**Dr. Eunice Bonsi**

*Tuskegee University/Ghana*

Growing up, Dr. Eunice Bonsi’s mother was one of the best cooks in her hometown in Ghana. Neighbors would enlist her help in cooking traditional Ghananaian foods for funerals, birthdays and graduations and other celebrations. Dr. Bonsi remembers sitting in the kitchen with her mother, watching how she prepared and cooked the food. “That,” she says “is where my interest in nutrition really started.”

After studying and researching nutritional science in laboratories for years, Dr. Bonsi said “I decided I needed to work with people.” She took a joint appointment for research and extension as an Associate Professor and Program Leader in Specialist Foods & Nutrition Education at Tuskegee University, where, for the past twenty years, she and her team have been working to promote the sweet potato in Ghana and West Africa.

The varieties Dr. Bonsi and her team are focused on – orange and purple fleshed – have incredible agronomic and nutritional benefits. They’re rich in vitamin A, an essential nutrient for pregnant women and children. In Ghana, where Vitamin A deficiency (VAD) affects 72 percent of the children under-five and contributes to an estimated one of three child deaths, the promotion of the sweet potato has been critical in addressing devastating micronutrient deficiencies.

Beyond just nutrition, Dr. Bonsi and her team have also helped local communities harness the poverty reduction potential of the sweet potatoe. The varieties Dr. Bonsi’s team promotes are fast-maturing, which allows farmers to produce more in less time, improving income and evening out seasonal fluctuations. Dr. Bonsi’s colleagues credit her for effectively linking the agricultural research community with the nutrition community in a way that has transformed thinking within both communities of practice.

Dr. Bonsi remembers farmers were originally resistant to growing the new varieties, concerned there wouldn’t be a market for them since everyone was used to white sweet potatoes. “So,” Dr. Bonsi says, “at the beginning, we had to seek the markets for them ourselves.” They bought grinding and dying equipment, and taught women how to process, package and sell the potatoes as complementary food for infants. Soon, leaders from other villages were asking Eunice’s team to train their women in the sweet potato processing.

They started a training model whereby one village would tutor the next. Today, nearly the whole Volta region in Eastern Ghana has embraced the consumption of the leaves as well as the orange flash sweet potato, and farmers and processors alike are exporting to neighboring countries of Togo and Benin.

Dr. Bonsi is now closely working with the Ghanaian government to incorporate these sweet potatoes into school feeding programs, thus further supporting small-scale farmers while simultaneously improving the nutrition of schoolchildren. Four schools in the south have already started the program.

Her team is looking to scale up to other regions in Ghana, then maybe look to neighboring countries. Asked about her ultimate goals, though, Dr. Bonsi doesn’t measure them in terms of people reached, incomes raised, or Vitamin A levels. Her vision is much simpler. “We want to scale up in the country first, so that in five years, when you go to a market, you should see orange and purple sweet potatoes,” she says. “And we want the people themselves to tell you what they do, for nutrition and health. That would be a great achievement.”