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Tanzania: Shifting Towards Drought Resistant Agriculture

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OPINION

Tanzania is poised for a scientific revolution to defeat one of its worst weather vagaries - drought – if tests to fertilise maize seeds biotechnologically prove successful.

A scientific conference which I followed in Johannesburg last week organised by the 'Water Efficient Maize for Africa' (WEMA) regional project revealed a rising enthusiasm by East and Southern African states to make this agricultural revolution which may mean sustained growth of Africa's staple food, maize.

Tanzanian officials interviewed by me for my weekly TV Show broadcast weekly on Channel Ten on the sidelines of the scientific regional conference were upbeat that this novel scientific breakthrough which had succeeded elsewhere in North America and other parts of the world will mean a real liberation for Tanzanian peasants and indeed the population as a whole because "ugali" - Tanzanian staple food - will be available sustainably all the year round.

According to Dr Alois Kullaya, a principal agricultural officer with the Tanzanian Ministry of Agriculture and country coordinator for the drought tolerant maize production project in Tanzania, already mock tests have been carried out at Makutupora in the arid Dodoma region in readiness for an imminent biotechnology test to develop drought resistant maize seeds.

"In doing the mock test we wanted to ascertain if there would be any harm to the environment in the event a biotechnological test was embarked upon. That was last year on October 3," said Dr Kullaya.

Dr Kullaya asserted to me that the tests at Makutupora have revealed that there would no consequential harm to the environment in the event a biotechnology breeding of maize production is carried out in the country.

Another official at my panel interview, Dr Rose Kingamkono was even more upbeat and displayed a knowledgeable scientific process of breeding maize seeds biotechnologically.

Her institution, the Tanzania Commission for Science and Technology in which she is a Director of Research Coordination is the one detailed to follow through the implementation of this technological revolution to conquer one of the vagaries of weather, drought, along with the Department of Research at the Tanzanian Ministry of Agriculture.

What one would wish this initiative by Tanzania as supported by the Nairobi based WEMA project is sustained focus and priority to bring this technological innovation to fruition because it will mean a significant leap forward for Tanzanian peasants.

For as has been observed elsewhere in the development effort, most of these projects have ended up as fine words on paper with little or no implementation on the ground.

Tanzania has a myriad of problems - from one extreme to another - as right now we are having to contend with floods brought about by heavy rains across the country. But efforts towards conquering one problem, such as drought may mean a lot to alleviate lack of sustainable food for the population.

Historically, as goes an overview by the African Agricultural Technology Foundation (AATF) which sponsored the Johannesburg meeting, subsistence farmers in Africa have not had access as quickly as their counterparts in the developed world.

Globally, more than a billion cumulative acres of crops grown biotechnologically have been grown thus far in other parts of the developed world.

"One of the greatest attributes of biotechnology is its scale-neutral applicability. The power of this technology is delivered through a seed that can be grown by any farmer, regardless of the farm size, without additional equipment or large capital investment," says the overview.

These are the key words. Tanzania's subsistence farmers stand to benefit from biotechnology if it was applied in their interest - and the sooner the better.

As pointed out, most often than not, we are more accustomed and content with slogans but with no tangible action!

So if 'Kilimo Kwanza' [Priority is Agriculture] is to have any significant meaning, then policy and decision makers must move fast to embark on biotechnology revolution towards drought resistant agriculture.

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