The SASHA project seeks to directly improve the food security and livelihoods of at least 150,000 families in Sub-Saharan Africa in five years and provide the evidence base for effective delivery systems to reach many more. Moreover, given widespread, informal farmer-to-farmer sharing of vines for planting, the number of direct plus indirect beneficiaries is likely to exceed 1 million families.

As part of a broader, long-term, multi-donor Sweetpotato for Profit and Health Initiative, it is expected that the SASHA project will set the groundwork for improving the lives of 10 million Sub-Saharan households in 10 years.

SASHA is a project of the International Potato Center (known by its Spanish acronym CIP). Major funding for the project has been provided by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.
Sweetpotato is the 3rd most important food crop in terms of production in seven Eastern and Central African countries – outranking cassava and maize. It ranks 4th in importance in the six targeted Southern African countries, and 8th among the four targeted countries in West Africa.

Sweetpotato requires fewer inputs and less labor than other staple crops. It tolerates marginal growing conditions, such as dry spells or poor soil. Sweetpotato provides more edible ... feed. It has a reputation as a classic food security crop — the one that the family relies on when the maize fails.

The potential of sweetpotato has remained largely untapped in Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly compared to grains and cash crops, and even compared to other root crops, such as cassava. Increased investment could significantly boost yields, increase market potential, and reverse sweetpotato’s image as a poor person’s food.

Improving lives for women

Women are the main producers of sweetpotato, but the extent of their control over the benefits from selling the crop varies in different social and economic settings. SASHA will focus on women as producers and guardians of family nutrition, with special attention to their needs and preferences. The project includes an African gender specialist and will integrate strategies to ensure that women have a full voice in project interventions and gain equitably from them.

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Sweetpotato requires fewer inputs and less labor than other staple crops. It tolerates marginal growing conditions, such as dry spells or poor soil. Sweetpotato provides more edible energy per hectare per day than wheat, rice, or cassava. Its ability to produce better yields in poor conditions with less labor makes sweetpotato particularly suitable as a crop for households threatened by migration, HIV/AIDS, or diseases such as AIDS. In addition, sweetpotato is very versatile. The vines provide a high-protein, medium-energy animal feed. It has a reputation as a classic food security crop — the one that the family relies on when the maize fails.

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All sweetpotatoes are good sources of carbohydrates, fiber, and vitamin A precursors. Orange-fleshed varieties are also very rich in beta-carotene, the precursor to vitamin A. As a result, sweetpotato is well placed to address both undernutrition and micronutrient malnutrition. The more widespread consumption of orange-fleshed sweetpotato can significantly impact vitamin A deficiency, which threatens an estimated 14 million children under age 5 in Sub-Saharan Africa, and contributes to significant rates of blindness, disease, and premature death in children and pregnant women. Only 125 grams of most orange-fleshed sweetpotato varieties can supply the recommended daily allowance of vitamin A for children and non-lactating women.

Untapped potential

Program components

1. IMPROVED QUALITY AND RANGE OF AVAILABLE VARIETIES: This component is on breeding a wide range of varieties with the combinations of traits suited to local nutritional, livelihood, and consumer demands. The point is to create an integrated breeding system akin to the one that exists for cereals breeding, but focused on the producer and consumer preferences of resource poor women and children.

2. BREEDING WEEVIL-RESISTANT SWEETPOTATOES: This component draws on biotechnology to develop weevil-resistant sweetpotato varieties for Sub-Saharan Africa. With the rise of weevil attacks in the region, the urgency of developing resistance to weevils will likely intensify.

3. DEVELOPING SUSTAINABLE SOWN SYSTEMS: The access to and maintenance of quality planting material is a struggle for smallholder farmers. This component involves developing and testing strategies to ensure effective multiplication, dissemination, and exchange of disease-free vines from which new plants will be propagated. It involves strategies to more efficiently link farmers with public sector distribution programs and integrate those with for profit nurseries. It will examine which strategies assure women the best access to vines and whether women are as successful as men at commercially-oriented vine production.

4. PROOF-OF-CONCEPT PROJECTS: This series of projects will examine broader institutional or market level issues affecting crop production, market potential, market expansion (e.g., use of sweetpotato as animal feed), and scalable approaches for improving nutrition with sweetpotato. These projects will evaluate options that influence the capacity to scale up and achieve the outcomes on poverty and nutrition that are planned for the years following SASHA, in the longer, ten-year initiative.

5. SWEETPOTATO SUPPORT PLATFORMS AND CAPACITY STRENGTHENING: Three sub-regional support platforms, based in strong national research programs, will be established to provide the organizational and management structure for developing long-term breeding skills and capacity in Africa, for Africa. They will be located in each of three sub-regions: Ghana, for West Africa; Mozambique, for Southern Africa; and Uganda, for East and Central Africa.

Health benefits

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