

WOMEN ROLE IN MAINTAINING SWEETPOTATO DIVERSITY: A LESSON LEARNT FROM SWEETPOTATO IN SITU CONSERVATION IN BALIEM VALLEY, IRIAN JAYA, INDONESIA

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A study of the role of women in maintaining sweetpotato diversity was conducted from 1997 to 2000 in three different sites in the Baliem valley, Irian Jaya: Waga-waga, Wesaput and Kurima villages. The objectives of the study were: (1) to understand the mechanism of dissemination and transfer processes of knowledge of sweet potato within and between generations; (2) to determine the relationship between women's status in the society and their knowledge and management of sweet potato; (3) to determine the reasons for selecting, maintaining and discarding particular sweet potato cultivars and (4) to clarify the significance of dominant cultivars and their functioning and distribution. Data collection was done through a survey, participatory observation and direct interview. To document in detail the planting practices and allocation of space to cultivars, women's individual sweetpotato beds were mapped and bed cultivators interviewed.

Result of the study indicated that women farmers have a detailed knowledge of agro-ecological variability and zones, allocation of specific sweetpotato cultivars to particular zones, the distribution of cultivars within beds and interactions between types of cultivars and soil fertility. The changing soil fertility between new and old beds results in a gradually change in the composition of the cultivars planted there. They identified sweetpotato cultivars based on their use and agronomic characteristics. Results of the study also documented the way that knowledge of sweetpotato cultivars is exchanged within and between generations of women in Waga-waga village. The study also indicated that the status and age of women are important in sweet potato cultivation in this ethnic group. Two type of status were found to influence knowledge and management of sweet potato diversity (1) marital status and (2) achieved status.

The higher status of the first wife compared to second or subsequent wives, especially in marriages of tribal chiefs, meaning that the first wife a larger number of sweet potato beds. In the cases studied, this larger planting area contained higher diversity than other women. On the other hand women can also achieve higher status through a number of strategies associated with deployment of sweet potato diversity. It was found that women enhance their status by becoming known for developing or maintaining original sweet potato cultivars in their gardens. This status is further strengthened if they make offerings of traditional or original sweet potato cultivars such as *Arugulek*, *Helalekue asli*, and *Musaneken* to *honai adat*, the ancestral house of the settlement. Finally, a woman can enhance her status by developing strong relationship with relatives and friends and ancestors.