

Inside this issue:

NaCRRRI socio-economists set to assess impact of Fall Army Worm

Researchers in drive to create awareness on new Striga-resilient maize varieties

TL III three years down the road...

Ugandan media, scientists discuss opportunities and challenges for public awareness on GMOs

Uganda benefits from Water Efficient Maize for Africa (WEMA) project

Africa conference confirms growing strength of plant disease research network

Contributors

Winnie Nanteza
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Ugandan media, scientists discuss opportunities and challenges for public awareness on GMOs



Some of the journalists who participated in the training during the field visit.

March 9-10 sensitization workshop at Namulonge, wondered why some politicians and members of the public continue to oppose GM technology, despite being pro-

This begins with asking valid questions. "Why does the public hear more of the myths and lies about genetically modified crops than the truth and facts that the scientists are so proud of?" asked Abalo Irene Otto, a freelance journalist with The Observer Newspaper, operational in Uganda.

Her question was directed to Dr. Godfrey Asea, Director of Research NaCRRRI at Namulonge (Uganda), an institute that undertakes research on genetically modified (GM) maize.

This was during a press conference showcasing research products from a field trial of the Water Efficient Maize for Africa (WEMA) Project.

Abalo, like many of the 25 Ugandan journalists who participated in the

vided with hard evidence of its social, economic and health benefits.

The reporters also decried the bureaucracy that they endure to get a scientist to appear on a radio or television program.

"Sometimes we have radio airtime, but can hardly find someone to host and who is able to speak in a local dialect," noted Edward Sserinya, an editor at Bukedde, a local FM radio station. The journalists cautioned that such obstacles and other rarely discussed topical issues, have limited both media and scientists' contributions towards the ongoing GM debate in Uganda. Scientists have recognized this challenge and consequently devised swift actions. "As scientists, we never had to worry about information dissemination," Dr. Asea told reporters.

"But we are now coming out strongly to make our case." He went on to add that "there are still a lot of myths and misinformation out there, but we are not enough to reach everybody in the country. This is where we need the media."

Since 2007, Ugandan scientists at the National Agricultural Research Organization (NARO) opted to use biotechnology to develop genetically-engineered varieties of banana, cassava and maize. This was meant to address the intractable key yield-robbing stresses of banana (black sigatoka and bacterial wilt), cassava (brown streak and mosaic diseases) and maize (drought and stem-borer infestation).

For example, it is estimated that banana bacterial wilt alone causes an average yield loss of 71.4 percent, representing an estimated annual loss of US\$299.6 million.

Uganda's economy could be boosted by US\$25.4 million yearly by solving the dual challenge of stem borers and drought effects in maize. Similarly, cassava brown streak and mosaic diseases, cause an estimated annual loss of US\$1.25 billion in export earnings for the country.

Despite the clear social, economic and health benefits demonstrated, Uganda is yet to pass a biosafety bill; approval of this bill will guide the process for getting these publicly developed GM crops out to the farmers and end-users, who are hardest hit.

In an attempt to dispel misinformation about GM crops, NaCCRI has hosted a range of sensitization engagements for policy makers, religious, community leaders, media, students, educators and farmers. These outreach efforts that reached the peak in 2017, were complemented by several "seeing-is-believing" activities for policy makers, including officials from the Ministry of Science and

Technology, Members of Parliament, media editors, regulators, university students and scientists.

The journalism workshop, which was offered in cooperation with the Cornell Alliance for Science, was conducted to continue this outreach effort. NaCCRI, which is hosting research on GM maize, rice and cassava, has also held numerous trainings and sensitization engagements for stakeholders through the Uganda Biosciences Information Center (UBIC) and the WEMA project.

Though Uganda has made significant progress in GM research and regulation, resulting in Parliament passing a biosafety bill last October, President Museveni referred the National Biotechnology Act back to lawmakers last December, citing gaps that needed to be addressed. Parliament is expected to debate the bill again.