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Tanzania's government signs off on sorghum

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Daidi Kingu, his wife Sarah Amon and their children look at their sorghum crop in Iramba, Tanzania.
ICRISAT/Christine Wangari

Sorghum has the potential to significantly improve food security and the incomes of smallholder subsistence farmers, especially those that live in dry areas where maize production has dropped due to low rainfall. In Tanzania, sorghum is grown in areas with marginal annual rainfall, such as the central, northern, southern and lake zones.

To be encouraged to grow sorghum, farmers need to have access to seeds as well as know there is a market demand for their harvested grain. The demand for sorghum in East Africa has increased dramatically following a resolution by the East Africa Breweries Limited to use it to produce one of its beer brands.

According to figures by the Tanzanian Ministry of Agriculture, Food Security and Cooperatives, the annual demand for sorghum is 3,360 metric tonnes while the supply in 2011/12 was 1,084 metric tonnes.

In an effort to promote farming of sorghum in the region, the [HOPE Project](#) developed, and is implementing, strategies that will enable farmers to have easy access to improved quality seed. The project team in Tanzania has been lobbying for the government of Tanzania to include sorghum certified seed into the government seed subsidy program. This would mean that the government buys sorghum seed from seed companies and sells it to farmers at almost half the market price.

The Tanzania Seed Trade Association (TASTA), one of the HOPE Project partners in Tanzania, worked hard to ensure that sorghum was given priority in the government's new seed subsidy program. The association of seed companies in Tanzania is leading the project's mandate to improve markets and inputs access in the country.

"As a private entity, TASTA has been spearheading the discussions with the government on the inclusion of sorghum in the subsidy scheme", said Mary Mgonja, a principle scientist with the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics ([ICRISAT](#)) and a leader of HOPE Project research. Having farmers diversify into more drought-tolerant crops like sorghum is particularly important because of climate change impacts, she said.

CLIMATE ADAPTATION

Efforts by the project team eventually paid off. Last August the Ministry of Agriculture announced that 402 tons of various varieties of sorghum had been included in the seed subsidy program, fully funded by the national government, and that the government had agreed to provide fertilizer subsidy for sorghum for the first time, said Bob Shuma, TASTA's executive director.

Mgonja said the subsidized sorghum seed is being distributed into all 24 regions in the country, with the highest amount (60 tons) going to Dodoma, which is the major sorghum producing region, and the lowest quantities going to non-conventional sorghum areas such as the southern highlands (Njombe and Mbeya) and the coastal regions.

"We expect to see sorghum moving into new regions. What is very encouraging is that farmers in these new regions will be introduced to improved sorghum varieties that give high yields", Mgonja said.

Sorghum is particularly suited to dry areas as it is hardy, resilient and adapted to harsh environments, while other cereal crops such as maize yield poorly in such climates. Farmers in Tanzania report that the improved sorghum varieties grow quickly, demand less labor and are more resistant to pests and diseases.

Daudi Kingu, a 45-year-old farmer in Iramba, talks about how farming with the improved sorghum varieties has improved his life.

“Before ICRISAT introduced the improved varieties, we used to grow a local sorghum variety called *Kakela* which took too long to mature, had low productivity and hence low income for the family,” Daudi said. “The improved sorghum varieties are less vulnerable to drought and pest attacks. We are now harvesting up to 15 bags per acre which is a lot more than the 5 bags we used to harvest with the local varieties.”

Daudi’s increased income from sorghum farming has enabled him to pay school fees for his children. He has also bought more livestock, a wheel cart and improved food security for his family. “I am no longer a beggar for food from neighbors and relatives”, he said.

Shuma called the government’s decision “a big step forward.”

“We foresee an increase in adoption of sorghum in Tanzania following the strong support by the government” he said, calling such changes essential to efforts to improve food security for small-scale farmers in the face of an increasingly unpredictable climate.

Christine Wangari works as a communications specialist with [ICRISAT](#) in Africa.

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