

Could GM crops help feed Africa?

In the final part of his series on whether genetically modified food can help solve the world food crisis, BBC News rural affairs correspondent Jeremy Cooke reports from Uganda.

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Could GM help feed Africa?

If there is one place on earth where farmers have it hard, it is sub-Saharan Africa.

Most people are farmers, but not for profit - to survive. Africa is the one continent that cannot feed itself.

When you see children picking away at the arid, red, African soil with the most rudimentary tools, it is clear that African agriculture can use all the help it can get.

Bananas are a very important staple here in Uganda, if I can secure that livelihood, I'll be done

Researcher Andrew Kiggundu

But GM has for years been viewed with suspicion across the continent.

Indeed aid shipments from the United State containing GM food were turned away during Zambia's famine in 2002.

But what I have discovered in Uganda is that the government here is beginning to adopt a "by any means necessary" policy to tackle their own national food shortages.

They are working to develop their own Africa solutions to African problems, and clearly believe that GM is part of that solution.

Drought resistant

My first stop in Kampala is the Jenny and Jessie School on the outskirts of the capital.

Some 80 children live here, many of them are orphans and budgets are extremely tight.

The diet could hardly be more basic. At breakfast time the kids tuck into porridge made of maize flour.

The trouble is that the price of the maize has gone up three fold in a year.

The school is struggling to cope. Staff are worried that, soon, they will be unable to feed the kids.

The school is a microcosm of the problems facing all of Uganda, and indeed the region.

The problem is one of supply and demand.

The United Nations predicts that demand is only going to increase. The answer must be to increase the food supply.

That is why millions of dollars are being spent on trying to develop Drought Resistant Maize.

It is an expensive project, but the big bucks of the Gates Foundation and Monsanto already mean that research is well advanced.

Africans know that GM is highly controversial. They know that in much of Europe there is a de facto ban.

Dumping ground?

But, standing in a field of corn stunted by drought, one of the prime movers in Africa's GM project, Mpoko Bokanga, says Africa will make its own choices on GM.

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Dr Mpoko Bokanga on Africa's GM future

"Europe is at a different situation in terms of food production, they have surplus. In Africa, we have deficit," he says.

"Therefore the need may be greater in Africa than in Europe. We need to use any tool we can find to increase production."

But there are concerns. Africa's agricultural problems are complex.

Even the most ardent backers of GM say there is no silver bullet, and that it can only ever be part of the solution.

And environmental groups like Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth have warned Africa not to become a dumping or testing ground for big US biotech companies; and that there could yet be unforeseen and potentially catastrophic environmental risks.

One of the leading British anti-GM campaigners, Lord Melchett, believes that African farmers risk being duped.

"If you're a subsistence farmer in Africa with any sense, and many of them are; you know you're being lied to. You know it's propaganda and hype," he says.

"All of these benefits have been claimed for decades, and not one has been delivered."

Home-grown solutions

Despite the warnings, the government of Uganda is determined to press ahead, and not just with imported GM technology.

In a small field just outside Kampala I get rare access to cutting edge African technology.

The plot is 50m by 60m and planted with some 1,000 banana plants.

[HAVE YOUR SAY](#) Starvation and food shortages are caused by economic, not agricultural, factors James Uscroft, UK

It is a field trial. The plants have been genetically modified to withstand a deadly fungal infection which kills plants and destroys yields.

The promise of a home-grown African solution drives the scientists here.

Andrew Kiggundu, who is leading the banana research, says he is motivated to improve life for his own people.

"For me, everyday when I come to work, I want that one day I'll have contributed to a variety that is going to secure productivity for the farmer," he says.

"Bananas are a very important staple here in Uganda, if I can secure that livelihood, I'll be done."

That finish line is likely a long way off. It will take years of testing before the bananas could be ready for widespread use.

Food shortages are nothing new Africa. But the continent is clearly feeling the pain of the global food crisis.

And some governments here clearly believe that GM crops will be part of the long term solution.

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How GM could fight banana wilt

Story from BBC NEWS:
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/africa/7428789.stm>

Published: 2008/05/30 22:23:35 GMT

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