



A FARMER'S SAY >
By Michael J. Ssali

Bio tech crops help African countries

It was reported in this column last month that maize, cassava, and cotton farmers in North Eastern Tanzania, had appealed to senior government officials to give them Genetically Modified (GM) crops to plant in order to avoid persistent crop failure.

This followed vain attempts made for years by the farmers to fight pests like stalk borer which affects maize, African cotton bollworm, and incurable diseases such as cassava mosaic.

One of the farmers' major concerns was that they spent too much money on inputs like pesticides to grow crops whereas Tanzanian scientists, through GM research, had developed crop varieties that were self-protected against the dreaded diseases and which needed no pesticide spraying.

Only last week, an online publication, Crop Biotech Update, carried a screaming headline: "Improved Cassava Varieties to Ease Hunger in Africa." It was about scientists from Kenya Agricultural Livestock and Research Organization (KALRO) that had developed GM cassava that was both nutritionally improved and resistant to cassava mosaic and cassava brown streak diseases.

According to Simon Gichuki, a KALRO scientist, the two cassava destroying diseases annually cause a combined economic loss of about US\$ 180 million in East Africa alone.

Uganda's agricultural production issues could be the worst in the region due to recently arrived incurable crop diseases and climate change. Besides cassava, maize, and cotton production constraints Uganda, whose population heavily depends on banana as a food crop, is faced with the banana bacterial disease which has nearly halved the crop's production and significantly raised food prices.

Uganda can hardly afford to take such food insecurity issues lightly given its rapidly growing population, declining soil fertility, frequent droughts, and high refugee influx.

Using government and donors' funds the country's scientists through GM research have developed self-protecting and nutritionally improved banana varieties.

Its farmers however cannot grow the improved crops because parliament is not in a hurry to pass the biotechnology and bio-safety bill.

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