Tropentag, September 17-19, 2018, Ghent

"Global food security and food safety:
The role of universities"

Biofortified Food Choice in Zambia. Farmers' Views on Vitamin A Maize in two Rural Communities

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Abstract

Vitamin A deficiency is a global public health challenge causing preventable blindness in children and pregnant women. It leads to impaired growth and increased risk of disease and death from common childhood infections such as diarrheal diseases and measles, and especially heightened risk of maternal mortality among women. In Zambia, 54 percent of children under five are reported to be vitamin A deficient and 14 percent of pregnant women. The IFPRI-led Agriculture for Nutrition and Health (A4NH) programme HarvestPlus supports the breeding, testing, and release of vitamin A maize varieties in the country. Three varieties were officially released in 2012, and to date the HarvestPlus programme has spread to five provinces and it was estimated that 100,000 households would grow Vitamin A maize by 2016. Following five years of delivery efforts, a gender sensitive monitoring study was jointly conducted in September 2017 by HarvestPlus and the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences to assess progression and understand farmers' perceptions about these varieties and the effects on their wellbeing. In this paper we specifically discuss rural farmers' decisions related to biofortified food choice, including socio-cultural, economic, and agro-ecological factors. The data stem from eight focus group discussions with women and men farmers and 22 individual interviews with farmers and key informants in two villages located in Chirundu and Chipata districts. The findings of this paper improve our understanding of factors necessary to consider in order to scale-up the consumption of biofortified foods in central and eastern Zambia. The paper also shows the value of a social relations approach, as advocated by feminist scholars, when performing this type of implementation assessment studies. As such, it can inform the design of future agricultural interventions.

Keywords: Biofortified crops, food choice, gender, social relations approach, vitamin A maize, Zambia

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