preformed vitamin A and vitamin A precursors (provitamin A, carotenoids).

T-MARC is tasked with developing and implementing a revised communication plan to increase food security and to promote the health benefits of sweet potatoes to Tanzanian consumers. The comprehensive plan includes a framework for communication channels and methods, messages, audience analysis, monitoring indicators and identifying appropriate marketing avenues for the produce.

“We are in the final stages of printing the communication and promotional materials,” said T-MARC’s Programme Manager, Imma Kapinga. T-MARC is developing a revised communication strategy that includes signboards for easy identification of the sites where the project is being implemented and identification of market days for sale of the produce. The coming month should see a roll out of market day promotions and field days to further enhance awareness and support for the project.

Farmers participating in the project expect quadruple gains from the sweet potato vines. Besides reaping, eating and selling more bountiful harvests of nutrient rich sweet potatoes, farmers can also sell the sweet potato vines to fellow farmers, thus providing alternative avenues for income generation. Furthermore sweet potato vines make good fodder for livestock.

The sweet potato project supports the country’s green ambitions, especially the paradigm shift to the strategic framework of Kilimo Kwanza which is the fourth pillar of the green revolution.

The Kilimo Kwanza strategy aims to identify priority areas for the production of strategic food commodities for the country’s food self sufficiency and especially crops that can transform agriculture quickly and with minimal financial and technological requirements.

Amongst other activities, this pillar puts in place arrangements for the production of strategic commodities such as potatoes, cassava, grains, legumes, fish, meat and dairy products.

Sweet potatoes are amongst these crops that require minimal financial and technological requirements and also have a huge potential in growing domestic and external market demands while creating employment opportunities for the rural and urban populations.

“Everything is on track and mass dissemination of vines is expected to be in October/November, so farmers should expect to start reaping benefits of the program very soon,” Imma concluded.

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