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OPINION

## On GM maize, Kenyans need to listen more to scientists



Posted Saturday, July 16 2011 at 17:13

Since former Cabinet minister Paul Sang sensationally led his Kericho crowd into rubbishing everything I learnt about the hydrological cycle in primary school, I have lost faith in the ability of politicians to educate me on anything science.

"Rain comes from heaven, not forests," Mr Sang declared to thunderous shouts of approval from his audience protesting government eviction of squatters from the Mau Forest

The public debate on GM maize this past week has further reinforced my view that some policy decisions are too important to be left to the cheeky or ill-informed politicians.

Mrs Beth Mugo, the minister for public health, seized on the rather familiar conspiracy theory about the multinationals and their evil schemes to use Kenyans as guinea pigs.

Mrs Mugo just fell short of advising the millions of Kenyans currently facing starvation in the drought-stricken areas to continue feeding on wild berries and boiled leaves.

A position like that would have drawn perfect comparison to that of Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, the former South African health minister who advocated beetroot and wild garlic as treatments for HIV.

And how about Mathira MP Ephraim Maina popping up with the wild allegation that GM maize will render Kenyan men and women infertile? It is such public display of folly that prompted me to seek the sober opinion of Calestous Juma, the respected Kenyan scientist and scholar at Harvard University, on Facebook on Friday.

"The debate seems to be informed by other debates and not by knowledge," said Prof Juma who has dedicated 10 pages of his new book, *The New Harvest: Agricultural Innovation in Africa*, to the subject.

Prof Juma recently made a strong case for the adoption of biotechnology in his testimony before the US House of Representatives committee on agriculture.

He argued that biotechnology actually promises to increase food security and improve health in developing countries like Kenya.

He also cited a number of independent studies that have concluded "that biotechnology, and in particular GMOs, are not per se more risky than conventional plant breeding technologies".

Three African countries — Egypt, South Africa and Burkina Faso — have already adopted genetically modified crops.

The ongoing debate on GMOs in Kenya is healthy. But if it proceeds in an atmosphere poisoned by reckless political undertones — rather than enriched by scientific knowledge — Kenya might yet miss out on the opportunity to free its people from hunger.

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