

East Africa region urged to adopt GMOs to boost food security

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Governments in East Africa have been urged to adopt genetic modification (GM) technology if they are to boost agricultural productivity and resolve the perennial food and nutrition crisis. The concerns were raised by experts who addressed parliamentarians from the region during a recent forum on food and nutrition security in Kigali. They said countries that have not legalised the use of GMOs need to do so because their hesitation is largely based on misinformation and politicking around the subject.



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Only Uganda and Tanzania are at interim stages of tapping into the controversial technology after they came up with biosafety frameworks, allowing scientists to carry out research in the area and gaining farmers access to GM products.

Countries like Kenya have started GMO research on a number of staple crops for drought and disease resistance, improved productivity and nutrition value.

However, despite the technology being seen as key to tackling low crop yields, climate change and emerging diseases, many countries remain averse to GM technology over safety and trade-related concerns.

Legislation

Experts said it was becoming urgent for governments to expedite biosafety and biotechnology legislation if the region is to cope with food and nutrition security.

"From a food security and nutrition perspective, GMO's offer benefits in terms of food production and crop productivity and if we want to be self-sufficient, then that's something governments need to consider," said Robert Ackatia-Armah, an expert with CGIAR, a global research partnership for a food-secure future.

An overview of food security and nutrition in the region shows an increasing number of people are affected. As threats from crop diseases, harsh weather patterns, demography trends increase, a section of legislators who are in agriculture committees said governments need to explore biotech to avert a food crisis.

Regulation

National regulatory agencies do not dispute the benefits of GM technology but said clearer and stronger regulatory mechanisms are needed to ensure safe application of the technology.

Patrick Karangwa, the head of research at the Rwanda Agriculture Board told Rwanda Today that the country had started the process of putting in place the biosafety standards with a draft law currently being examined by the Rwanda Environment Management Authority. With no specific timelines, the country wants a well-established framework for regulating the transfer, handling, use and release of genetically modified organisms.

Concerned institutions said they are particularly interested in having a system for dealing with GM in trade, especially the transboundary movement of living modified organisms. This has to do with controlling how the seeds are developed and where they come.

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