From the Editor-in-Chief's Desk

Call To Develop Cassava Varieties That Will Stand The Storm Of Climate Change. Cassava A Wonderful Crop for Hope

The world's climate is changing for the worse. That is a fact and no doubt about it. Some of the vulnerable people who depend directly on climate for their livelihood, but do not have the resources to cope with climate variability are the ones who will be most affected by the climate change. It has been reported that Africa will be the most affected continent and the Southern Africa will be no exception that can sustain the limited rainfall predicted.

The new economic study released recently by the Regional Strategic Analysis and Knowledge Support Systems for Southern Africa (ReSAKSS-SA) indicate that small-scale farmers in Southern Africa live with a host of uncertainties and one of these is climate variability. In some years there may be not enough rain for most crops to survive and the entire harvests may fail while in other years it may be enough but poorly distributed resulting in reduced yields while in other years it may be too heavy and result in severe soil erosion and damage of crops.

The 2009/10 rainy season in Southern Africa has not been favorable either. As of February 2010 most people were in fear of having a crop failure because the rains delayed in starting and the major crop, maize, was not planted on time, causing a lot of uncertainty and anxiety among the farming community.

The seasonal climate forecasts being given by the Meteorological Services can be useful in enabling farmers to respond to expected rainfall and adapt to climate variability on a yearly basis. This may help maximize production but it should be recognized that there are numerous challenges that farmers face because they have few crops species that can sustain the limited rainfall predicted.

There is need therefore to shift away from chance and nature-based agricultural systems for more scientific and predictable agricultural systems and crops that can naturally stand the storm. Research that develops crops with tolerance to drought or resistance to less rain such as root and tuber crops, particularly cassava, should be strengthened and politically supported.

Cassava is well known to have robust characterises of giving minimum yield even in conditions where other crops have failed. It would be important therefore to take advantage of this characteristic this crop offers to develop varieties that will withstand drought. Though climate change is occurring worldwide, the southern African region is particularly known to be prone to drought. As it is likely that climate change will worsen as is reported world wide in different media and journals then one could anticipate a serious situation on crop production. We wouldn't like to live till we experience such situation.

Cassava is a highly dependable food security crop that can help ease future turmoil in world food supply and demand and at the same time foster economic development through the value chain. The world will be watching. Time for words is gone and now it is time for action and the pressure is on us!

Changing attitudes towards cassava

Attitudes have changed towards cassava over the last decade. A growing number of policy makers, economists and scientists are recognizing the important role cassava plays in food and economic security of countries in the tropics. With the rapid emergence of modern biotechnology there are technologies that can overcome traditional barriers to cassava improvement and complement conventional research methods, offering exciting new possibilities to transform this ancient crop into a major player in 21st century agriculture.

Cassava is now considered to have a central role in addressing future food supplies in tropical countries. Cassava outperforms rice and maize on poor soils and under drought conditions. It is one of the most productive crops and the cheapest known source of dietary and industrial starch. Past neglect has become an opportunity for cassava to retain its potential for yield and quality improvement above the other, more intensively researched food crops.

Cassava is also the cheapest known source of starch and can be used to make more than 300 industrial products, including ethanol as a possible source for biofuel, though this is not yet priority in the region. However, despite growing demand and its production potential, cassava remains an "orphan crop." It is grown mainly in areas that have little or no access to genetically improved cassava varieties, fertilizer and other production inputs, by small scale farmers often cut off from marketing channels and agro-processing industries. Governments have not yet made the needed investments in value-added research that would make cassava based products competitive on an national and regional scale.

How SARRNET and its partners can help?

Our goal will continue to guide us. *"The overall goal of SARRNET is to facilitate synergistic regional complementarities to research, production and marketing to improve food production and increase rural incomes by generating technologies that will address common constraints in the region through research for development of root and tuber crops".*

Togetherness with our willingness to complement each other we will build mountains.

Partnership building: A coalition of the able, willing, and knowledgeable

Dr. P. Ntawuruhunga, SARRNET Coordinator