

The Weekly

Information Resource Bulletin

FOCUS: Rain Dependence

Small-scale farmers in Malawi grow maize and other crops using rain-water. As climate change intensifies, rains in the country are becoming inconsistent.

In the next couple of decades, the World Bank projects that farmers across Africa could lose more than half their cropland to drought and heat.

The once-dependable rainfall in Malawi has become increasingly erratic. Nearly every year now, it seems some areas in the country are hit with a serious dry spell.

Drought is caused by insufficient rainfall and it is one of the major factors influencing maize productivity in Malawi.

According to Action Aid International, changing rainfall patterns and higher temperatures have forced farmers to shorten the maize growing season and switch to more expensive hybrid crops.

The increasing frequency of droughts and floods has made farmers vulnerable to food shortages.

The goals of the Weekly Bulletin are:

- To help journalists discuss with their listeners the advantages of drought-tolerant maize varieties
- To help journalists engage their communities in the search for solutions to droughts
- To help journalists discuss with their listeners how drought tolerant maize varieties could help the country in being a food secure nation.

The Problem: Lack of Knowledge of Drought-Tolerant Maize Varieties

Estimates are that the global population will likely hit nine billion by 2050 – and this is likely to mean food shortages for millions -- as climate change brings about extreme weather and varying agricultural conditions.

Maize is the main staple food in Malawi and one of the cash crops to most farmers. Maize is planted on 70% of arable land in the country. (CIMMYT, 1999). However, yield is low and drought is the main factor influencing maize productivity in Malawi.

Drought is an extended period when a region experiences a deficiency in its water supply, whether surface (such as rain) or underground water. A drought can last for weeks, months or even years.

Therefore, there is a need for Malawi farmers to start using maize varieties that can give them good harvests – even when rainfall is limited and in times of drought.

The use of drought-tolerant maize seeds may be the only affordable and reliable option for small-holder farmers.

According to the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center - CIMMYT, drought-resistant maize is now providing a better livelihood for some 20 million people in Africa. It further says that the drought-tolerant varieties do as well as or better than traditional maize when the rains are good, and when there are rain fall shortages these varieties will save a farmer from ruin.

Activities for Journalists

Use your community radio station to help listeners understand that the use of drought-tolerant maize seeds may be one of the most reliable ways to combat hunger in the country.

In this program we will concentrate on two drought-tolerant maize varieties namely; ZM 309 and ZM 523—developed specifically for Malawi's drought-prone areas with infertile soils by CIMMYT, Malawi's Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security, and the Chitedze Research Station, through the Drought Tolerant Maize for Africa (DTMA) project.

According to CIMMYT, ZM 309 and ZM 523 maize varieties have higher yields, mature earlier and offer better resistance to common maize leafy diseases.

ZM 309 and ZM 523 give farmers a boost in safeguarding their maize harvests from the increasing threat of drought.

Locally, ZM 309 is known as *Msunga banja* which means "that which takes care of the family," while ZM 523 is *Mwayi*, which means "luck."

ZM 309 and ZM 523 are open pollinated varieties (OPVs), meaning farmers can save seed from one season and plant it for up to three subsequent seasons without losses in yields or other undesirable effects.

Ordinarily, OPVs are not as attractive to commercial seed companies as hybrids, because with hybrids farmers have to buy and sow fresh seed every

season or risk a reduction in the performance of their crops, but, according to the experts, with ZM 309 and ZM 523 this is not the case.

Have a vox pop with farmers from your community and find out if they know about these maize varieties or any maize varieties that are drought-tolerant. If they are available, how affordable are they?

Have an interview with two farmers who are using the two maize varieties that have been mentioned in this bulletin, or any other drought-tolerant maize varieties that they are using. Ask them why they use these varieties? What benefits they have seen and ask them if these varieties are affordable.

Talk to an agricultural extension officer from your area, and ask him/her how drought-tolerant maize seeds are important now that Malawi faces droughts now and again.

Has anyone had a negative experience with these varieties? If so, what happened?

Talk to farmers. Can they afford these drought-resistant varieties? Is financial help available to farmers who can't afford to purchase these seeds?

Urge listeners to send SMS, call or stop by the radio station to talk about the advantages of drought-tolerant maize varieties in their community.

Useful Contacts

- Chitedze research station; +265 01 767 222
- Seed co Malawi Limited; +265 01712074 / +26501711014
- http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/04/09/a-green-revolution-this-time-for-africa/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0
- www.actionaid.org/malawi/stories/climate-change-malawi



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