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Africa Online Health: Health news stories about Africa

AEGIS: An excellent source about the latest developments in HIV/AIDS

NIGERIA: Research improves nutrition value of staple foods - Thursday, October 16, 2003

LAGOS, 15 October (IRIN) - Africa should be a major beneficiary of a new US \$100 million research initiative to improve the nutritional value of major starch crops that are staples in under-developed countries, a Nigerian crop research institute said on Wednesday.

The International Institute for Tropical Agriculture (IITA) in the southwestern city of Ibadan, said in a statement it would receive an unspecified amount of funding from the programme, known as HarvestPlus to improve the nutritional quality of cassava, maize and sweet potato.

The 10-year programme will be run by the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), of which Nigerian research centre is a member. It will seek to improve the nutritional quality of key staple foods in Africa, Asia and South America.

The IITA said HarvestPlus had received \$25 million of funding from the Bill and Melina Gates Foundation, set up by Bill Gates, the founder of software giant Microsoft, and a further \$47 million from other Western donors.

The Nigerian crop research institute said it would be one of the main African research centres involved in the project. A research station in Mozambique specialising in sweet potato is also expected to get some funding, it added.

IITA said it would concentrate on improving the nutritional value of cassava, maize and sweet potato using plant breeding techniques and bio-technology. The institute said it aimed to raise the content of important nutrients such as iron, zinc and "the precursors of Vitamin A".

Researchers say these staple foods provide calories and energy, but lack key micro-nutrients essential for good health.

According to IITA, malnutrition and poverty go together as people are usually forced to eat what they can afford. As a result an estimated 1.8 million people suffered premature death in Africa last year. The institute also noted that nearly a third of all children under five in Nigeria were deficient in Vitamin A, a major cause of blindness.

The research institute said that over the past 25 years it had identified cassava strains with high yields of beta-carotene, which is important in the formation of Vitamin A. Under the new research project, researchers will seek to combine high beta-carotene content with high crop yields, disease resistance and good taste.

With maize, work already done to increase beta-carotene, iron and zinc content will be continued. Similar work will be done with sweet potato, building on research already conducted by scientists in Mozambique.

"This is an idea whose time has come," said Bussie Maziya-Dixon, a food scientist at IITA. "More nutritious food will be a foundation for development in Africa."

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