



SUSTAIN Rwanda Receives Visit from Ambassador Michael Ryan

Along the Kigali-Musanze highway in the Rulindo District of Rwanda lies a roadside market branded with the tell-tale orange of Orange-Fleshed Sweetpotato (OFSP). As one approaches, a sign reads “My Sweetpotato, My health, My wealth”, indicating bio-fortified OFSP ahead. Strategically placed to draw in motorists traveling down this main stretch of road, it is part of the Scaling up Sweetpotato through Agriculture and Nutrition (SUSTAIN) project’s goal of making OFSP a staple in the Rwandan diet.

On the last day of November 2015, Ambassador and Head of Delegation of the European Union Rwanda, Michael Ryan, stopped at the market as part of a learning tour to see how an agriculture-sensitive nutrition-for-health program is implemented on the ground. The OFSP market, the first of its kind in Rwanda, was designed to elevate the status of this particular tuber and differentiate it from the more common yet less nutritious white and yellow fleshed varieties, while creating a unique market for OFSP farmers to sell their harvests and cuttings. Its strategic placement along the highway not only makes OFSP easily accessible, but it also helps cement the OFSP brand in the minds of passing motorists. OFSP market vendors are well versed in the health benefits of their

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product and freely share their knowledge on preparation, storage, and the amount needed to counteract vitamin-A deficiency in young children. This is an essential message in a country where chronic malnutrition is as high as 40%.

Ambassador Ryan was able to chat with the farmers who sell at the market and tour the facilities. While a variety of OFSPs and other fruits and vegetables are



displayed for sale on the red brick and concrete stalls, the Terimbere variety caught the ambassador's eye. Weighing in at over 6 1/2 pounds, the hearty tubers are about the size of a newborn baby. International Potato Center (CIP for its acronym in Spanish) Rwanda Country Manager Kiriimi Sindi accompanied the delegation. Much as CIP has been doing throughout Rwanda, he emphasized the OFSP brand, "Whenever I talk to a government official or a donor agency, we never talk about sweetpotato – we talk about OFSP, so that people ask what is different about this orange sweetpotato," Sindi says. "It gives you an

opportunity to communicate this message (about the importance of the orange flesh and its connection to nutrition)."

OFSP Opening Doors to Financial Health

It has been only five years since CIP first introduced OFSP as a way to counteract micronutrient deficiency in Rwanda, but the tuber is already having a big impact on the physical and financial health of the farmers who plant it. After a stopover at the market, the delegation then visited the KOTEMU group farm, one of the first farmer groups to start working with OFSP under the CIP project known as SASHA.

Because the group had worked with OFSP for at least four years, they were in a position to give the visitors insights into the production of vines and roots for

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marketing and processing. Farmers were able to address all questions posed by the visitors. In his interaction with farmers, the ambassador was eager to know how profitable sweetpotato farming was compared to other crops.



OFSP farmer, Margaret Muhayimana of the KOTEMU farmers groups shares her experience with OFSP with Ambassador Michael Ryan. *CIP Staff*

Margaret Muhayimana, a [KOTEMU group member](#), has seen her life transformed since she began planting OFSP. Land holdings in Rwanda are small, a typical farmer only has just over a half an acre. Women in particular rarely earn a continuous income from farming. They grow the typical crops such as beans and maize. They save some of their harvest for household consumption and sell the rest on the open market. It is not enough to make ends meet, let alone pay for school fees, which often extends the cycle of poverty to the next generation. As a single mother and the only breadwinner for

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her family, Margaret faced additional financial hardships. Margaret explained that over the last five years, through the proceeds she has earned selling OFSP vines and roots, not only has she been able to pay school fees, but she has also been able to make substantive improvements to her family's well-being, including: rebuilding her house, getting connected to the electrical grid, purchasing a dairy cow, paying for health insurance every year, and installing a biogas unit for producing gas for household use.

Margaret and her fellow farmers are able to achieve such successes because OFSP can be grown throughout the year. Despite the fact that the ambassador visited right at the start of the rainy season, a time when any other crop would just have been planted, he was able to see sweetpotatoes ready for harvest. "You can plant it (OFSP) at the beginning of the season, the middle of the season, or the end of the season," says Sindi. "The beauty of it is that it needs very little input. You can grow it with almost no fertilizer and it is not sensitive to rain patterns."

Since OFSP grows from vines that need to be planted at the most three days after cutting, farmers like Margaret have a steady income selling vines to other interested farmers. From December 2014 to June 2015 alone, the SUSTAIN project produced and distributed 4 million OFSP cuttings to 20,000 eligible households in eight districts, opening the door to financial and nutritional health to a whole new crop of poor farming families.

Creating OFSP Products for Sale on the Local Market

In order to make OFSP ubiquitous in the Rwandan diet, creating demand is essential so that farmers have a steady market for their product. To do this, CIP has developed the technology of substituting OFSP puree for up to 50% of the wheat flour contained in baked goods. This raises the nutrient content of the baked goods and lowers the production costs. SUSTAIN has linked farmers to major manufacturers such as Urwibutso Enterprises that uses OFSP in its Golden Power Biscuits and other bakery products that yielded US \$364,410 in

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sales in one year alone. To reach more farmers, however, it is essential to create local market opportunities that farmers can tap to sell their products.

Cooperatives that can produce their own puree to be used in goods sold on the local market are able to keep more of the earnings in their own coffers.



Ambassador Michael Ryan helps cut a Queen Cake prepared with OFSP. *CIP Staff*

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The climax of the field visit was a tour of a farmer cooperative run processing unit located in the Gakenke district of Rwanda. Members of the cooperative explained the process of transforming fresh OFSP roots into value-added products for sale, such as mandazi (a type of doughnut) and queen cake to the Ambassador. Various bakery products were showcased and tasted by members of the delegation. The team was impressed at the great variety of products that can be made using OFSP as an ingredient.

At the end of the visit the Ambassador expressed his gratitude for an educational, enlightening, and comprehensive field trip and said he was looking forward to other opportunities of seeing more work in the near future as CIP expands its program in Rwanda.

SUSTAIN is a five-year partnership (2013-2018) coordinated by CIP and financed by the UK Department for International Development, to scale up the nutrition benefits of biofortified orange-fleshed sweetpotato (OFSP). The goal is to reach 1.2 million households with under-five-year-old children in Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, and Rwanda.

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