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Incorporating orange-fleshed sweet potato into the food system as a strategy for improved nutrition: the context of South Africa

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Abstract

Orange-fleshed sweet potato (OFSP) is considered the single most successful example of biofortification of a staple crop, and presents a feasible option to address vitamin A deficiency. Though initially promoted as part of a crop-based approach focusing on production and consumption at household level, it evolved into small-scale commercial production, predominantly in Sub-Saharan Africa. This paper reviews OFSP initiatives in relation to the South African food environment and food supply systems, also identifying opportunities for scaling out OFSP in a situation where sweet potato is not eaten as a staple. Current per capita consumption of sweet potato is low; the focus is thus on increasing consumption of OFSP, rather than replacing creamfleshed varieties. For the major OFSP variety, Bophelo, 66 g consumption can be sufficient to meet the recommended daily allowance for 1-3 year old children (300 µRE vitamin A). Despite a national Vitamin A supplementation programme and fortified staple foods in South Africa, 43.6% of children under 5 years of age were reported to be vitamin A deficient in 2012, indicating a stronger need to promote the consumption of Vitamin A-rich foods, such as OFSP. To increase availability of and access to OFSP, all aspects of the food supply system need to be considered, including agricultural production, trade, food transformation and food retail and provisioning. Currently, small-scale commercial OFSP producers in South Africa prefer to deliver their produce to local informal markets. To enter the formal market, small-scale producers often have difficulties to meet the high standards of the retailers' centralised procurement system in terms of food quality, quantity and safety. Large retailers may have the power to increase the demand of OFSP, not just by improving availability but also by developing marketing strategies to raise awareness of the health benefits of OFSP. However,

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