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Uganda: We May Not Be Ready for Genetically Modified Crops

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ANALYSIS

The adoption of genetically modified (GM) crops to off-set the current food crisis and increase the volume of agricultural exports in the country should be a last resort, agricultural experts have said.

The country currently has the potential to produce food for consumption for the more than 30 million people and have surplus for exportation to the regional and international markets, they insisted. And as long as the government continues not to fund the agricultural sector, containing the food insecurity problem faced in most parts of the country and attaining a progressive volume in agricultural export returns will never be realised.

In her recent budget speech, Finance Minister Syda Bbumba allocated 4.4 per cent to the sector, which she ranked tenth in priority. According to Makerere University Faculty of Science Lecturer and crop science expert, Prof Patrick Rubaihayo, Uganda is not yet ready to consume and export genetically modified plants, given its natural soil fertility.

"We should not even be talking of introducing GM foods in the country," he said in an interview during a workshop organised by Uganda National Academy of Sciences and Uganda National Council for Science and Technology in Kampala.

"The soils in this country are fertile enough to produce adequate food for the population and have surplus for export to neighbouring countries." He said the current budgetary allocation for the agricultural sector is insufficient to support a sector deemed the "back-bone of the economy." Ms Bbumba said in the budget speech, that government funding was increased by 18.5 per cent - from Shs6.16 trillion to Shs7.3 trillion.

An extra Shs36bn was added to the agricultural sector, raising its financing to Shs278.84bn. This was a 25 per cent budgetary increase from the 2008/2009 fiscal year. She said agriculture had grown at a 2.6 per cent rate compared to 2007/2008 financial year's 1.3 per cent, growth she attributed to improved performance of food crops.

The Finance Minister's speech was however countered with criticism with analysts saying it didn't favour agriculture. A day after the budget was presented, the leader of the opposition in Parliament, Prof Morris Ogenga Latigo, agricultural experts and a section of the public, said the estimates had failed to capture the sectors driving the economy. The Ministry of Works and Transport took the largest percentage of funding with Shs1.2 trillion, while Defence, which is considered a consuming ministry was allocated Shs477.24bn.

Prof Rubainhayo said the funding was inadequate for agricultural mechanisation and exploitation of the country's expansive idle land. According to the Ministry of Agriculture, Uganda is still a predominantly subsistence economy with production patterns indicating that 70 per cent of the area under cultivation is used for subsistence production.

The ministry's data shows agricultural produce has consistently, apart from 2007, generated foreign exchange more than any other sector, despite challenges including floods, which affected crop yields in eastern Uganda, limited financing and persistent pest and disease attacks.

Prof Rubaihayo was responding to a presentation by Gregory Jaffe, a Biotechnology Director at the Centre

for Science in the Public Interest in Washington DC, who said Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) should be adopted to increase agricultural productivity. Gregory said GM crops would provide a platform for revamping the agricultural segment of the economy as they do not require weeding, spraying against pests and have high yielding capacity.

Prof William Banage, a Zoology lecturer at Makerere University, said agricultural mechanisation is a medium through which the sector could be refurbished to increase exports, hard currency earnings and employment creation. "We have the potential to produce and export (agricultural produce) more than any other country in Africa even without GM crops," he said. "It is just that there is no will (from the government) to transform the sector." There is currently a Bio-safety and Bio-security bill at the Attorney General's Chambers that seeks to legalise and regulate the importation and use of GMOs.

In the East African region, Kenya is the only country with a law regulating the use of GMOs. The US is currently the largest single producer of GM crops globally. But even with their introduction to Uganda, it is not clear whether the country will reap from their exportation, given the strict legal framework against the use of such crop products in global economies.

GMs are associated with health complications. During his State of the Nation address, President Yoweri Museveni said the government will strive to increase agricultural export volumes, particularly to markets outside Eastern Africa.

This is because the region's capacity to import Uganda's agricultural produce is hampered by the current instability particularly from Southern Sudan, DR Congo and Kenya, where most people have embarked on production for self sustenance.

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