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#### AGRICULTURE

# Drought resistant corn in the offing

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KAMPALA

EAST AFRICA like much of sub-Saharan Africa is endowed with exceptionally rich soils and a climatic mix unmatched anywhere in its power to nourish organic agriculture.

That unusual blessing though has also long fuelled one of the greatest world paradoxes: despite the potential for bountiful crop farming, the region is in fact more known for recurring acute food shortages (some verging on famine) and international appeals for relief than perhaps anything else.

And now, a coalition of in-

ternational organisations is trying to tackle the problem at the heart of this contradiction: frequent droughts. Because of dry spells becoming more elongated and pervasive and more areas becoming water-stressed, crops are getting parched with communities losing entire seasons' worth of harvests.

An NGO, African Agriculture Technology Foundation, AATF, collaborating with two American seed companies, Monsanto and International Maize and Wheat Improvement Centre have started an experimental project that will aim at developing drought-resistant corn,

a staple in the region. Once developed and propagated in the four countries where the project is to be implemented (Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania and South Africa), according to the estimates by these institutions, this crop is expected to improve the region's food yield by two tonnes and to feed an extra 15-21 million people.

Following a press conference in Kampala on March 19th,

**Drought is a source of food insecurity and suffering for many people**

the partnership will spend the next five years trying to use drought-tolerant technologies to identify local corn varieties that survive more in dry conditions than others. A \$47 million donation from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Howard G. Buffet Foundation is to finance the project and implementation is to be coordinated by national organisations in charge of promoting new agricultural technologies. "Drought is a source of suffering and food

insecurity for many people in Uganda," said the National Agricultural Research Organisation, NARO's Director General, Dr. Denis Kyetere. Much of the corn farming in Uganda as it is elsewhere in the region is still rain-fed, particularly among smallholder farmers who still account for a disproportionate chunk of sub-Saharan Africa's food output. But rains have been progressively decreasing and scarcely any of the farmers can afford the costly irrigation systems, making AATF's Water-Efficient Maize for Africa (WEMA), as the project is officially called, a profound and timely solution.