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## Uganda: New Maize Type to Curb Hunger

Joshua Kato

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Kampala — There is maize being harvested in all corners of Uganda. According to the Ministry of Agriculture, this is likely to be the biggest maize harvest in a very long time. The harvests would be even better, if two new maize varieties that may change the face of maize production in the region had already hit the farms.

The two varieties, the Water Efficient Maize for Africa (WEMA) and the Drought Tolerant Maize for Africa (DTMA) are currently under going field tests in the East African region.

The varieties are being promoted by the African Agriculture Technology Foundation (AATF). Other organisations taking part include the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Centre and Monsanto.

For the last five years, incidences of hunger have ravaged most parts of eastern Africa. According to farmers, they responded to this need to fight hunger. Most of the maize has been produced on plots averaging one-and-a-half acres. By Ugandan standards, an acre of maize produces four tons at the farm. On average though, maize production is as low as 1.5 to two tons per acre.

By international standards, an acre produces almost nine tons. "There are many factors that prevent us from producing at maximum," says Sam Mukalazi, a maize farmer. He cites unpredictable weather patterns and poor quality of seeds. In Teso and other parts of Uganda in 2008 and 2009, drought caused an almost 100% crop failure.

WEMA and DTMA will improve production of maize by between 30% and 35%. "The project will benefit 30 million to 40 million people," says Dr. Sylvester Oikeh, the WEMA project manager.

The two varieties are genetically modified. The variety was discovered when a bacterium, that was found to be resistant to drought was merged with existing varieties.

"The aim is for farmers to be able to harvest a ton or more," he says. The varieties can be produced with very little water. This is particularly important because areas that are dry, like Karamoja may also produce it.

According to Oikeh, the fact that farmers in Africa use negligible amounts of fertilizers means the other way to make better yields is to provide them with seeds that can handle different situations.

He says while there is still a low adoption of genetically modified foods in the region, the food has proved to be an 'enemy of hunger' and an improver of food security in many countries like South Africa.

Research about the maize in the laboratories has already been completed and testing of the WEMA maize is going on at Mobuku irrigation scheme in Kasese, under what scientists call 'mock trials', while in Kenya it is being carried out at Kiboko for DTMA. In Uganda, research is being carried out in conjunction with the National Crop Research Institute at Namulonge. More tests will be carried out in Buliisa and Abim districts, before the approved variety is given to farmers.

Adoption of high yielding maize varieties is one of the reasons why there is food in stores in Malawi. Before the country took on massive maize production, she was most of the time rated among the most food insecure countries in the region.

A presidential initiative to embrace massive maize production with an emphasis on adoption of new varieties changed all this.

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