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Cooking demonstrations in Ghana

Empowering school cooks and communities to integrate orange-fleshed sweet potatoes into school meals programmes

Project Brief

Overview

As part of the Food Systems Transformation Through School Feeding initiative, a community-led cooking demonstration was conducted in Ghana to support the integration of orange-fleshed sweet potatoes (OFSP) into school meals programmes. The activity demonstrated practical, scalable approaches for incorporating nutrient-rich, locally available foods into school meals while strengthening community ownership of school food systems.

The demonstration focused on empowering school cooks and women food actors through hands-on training in culturally appropriate recipes and safe food preparation practices. By bringing together cooks, farmers, and community members, the activity supported knowledge exchange and highlighted the role of school meals in improving child nutrition, strengthening local food systems, and promoting sustainable, locally sourced diets.



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Intervention

Two project sites in the Kpandai District of Ghana, Meme Primary School and Lesseni Primary School, were selected to take part in the cooking demonstrations. To support coordination and strengthen local ownership of the activity, school leadership and community stakeholders were engaged by the project team early in the planning phase. Community leaders, including community Chiefs, were integral to the mobilisation of resources for the demonstrations. They also supported recruitment, organisation, and smooth participation of the women involved.

The cooking demonstrations were strategically delivered during the schools' "Our Day" celebrations—a termly child-centered event marked by high attendance, strong parent engagement, and community participation. Offering the cooking demonstrations on this day enabled an environment for adoption and visibility without disrupting teaching and learning.

In each community, 20 young women were mobilised and supported to lead the meal preparation process. First, women received structured training on:

- dietary diversity and the importance of incorporating multiple food groups in school meals,
- how to balance ingredients to improve nutrient quality, and
- practical ways to integrate OFSP into meals without disrupting local food preferences.

Next, women worked in self-selected teams of five, four groups per community, to creatively develop a new dish for school menus. They were instructed to adapt familiar dishes that they regularly prepare and incorporate OFSP roots and leaves into the recipes. This approach strengthened the cultural acceptability of recipes and utilisation of locally available ingredients.

Finally, women procured cooking ingredients using funds distributed by the project team, and cooked the meals together. To reinforce sustainability and local food system linkages, women were encouraged to use only locally available ingredients, avoiding imported options.

To support compliance and visibility of safe preparation, the women were provided with aprons and head covers (hair nets) as part of the demonstration. Although school cooks and communities are already exposed to the Ghana School Feeding Programme (GSFP) hygiene expectations, the activity reaffirmed key WASH practices, such as:

- safe water considerations for cooking,
- correct hand washing techniques, and
- hygienic handling of ingredients and cooked foods.

Impact

The cooking demonstrations had strong community participation, with approximately 1,100 people—including pupils, teachers, parents, local leaders, and non-enrolled children—present during the event. The women participating in the activity produced multiple culturally appropriate dishes that reflect realistic options for the school meals programme (SMP) menus. These included: OFSP rice with vegetable stew, boiled OFSP with vegetable stew, OFSP with beans stew, OFSP-based jollof rice, and noodles served with fried OFSP.

Additionally, the project team made many positive observations throughout the conception and delivery of this activity. These observations provide valuable learnings for future cooking demonstrations and climate-smart SMP implementation.

OBSERVATIONS

- **High child acceptability:** OFSP-root and OFSP-leaf meals were well received. Most pupils finished their portions and some saved small amounts to share at home. This indicates that the local product may be a strong option for school menu integration.
- **Strong community support:** There was visible community interest in OFSP, including through consumption of the raw product during the demonstrations. This indicates local acceptability, strengthening the potential to utilise the product to increase nutrition access through school and community systems.

- **Strengthened social capital and trust:** The demonstrations built stronger relationships among schools, traditional leaders, women groups, and parents—creating shared ownership and a supportive environment for sustained SMP improvements.
- **Women’s leadership in innovation:** Young women adapted familiar meals in culturally appropriate ways to incorporate OFSP roots and leaves. This indicates that locally-led solutions have potential to support dietary diversity in school meals without disrupting food preferences.
- **Partnership momentum:** The project has attracted interest from other NGOs and stakeholders willing to support scale-up. This opens potential pathways for collaboration, shared resources, and reduced expansion costs over time.
- **Land access:** Engagement with local community members at the start of the project resulted in offers to lease or provide land for school farms. This action has potential to strengthen long-term farm-to-school supply chains and local sustainability.

Next steps

With the right support, the project teams hopes that this approach can scale into a sustainable SMP model that advances: nutrition improvements for children, local women’s empowerment and leadership, climate-smart, locally resilient food systems, and stronger community ownership of school health and nutrition.

To take this work forward, the project team plans to work with each community to:

- Develop a short OFSP recipe guide for school cooks using locally available ingredients,
- Align recipes with GSFP menu standards and practical cost realities,
- Strengthen produce safeguarding and community sensitisation around harvest management, and
- Expand cooking demonstrations to integrate with local procurement pathways.



Women preparing orange-fleshed sweet potato to cook. Credit: Dr. Mawuli Kushitor, Dr. Phyllis Addo

Why it matters

School meal programmes are a key entry point for improving nutrition, learning outcomes, and local food system resilience. As a climate-resilient, locally available crop OFSPs offer a strong option for contributing to healthier diets for school children when integrated into SMPs.

This activity provided practical evidence that OFSP can move from local crop production to school plates through community ownership.



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About this project brief

This project brief is part of a series aiming to convey the results and progress of the Food Systems Transformation Through School Feeding Project, funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and the Rockefeller Foundation under the Catalyzing Change for Healthy and Sustainable Food Systems (CCHeFS) initiative. The full series can be found at www.regenerativefoodsystemsalliance.org.

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Suggested citation: Kushitor, M., Addo, P., Zotor, F. B., D., Dysard, S., Singh, S. (2026). Cooking demonstrations in Ghana: Empowering school cooks and communities to integrate orange-fleshed sweet potatoes into school meals programmes. London, United Kingdom.

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Opinions stated in this brief are those of authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the CCHeFS program funders.