Uganda not ready for GMOs - Experts

Lillian Anguparu oraganises packaged pineapples for export FILE PHOTO

Lilian Anguparu, the Chief Executive of AMFRI farms limited says Uganda risks losing its European Union market if the country embraces genetically modified organisms (GMOs) whose long-term impacts remain unknown, writes **Roland D. Nasasira**

WHAT IS A GMO?

Genetically modified organisms (GMOs) are living organisms whose genetic material has been artificially manipulated in a laboratory through genetic engineering. This creates combinations of plant, animal, bacteria, and virus genes that do not occur in nature or through traditional crossbreeding methods. Most GMOs have been engineered to withstand the direct application of herbicide and/or to produce an insecticide.

A late evening meeting to discuss the future of Ugandan agriculture on Friday at Inspire Africa Coffee along Kafu Road in Kampala concluded that Uganda is not ready to embrace genetically modified organisms (GMOs) as a reliable means of food production.

Under the theme "From the farm to the plate, featuring the French Ambassador Stephanie Rivoal," Lilian Anguparu, the Chief Executive of AMFRI farms limited that exports organically certified products said as a country, Uganda should not only look at a sustainable model but also how long its citizens are to live.

"Trying out a system whose aftermath we even do not know is something very risky. Trying out a system where we are so dependent on people or something is not the right way to go. We have to learn from the mistakes which were made by some developed countries. We should not go to where they left it at. In my view, GMOs are not the right way to go because it is going to lead to a lot of seed and fertiliser dependency and all this is money we are talking about," Anguparu explained.

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KILOGRAMMES OF DRY COCOA BEANS A FARMER HARVESTS IN AN ACRE

"If you look at our Ugandan economy, not every farmer can afford that. And yes, if we can afford that and we have to import the technology, for how long are we going to depend on this?" Anguparu wondered.

Rather than take a path that is not sustainable, she recommended Ugandan farmers to stick to what is sustainable.

"It is only about educating people how to do organic farming right and they will get it right," she said.

GMOs kill the export market

If Uganda goes GMO, Anguparu observed there will definitely be less export to the European Union (EU) because it is a no go zone.

"EU and genetically modified organisms do not mix and this means that the trade of the agricultural product to the European market is gone. We are not only looking at the European market but there could be other countries that fall into the same bracket. That means reduced exports and income and foreign exchange to Uganda," she noted.

"We cannot control our own food destiny which controls any system, environment and country. Be it political or economic, food is something very key. If somebody is going to control your destiny, which is food, then we would be doing something wrong," she added.

Agricultural habits in Uganda

Agnes Kirabo, the Executive Director of Food Rights Alliance said agricultural habits vary between the middle class and the elite and so do the perceptions of what agriculture should be.

Also, the perceptions and habits do not match people's food preferences in that the middle class and the elite are the ones who look out for traditional restaurants, yet they speak ill about traditional farms.

"We are having small and large scale producers who are supposed to be driven by the consumers. They have a challenge of believing in nature, integration and we are not giving them an option. We have a mixture where the middle class and the educated and the urban dwellers are trying to pull the rural away from the direction that produces the food they prefer to eat," Kirabo observed.

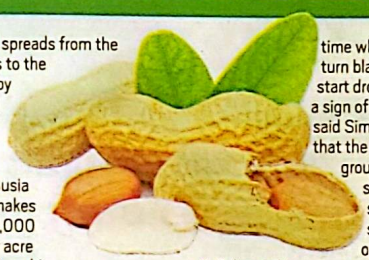
"Unfortunately, the people who are constructing confinements around their homes are not doing any agriculture within their perimeter walls. In the rural areas, agriculture is more interactive and integrative and it is this nature that is sustaining food production," she concluded.

trending now> DRYING OF GROUND NUTS SAVES FARMERS FROM POST HARVEST LOSSES

Groundnuts farmers can avoid up to 50 per cent post harvest losses to aflatoxin contamination by proper drying the legumes in the sun before storage.

In Uganda and the western region of Kenya, groundnuts are a favourite source of food and a major source of income for small-scale farmers. However, most of these farmers risk losing bigger portion of their produce to aflatoxin poison which is dangerous to humans and animals.

Aflatoxins are caused by moulds in the soil. The moulds grow more when it is humid and hot. When groundnuts are harvested late especially during the rainy season, the pods split and let in mould. Mould spreads from the diseased pods to the healthy ones by contact when mixed.



Timothy Simiyu, a farmer from Busia County who makes about Sh450,000 (Shs13m) per acre each season from his Red Oratia and Manipitia groundnuts says groundnut farming is a cool venture with sweet returns if a farmer acts within time to avert any losses between harvesting and storage.

"Groundnuts are best harvested in time when the leaves turn black and some start dropping as a sign of maturity," said Simiyu adding that the harvested groundnuts should be spread in the sun or in an open place for 6-7 days taking care to cover them if it rains.

The primary objective of curing or drying is to achieve a rapid but steady drying of pods in order to avoid aflatoxin contamination.

For good storage and germination, the moisture content of the pods should be reduced to six to eight per cent.

According to Kenya Agricultural Research Institute., the correct drying or curing of the harvested groundnuts is very important as poor curing can help induce fungal growth and reduces seed quality including groundnuts meant for consumption.

Eliakim Otieno, a dealer in groundnuts in Siaya County says that for hygiene purposes and to ensure even drying of the groundnuts, a farmer can also use a solar dryer made of locally available materials such as wooden poles, sticks, wire mesh and a plastic sheets.