

Opinion: Agricultural technology can't be ignored

By Gilbert arap Bor | February 10th 2017

Kenya is on the brink of embracing biotechnology in agriculture. The MIT Technology Review made the claim in October: 'Kenya is thought to be on the brink of reversing its ban on GM imports.'

The news and commentary website Grist said it in June: 'Kenya is on the brink of approving GMOs.' I've been saying it myself for years: On the brink. On the brink. On the brink.

Now I'm ready to say something new: We've been on the brink for too long. Many Kenyan farmers, like me, had hoped that 2016 finally would be the year that the National Environment Management Authority (NEMA) allows open field trials of Bt maize - a variety of genetically modified crop that has become common around the world. It protects plants from certain insect pests, giving us a natural way to defend our harvests from a major threat.

I've seen farmers grow it in other countries and I'd like to grow it on my farm too. It would allow me to produce more food for my family and country. And yet our Government dilly-dallies, as it has for years. On November 30, the Kenyan National Assembly slowed us down even more when they "upheld the ban imposed on importation of GMO food by the then Minister for Public Health, Beth Mugo in 2012".

Our delay comes with a consequence. It means we're choosing to squander a promising opportunity, are still plagued with scientific ignorance and that once again, an African nation continues to lag behind the world in everything.

Of even greater concern is the reality that our university students are threatening to stop taking biotechnology classes because they fear the ongoing Government ban on the import of GMO food crops and recently upheld by the Kenyan National Assembly would render them unemployable in their own country.

My hope is that we'll turn this around - and that within five years, Kenya will become a leader among African nations in the adoption of biotechnology. The planting of GM maize and cotton should become commonplace, leading to increased production, more economic activity, and better food security.

Three Sub-Saharan African countries already permit the planting of GMO crops: Burkina Faso, South Africa, and Sudan. They've gone over the brink. Tanzania and Uganda appear ready to join them.

On GMOs, we're poised to show the way. We know the science. We've issued the basic regulatory approvals through our National Biosafety Authority. We've set up collaborative partnerships with the Africa Agricultural Technology Foundation and the Kenya Agricultural and Livestock Research Organization.

Our population now numbers 46 million and it's growing. We can barely feed ourselves, as subsistence farming employs about three-quarters of the population in labour-intensive, low-mechanisation, and low-productivity farming. Famine is currently afflicting at least 2 million of our countrymen and the emerging threat of climate change suggests that our challenges will only grow. We need GMOs. They won't make our problems vanish, but they'll help us confront the difficulties that lie ahead.

We'll do better with them than without them. The African continent missed the Green Revolution - the adoption of seed technologies and other inputs that spurred large increases in food production in India, Mexico, and elsewhere in the 1960s and 1970s. Ever since, Kenya and its neighbours have suffered. Today, Africa is the only continent with more malnourished people compared with three decades ago.

We cannot afford to miss the Gene Revolution as well. If we do, we'll never produce enough food and fiber for our people. We won't industrialize as we should. We won't break the cycle of African desperation. We'll be doomed to our sad fate. There is an obvious solution. It's simple and sensible. Say it with me: Let's get off the brink.

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