ENHANCING FOOD SECURITY THROUGH INCREASED POTATO PRODUCTION IN KENYA

Abstract

Potato in Kenya is an important food and cash crop that plays a major role in food security and is only second to maize in terms of utilization. The crop has higher yields per unit area (40 tonnes per hectare) than most of the major food crops including maize and beans. Potato production has been increasing due to economic decline of competing cash crops such as maize, coffee and pyrethrum, and increasing demand from consumers and processors. Approximately 500,000 Kenyan smallholder potato farmers produce about 1 million tonnes from 100,000 ha of cultivated land area. The potato in Kenya, just like the other roots and tubers in the Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is a major source of sustenance. It accounts for more than 20 % of calories consumed world over. Its production and processing ensures employment to thousands of Kenyans. Besides general home use, potato chips (French fries), crisps and frozen fries, whose demand has rapidly increased due to rapid growth of fast food restaurants and snack bars in the urban areas, are among many products processed from potatoes. Due to erratic rainfall patterns experienced in Kenya, production of maize as a staple crop has been unstable. Recent years have seen a decrease in maize and other cereals production. Unlike the maize crop that takes at least 5 months to mature, potatoes have short growth cycle maturing at an average period of 3 months and can be easily integrated into existing farming systems. Potatoes can therefore be successfully grown during the short rain periods which have become common in Kenya. This paper looks at potatoes as a possible food security crop in the face of a changing Kenyan weather pattern.

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