

# Africa Storytelling Challenge Winners: In Maame Ekuia Manful's Words

*Recognized for the noteworthy contributions she is making to advance scientific innovations throughout Africa and beyond, Manful was named one of the five winners of the inaugural Champions of Science—Africa Storytelling Challenge. In the essay that follows, see how this pioneer is improving her community and inspiring the next generation to pursue scientific fields.*

## **What are you working on and why is it important?**

Sweetpot yoghurt is a flagship brand that produces delicious yoghurt enriched with highly nutritious Orange-fleshed sweetpotato (OFSP). In promoting the “Good health and well being” goal, we have developed a healthier snack which is also an adaptable food based approach to the Vitamin A deficiency syndrome. Sweetpot yoghurt is naturally flavored and supplemented with Vitamin A, and dietary fibres, presenting consumers with a healthier snack choice. We are tapping from a cheaper Vitamin A source (the orange sweet potatoes) to improve the nutritional component of a multinational snack. Unlike the existing yoghurts on the market our brand is naturally flavoured, has a natural dose of vitamin A and dietary fibres, without preservatives. Satisfying hunger due to its thickened nature while promoting healthier snacking that seeks to tackle vitamin A deficiency (VAD)—a social problem by fortifying yoghurt on the market is another great impact. Records from the World Health Organization concerning vitamin A deficiency Syndrome, which is prevalent in Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia, underpins a major factor for this food tech startup, notwithstanding the post-harvest losses faced by farmers who are into the cultivation of sweet potatoes. It can be seen in Ghana that the nutritional impact of sweet potatoes has not fully been exploited. Thus, a potential adaptable food-based approach (functional food) for VAD syndrome other than supplementation programs, to give wider coverage rate. Our initiative is affecting positively the sweet potato value chain, by creating another robust value chain whose end product is sweetpot yoghurt for the consumer, thus enhancing income generation and job creation for all actors along the value chain. These include farmers, suppliers/ distributors/ drivers/ to our team (purchasing and supply, production, finance and administration, sales and marketing) and retailers.

## **Who inspires you and/or what motivates you?**

I am inspired by the late Kofi Annan, the former Secretary-General of the United Nations. His passion for peace building, women empowerment and child education has made great impact in the world most especially in developing countries. Through his service to humanity, he has raised and inspired leaders and mentors for the next generation. I was excited to know Kofi Annan was a strong promoter of orange

fleshed sweet potatoes as potential tool to alleviate Vitamin A Deficiency Syndrome in Sub-Saharan Africa, when he paid a visit to the International Potato Centre in Kumasi in March 2015, while I was an intern with the organization.

When I see scientists, who have developed innovative solutions which transform society, it really motivates me. As a food scientist, I am motivated to explore possible means to apply what I learn from the classroom to the benefit of society. It brings much joy and fulfillment to know it's possible to make tangible research findings to improve society in a sustainable way, create jobs and improve livelihood. And that is what I and my team are doing now, to use entrepreneurship to move sweetpot yoghurt from the lab and shelves as a healthier snack in our capacity for consumers.

### **Why do you think it is important to tell stories of science?**

It is interesting to note that some famous scientific discoveries were accidental and results of mistakes. The only way we got to know of them were the stories that were told of them. Typical example not so far from me as a food scientist is the discovery of pasteurization by Louis Pasteur. This method is now applied widely in the food industry to process shelf stable and safe beverages. This world and the innovations that sustain it are discoveries of science. Telling stories of science is a great way to demystify science while allowing society to embrace science and its unfathomable blessings. Science without the end user in mind is not worth looking at. It is in telling science stories that science-birthered solutions are communicated to the end users. Knowledge churned out of science is disseminated to the public while being antidote to the niche beneficiaries in the society. Knowledge is preserved and improved upon from generation to generation as we tell the stories of science. The younger generation is inspired and challenged to explore sustainable ways of solving problems as well as address gaps that may have been created by the previous generation of scientist to meet changing societal needs.

*The content and views presented here are those of the individual Challenge participant.*

### **About the Africa Storytelling Challenge**

The inaugural [Champions of Science—Africa Storytelling Challenge](#) took place between May and August 2018. Open to all scientists doing innovative work in Africa, the contest drew more than 100 submissions. An independent selection committee of scientists, policymakers and science journalists reviewed the applications and selected the winners. Each winner will be awarded \$5,000 and will have the opportunity to share their stories at the 2019 American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) annual meeting in Washington, D.C.