
Soy Promotion by Plenty International

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Plenty International is a not-for-profit development organization dedicated to supporting efforts of economically disenfranchised families and communities to provide for their own basic needs, promote local culture and protect their natural resources. Plenty representatives work with women's organizations, farmers groups, cooperatives, indigenous communities, local non-profit organizations, government health and agriculture representatives, and small business owners who are seeking assistance to initiate or expand soybean production, processing, marketing and/or nutrition education programs.

Soybean Agriculture

Helping interested families and communities learn new agriculture practices and adapt the growing of new crops requires consistent delivery of quality technical support, combined with timely provision of appropriate material and equipment inputs over several years. We have found that if any of these three major components (technical service, materials and equipment) are missing or delayed, intended outcomes most likely will not be achieved. We have witnessed this happen several times while attempting to help farming families in the Caribbean, Central America, Asia's subcontinent, and Africa include production of soybeans within their cultural practices. We have also seen many families and communities succeed in adapting production of soybeans in rotation with rice, corn, root and/or vegetable crops, when required inputs were provided in a timely manner over a 5 to 10 year period.

Several technical considerations must be taken into account when attempting to help economically disenfranchised families and communities initiate and sustain production of soybeans or any new crop. Technical assistance cannot be done in isolation; one must provide more than just information about how soybeans are grown. Families need to know how to include soybeans within an overall agriculture improvement plan. The bottom line is that people you are working with will need to see, over an extended period of time, how including the growing of soybeans with other crops can help them: a) increase family income; b) improve food security; c) lessen pest and disease problems and dependency on chemical fertilizers; and d) improve financial returns for labor invested.

While implementing soy use programs, Plenty representatives have found the following agriculture tools can be maintained locally and, when used effectively, help farming families achieve increased financial return for their labor. Appropriate sized roto-tillers or small tractors can help prepare land. Pushalong wheel seeders

and cultivators are needed to lessen time required for planting and field maintenance. And, depending on the local economy, appropriate sized gas-powered cutterharvesters and/or plot threshers may be needed to achieve desired financial return for labor and to encourage continuing involvement of youth in agriculture activities.

In Dominica and St. Vincent in the Caribbean, where Plenty was not able to provide all the required equipment needed to make soybean seed production cost effective, farming families did not continue to grow the soybeans. But in St. Lucia, the Roots Farm Cooperative, having gained access to a thresher and large roto-tiller, continues to grow soybeans. In Belize, Plenty worked with grass roots organizations and government representatives to increase awareness of the benefits of growing and using soybeans for food. The result was expanded production of soybeans, replacing some of the soybean imports. Soybean production has now become a priority pursued by the Ministry of Agriculture. In Nicaragua and Sri Lanka, Plenty worked with NGOs that were already promoting increased use of soy foods. Supporting these NGOs in their efforts to establish soy food processing and marketing small businesses has resulted in more farmers in these countries growing soybeans to meet increasing local demands.

Soy Food Processing, Marketing and Nutrition Awareness

Plenty's efforts to adapt soy foods to local cultures are directed toward members of women-led organizations, farming families and/or indigenous communities. Typically the desire is to establish small food processing and marketing businesses; sometimes to support community clinics, nutrition supplementation programs, or other important social services.

One of the most important characteristics of primary soy foods (milk, flour, tofu/cheese) is their ability to easily absorb flavors. These primary foods, for the most part, have a neutral taste, making them easier to season or flavor and to be included in traditional meals or recipes. In all of the countries in which we have worked, 90% or more of the people who have tasted foods that included or were made exclusively from soybean products, found them to be highly acceptable.

Plenty has seen the greatest success when working with grass roots organizations to develop and sustain soy food processing and distribution services for micro-enterprises. We make every effort possible to use locally available equipment and tools, even to the point of having semi-manual, stainless steel milk presses and tofu/cheese boxes fabricated in the host country. We have found that helping grass roots organizations to establish small to medium scale soy processing businesses is a very effective way to support community efforts to improve access to high nutrient, low cost foods. At the same time, this approach addresses education and economic development needs of disenfranchised populations. In each of the countries where we have worked with local organizations to initiate soy food processing, marketing and nutrition education activities, the number of people including soy foods within family diets, and the number of people making and selling fresh soy foods is increasing at a significant rate.

While Plenty representatives provide soy food processing, recipe development and nutrition education workshops focused on home use, only a very small percentage of families continue to make soy milk or tofu/cheese at home with any regularity. Why? In many cases family cooks, having to haul water and cooking fuel, wash

clothes by hand, care for children and help tend gardens, prefer not to use their time to soak, grind by hand, cook, and separate the soy milk from the pulp. In contrast, a significant percentage of people who have learned about the nutrition and economic value of soy foods will, when easily accessible and affordable, purchase soymilk, tofu, and soy flour and use them in recipes at home. We continue to provide home processing and nutrition education workshops because they are one of the most effective forums for helping families understand the versatility and economic and nutritional value of including soy foods within traditional meals.

If you would like to investigate the potential of soy foods for your area, Plenty technicians are available to come and give advice. According to Peter Schweitzer, executive director of Plenty International, "Unless we have a grant to cover our costs, we do ask for expenses and, in some cases, a small stipend if we send a technician to a site. People can write us at Plenty International, PO Box 394, Summertown, TN 38483, or call 931-964-4323 or email to plenty@plenty.org." Plenty's website is www.plenty.org.

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