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## \$47m for Research in Drought-Resistant Maize

New Vision (Kampala)

### NEWS

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 Kampala

UGANDA is among the four countries that will participate in a \$47m (sh80b) project that will develop drought-resistant maize for Africa. Others are Kenya, Tanzania and South Africa.

The five-year Water Efficient Maize for Africa (WEMA) project aims at developing maize varieties that can withstand the semi-arid conditions that characterise the greatest part of Africa.

The project, which commences this year, is a public-private partnership, headed by the African Agricultural Technology Foundation (AATF). National agricultural research institutes in their respective countries will spearhead the research.

"WEMA was formed in response to a growing call by African farmers, leaders and scientists to address the devastating effects of drought on small-scale farmers. Frequent droughts lead to crop failure, hunger and poverty," said Dr. Mpoko Bokanga, the AATF executive director.



Bokanga added that local institutions will expand their capacity and experience in crop breeding, biotechnology and bio-safety.

Dr. Denis Kyetere, the director-general of the National Agricultural Research Organisation, said: "The project will promote food security in Africa. Drought causes up to 100% crop failure in Uganda."

He said the benefits and safety of the maize varieties will be assessed by national authorities according to the regulatory requirements in each country.

The first conventional varieties developed by WEMA will be available after six to seven years,

while the transgenic drought-resistant maize hybrids will be available in about 10 years. The Bill and Melinda Gates and the Howard Buffet foundations are funding the project.

The partners estimate that the new variety will increase yields by 20 to 35% under moderate drought, compared to current varieties. The increase would translate into about two million metric tonnes of food during drought years in the participating countries.

Crop failure from drought is one of the primary reasons why small-scale farmers in Africa do not adopt improved farming practices. A more reliable harvest could give farmers the confidence to improve their techniques.

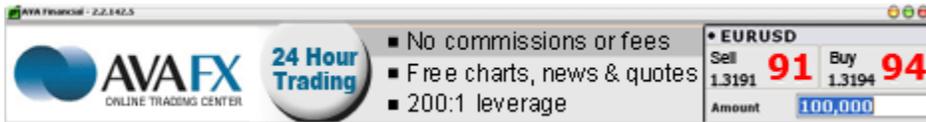
Maize, which is severely affected by frequent drought, is the most widely grown staple crop in Africa. More than 300 million Africans depend on it as their main food source.

Overall food security and livelihoods are deteriorating in Africa. In the past 15 years, the number of Africans living below the poverty line (\$1/day) has increased by 50%.

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