

Public-private partnerships to provide nutritional food to communities

Malnutrition has been a challenge in South Africa for a very long time, with a particular impact on children under five years of age. The International Potato Centre (CIP) has been working with small commercial food processing companies in several African countries to introduce orange-fleshed sweet potatoes (OFSP) puree as a highly nutritious and cost-effective ingredient in the food industry.

To roll out this initiative locally, McCain Foods South Africa has partnered with CIP, Agricultural Research Council (ARC) and CSIR/SanBio to review opportunities within South Africa's nutrition support structures that offer entry points to deliver OFSP puree.



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The challenge is reflected in the recently released [2020 South African Child Gauge](#) report which revealed that 44% of children under the age of five suffer from vitamin A deficiency and 27% are stunted. It is believed, however, that this has escalated as a result of Covid-19, as unemployment increased to 32.5% and the cost of the basic Household Food Basket also increased by 3.8% in February 2021 as reported by the Pietermaritzburg Economic Justice and Dignity Project.

Unathi Mhlatyana, managing director at McCain Foods South Africa, says a potential go-to solution for malnutrition and vitamin A deficiencies is a puree made from orange-fleshed sweet potatoes (OFSP) which can be used as an ingredient in a variety of foods.

This has been proven through an initiative by the International Potato Center (CIP - a CGIAR Research Center currently working in 15 countries across Africa) which has had success using OFSP puree in bread and magwinya (mandazi). He says: "These food offerings are acceptable to children in terms of taste profile, affordability and tummy fill."

Education, consumer awareness campaigns

Simon Heck, programme director, Sweet Potato Agrifood Systems at CIP says the consumption of just 150 grams of boiled biofortified OFSP can provide the daily vitamin A needs of children. "Together with our national partners in Africa and Asia, we have developed and disseminated dozens of biofortified OFSP varieties helping to improve the diets of more than six million households."

Through consumer nutrition education and consumer awareness campaigns, demand for OFSP is growing and it is becoming more widely used in food processing, explains Heck. "Over the past five years, CIP has been working with small commercial food processing companies in several African countries to introduce OFSP puree as a highly nutritious and cost-effective ingredient in the food industry. The partnership with McCain Foods is designed to take this technology to the diverse markets in South Africa."

CGIAR-led interventions have developed more than 11 biofortified crops over the last 20 years benefiting tens of millions of small-scale farming families. "With these types of investments, we can develop more nutritious varieties adapted to local conditions and consumer demand, and make them more accessible through adapted food systems. This would improve health, productivity and livelihoods," adds Heck.

Maximising SA's nutrition support structures

To roll out this initiative locally, McCain Foods South Africa has partnered with CIP, Agricultural Research Council (ARC) and CSIR/SanBio to review opportunities within South Africa's nutrition support structures that offer entry points to deliver OFSP puree. The companies have placed a special focus on providing children and adolescents with healthier meals.

Mhlatyana explains that McCain Foods South Africa will source OFSP and produce the puree in conjunction with technology partner SinnovaTek - a company with proven success in the manufacturing of OFSP puree in the US and more recently in Kenya. "We have been exploring this for the past three years as part of our sustainability strategy and we're hoping that through these partnerships, we will be able to reduce malnutrition, minimise poverty in our local communities, and reduce food waste at farm and factory level."



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2 Oct 2020



"The Covid-19 pandemic has seriously aggravated the food security challenges in the country and sweet potato-based foods offer affordable nutritious solutions to minimise malnutrition in our communities," he adds.

"At McCain, we produce about 14000 tonnes of OFSP in terms of raw materials per year in Delmas, Mpumalanga, however not all of the sweet potatoes comply with our specifications for sweet potato fries and are often left behind on the field. Our aim is to reduce waste and recover approximately 90% of these losses by producing sweet potato puree that can be used elsewhere along the value chain."

"Along with this, our goal is to improve farmers' livelihoods," he says. "We are, therefore, ensuring that the transfer of knowledge and technology remains something that our growers can benefit from during this process. The programme will provide them with the opportunity to use all aspects of the OFSP, meaning they will get further usage out of their yield, improve their income, diversify their food systems and bolster their technical capabilities."

In order to bring this project to fruition, McCain Foods, CIP, ARC and CSIR/SanBio recently held a workshop with key stakeholders to form further public-private partnerships. "Projects of this nature can only be successful if there is collaboration and we are looking forward to rolling out these partnerships as soon as possible. We must work together to reduce malnutrition in the country and ensure our food ecosystem remains sustainable through smart farming and planet-friendly practices," concludes Mhlatyana.

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