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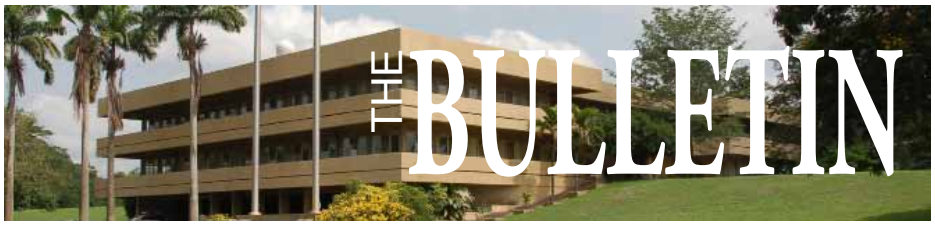

Joint efforts needed to maximize benefits of biofortification

Cassava breeder Elizabeth Parkes shows off the huge cassava roots harvested from an improved variety.

To address the menace of malnutrition arising from micronutrient deficiency, policymakers and media practitioners must step up and support ongoing efforts to make biofortified crops available to resource-poor farmers, experts have said.

"We need to work together and ensure that these crops are widely disseminated to the farmers who need them most… policymakers therefore have a key role to play," says Robert Asiedu, IITA Director for Western Africa during the HarvestPlus-organized media planning meeting in Ibadan.

Rampant in most of the developing world, micronutrient malnutrition or hidden hunger has assumed public health significance as it substantially affects the nutritional status, health, and development of a significant percentage of the population in many countries. These deficiencies compromise growth and accentuate morbidity, mortality, brain damage, and reduced cognitive and working capacities in both children and adults.

To tackle the menace, researchers are mainstreaming biofortification in breeding programs, and this has resulted in the development of improved varieties.

In Nigeria the development and release of provitamin A cassava and maize provides hope for the vulnerable, and elsewhere biofortified sweetpotato, pearl millet, and beans are being disseminated for the same purpose.

Paul Ilona, Country Manager for HarvestPlus, Nigeria, explained that vitamin A deficiency is among the leading causes of preventable blindness in children, with more than four million pre-school aged children having visible eye damage due to vitamin A deficiency; and that close to 20 million pregnant women in developing countries including Nigeria, are vitamin A deficient.

Working with partners, Ilona and his team disseminated provitamin A cassava varieties to 106,000 households in 2013, and plans to exceed this number in 2014.

He called on the media to help disseminate messages that would raise awareness and spark greater adoption and consumption of the varieties in the communities.

Although there are other strategies to combat the scourge of vitamin A deficiency such as fortification, dietary diversity, and consumption of supplements (drugs), Ilona said that biofortification offered a better option when viewed in the context of sustainability and cost.

He explained that the adoption and consumption of vitamin A cassava was an effective strategy to reduce malnutrition especially in the rural areas.

Researchers want the benefits of DTMA scaled out

Massive adoption and cultivation of drought tolerant maize varieties provide several benefits including "insurance cover" to farmers as rainfall patterns become more and more unpredictable, researchers say.

"Farmers can no longer predict for sure when the rains will come… the only option apart from irrigation is to plant drought tolerant maize varieties that have been developed," said Tsedeke Abate, Leader for the Drought Tolerant Maize for Africa (DTMA) project.

Addressing researchers and national partners at the 2014 Annual Planning week at IITA, Ibadan, Nigeria, Abate called on governments to support massive scale-out

next page, please

DTMA project implementers and other stakeholders meet in IITA, Ibadan.

Got a story to share? Please email it with photos and captions to Andrea Gros (a.gros@cgiar.org), Katherine Lopez (k.lopez@cgiar.org), Jeffrey T. Oliver (j.oliver@cgiar.org), Godwin Atser (g.atser@cgiar.org), or Catherine Njuguna (c.njuguna@cgiar.org).

Researchers want the benefits of DTMA scaled out *...from page 1*

of the outputs from the DTMA project to reach more farmers. The improved varieties need to be accompanied by an appropriate level of mineral fertilizers and improved agronomic practices, if we are to get the full benefits of the technology.

"The fact is that DTMA is a project or what I may call a pilot. But we have demonstrated that it is possible… what is now left is for national partners to scale out these benefits so we get maximum impact," he explained.

Launched in 2007, the DTMA project seeks to address drought and other constraints to maize production in sub-Saharan Africa, maintain maize yields of at least 1 ton per hectare under moderate drought, and with a 20 to 30% increase over farmers' current yields, benefit 30–40 million people in 13 African countries by 2016.

Abate said a lot had been achieved over the years.

"In the previous phase of the project, we emphasized variety development and release; we have now been able to release more than 150 varieties and more are still coming. The emphasis in our current phase is to speed up seed production and delivery. For instance in 2012, the project facilitated the production of thirty thousand tons of improved seeds; benefiting more than 3 million households.

The 2014 annual week, which was organized by the West Africa arm of the DTMA under Baffour Badu-Apraku, West Africa Coordinator, attracted researchers and key officials from the national systems, seed companies, and the Conseil Ouest et Centre Africain pour la Recherche et le Développement Agricoles/West and Central African Council for Agricultural Research and Development (CORAF/WECARD).

The meeting reviewed the progress made in the previous year, identified challenges, and drew up work plans for the year ahead.

Badu-Apraku reiterated that the core of the planning meeting was to ensure that more farmers get the drought tolerant maize varieties, and that their lives are being improved.

The Deputy Director General (Research), Ylva Hillbur, and the Deputy Director General, Partnerships and Capacity Development, Kenton Dashiell gave kudos to the DTMA team for the impact achieved so far and the team spirit exhibited by the partners.

They reiterated that the progress made by the team was commendable and demonstrated a successful partnership.

Jointly implemented by the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (CIMMYT) and IITA, the DTMA project executes its activities in close collaboration with national agricultural research systems, extension services, and seed companies in Nigeria, Ghana, Mali, and Benin Republic.

SNV and IITA launch the Cocoa-Eco Project in Cameroon

Konye in southwest Cameroon lies in an important cocoa production zone and is home to more than 5000 smallholder cocoa farmers. In February, Konye was the site of the launch of the Cocoa-Eco Project. The event was hosted by the Konye Council and attended by a wide diversity of stakeholders in the cocoa value chain including farmers, input providers, buyers, and service providers.

The Cocoa-Eco Project, which is financed by SNV (Netherlands Development Organisation) and implemented in partnership with IITA, aims to increase farmers' incomes through intensification and diversification of cocoa production while reducing deforestation and ecosystem degradation. The project provides farmers with training in sustainable cocoa production, develops capacity in reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation in developing countries; and the role of conservation, sustainable management of forests, and enhancement of forest carbon stocks in developing countries (REDD+),

Cocoa is essential to the livelihoods of 40-50 million people worldwide, including over 5 million small-holder cocoa farmers.

supports cooperatives in becoming stronger entities, facilitates market linkages, and explores issues related to farm succession. The project starts as a two-year pilot but aims to extend beyond this period. Project activities have also been launched in Cocoa-Eco's second site, Ayos, in the Center Region of Cameroon, a new cocoa production area.

Mercy Elohor, IITA research fellow, awarded Borlaug LEAP Fellowship

Mercy

Mercy Elohor, a research fellow at IITA, has been awarded a Borlaug LEAP Fellowship funded by USAID. Elohor completed her course studies under the WACCI program in Ghana and is now doing her research full time at IITA. She is studying flowering in cassava as part of the Nextgen Cassava project. "Her goal is to understand regulation of flowering in cassava so we can improve hybridization leading to more rapid selection of new cassava varieties," says Peter Kulakow, IITA Cassava Breeder.

Commenting on the award, Elohor said, "The award means a great deal to me… exploiting the network, and exposure to the outside world where great and new technologies are implemented to combat hunger issues is a great privilege."

Elohor will study at Cornell University for 6 months with her USA mentor Tim Setter.

The Borlaug LEAP Fellowship honors Nobel Laureate Norman E. Borlaug who has been hailed as the father of the Green Revolution.

Credited with saving millions of lives, his work virtually eliminated recurring famines in South Asia and helped global food production outpace population growth.

Borlaug's distinguished career epitomized the qualities of leadership, scholarship, scientific achievement, international cooperation, mentoring, and passion.

Project pushing for agriculture policy action in Uganda launched

Project coordinator Pamela Pali meets the Ugandan Agriculture Minister.

A project seeking to transform the agriculture sector in Uganda through creating a conducive policy environment was recently launched. The Policy Action for Sustainable Intensification of Ugandan Cropping Systems (PASIC) project seeks to support policy makers to enact policies that stimulate growth of and investment in the agriculture sector. This will ultimately contribute to the reduction of poverty and hunger, ensuring nutrition and food security, catalyzing economic growth, and creating jobs in rural areas while creating stable market conditions for staple food crops and safeguarding the natural resource base in the country.

The project was officially launched by the Minister of State for Agriculture Honorable Zerubabel Mijumbi Nyiira at a workshop held on 10 April at Kabira Country Club.

"Population pressure is high, farm sizes are small (less than 2 ha), and the options to put new land into production are rather limited which makes traditional farming no longer sustainable," he said. "Therefore there is need to intensify the production of those foods that do not pose food insecurity challenges and can earn farmers reasonable income".

The project is targeting two crops, rice and Irish potato. The policies of interest include the National Fertilizer Policy and Seed Policy.

The workshop brought together various stakeholders in the sector including representatives from the farming community, civil society organizations, the private sector, and development partners in the agricultural sector. They provided their perspectives on challenges associated with policy action in Uganda, which were synthesized into emerging issues for policy action, priorities for joint engagement, and constraints to the adaptation and harmonization of policies. They also agreed on modalities for stakeholder engagement.

The priority areas for policy action which emerged from key challenges in agricultural policy formulation and implementation were synthesized into four key areas:

1. Coordinated involvement of key stakeholders in policy formulation and implementation processes to overcome constraints of inadequate participation of relevant stakeholders in policy formulation and lack of operational strategies for policy implementation.
2. Generation and use of credible evidence and data to inform formulation, adaptation, harmonization, and effective implementation of agricultural policies. This priority area emerged from constraints such as lack of credible evidence to guide relevant policy formulation and implementation. These include lessons from previous initiatives and inadequate research and development efforts to provide essential technologies for productivity enhancement and labor efficiency.
3. Harmonization, finalization of important pending policies, and developing new and relevant ones which stemmed from lack of a comprehensive agricultural policy leading to duplication through commodity-specific policies. Other constraints include the ever-changing policy direction of government which creates uncertainty and renders some policies irrelevant.
4. Capacity strengthening for policy formulation and implementation at all levels including stakeholders. Lack of capacity results in a weak regulatory framework, and lack of resources to support enforcement of policies related to quality assurance and prevention of counterfeits especially in agricultural inputs; weak advocacy for formulation and implementation of relevant agricultural policies and limited capacity among stakeholders to demand for services and accountability; and duplication of efforts and conflict of mandates within different government ministries and agencies in areas such as natural resource managament, environment, and trade.

Several modalities for continuous stakeholder engagement in policy actions were agreed upon including identifying more stakeholders to engage in the PASIC project, instituting a project steering committee, creating electronic platforms for interaction and generation of ideas from a diversity of stakeholders for them to learn, share outputs, and experiences, developing joint action plans for improved agricultural policy development and implementation, and for updating stakeholders about progress and developments.

Participants also formulated recommendations for future action, emphasizing the need for improved coordination and strengthened linkages across and between sectors to create synergies.

Upcoming events

1. IITA Board Meeting, 6-8 May, IITA, Cotonou, Benin
2. Commissioning of IITA Science Building, 5 June, IITA, Bukavu, DR Congo
3. Engagement of Youth Entrepreneurship for Agricultural Transformation in Africa, 28-30 May, IITA, Ibadan, Nigeria

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1. Powered off all unnecessary electrical office/lab equipment;
2. Turned off air conditioners; and
3. Switched off all lights.