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Scientists re-strategise on cassava breeding for emerging markets

By [Stories David Amuwa](#)

Scientists from across Africa have stressed the need to re-strategise the cassava breeding paradigm, shifting it from being production-focused to specifically targeting new and emerging markets, especially for value-added products.



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Cassava plantation

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The move aims to further help improve the livelihoods of cassava farmers by tapping into high-value markets.

"Cassava has transformed from a poor man's subsistence crop to an industrial one," says Elizabeth Parkes, a breeder with the Ghana-based Council for Scientific and Industrial Research Crop Institute.



"What we need to do now is to find ways to move from just improving production and productivity to identifying and introducing specific traits that markets want," she said.

Since the early 1970's, national agricultural research centres of major cassava-producing countries in sub-Saharan Africa have released more than 200 improved varieties, with genetic material from International Institute for Tropical Agriculture representing the major source of germplasm used in their development.

Through the years, utilisation of the crop has grown, with demand for cassava-based products such as flour, ethanol, glucose and starch, among others, on the rise.

New research into cassava must focus on increasing the range of its diversified uses. But to remain relevant, cassava-derived products must at the same time be able to compete with other crop-based raw materials.

For example, breeders should develop cassava varieties that produce flour, which is comparable in quality but costs less than wheat flour.

"We are not only interested in putting food on farmers' tables, but also money in their pockets," says Dr. Alfred Dixon, IITA's cassava breeder, during a workshop on "Cassava Breeding Community of Practice in Africa," a Generation Challenge Programme-commissioned project being implemented by IITA.

Farmers, on their part, have identified the tuber's bulkiness and perishability as two important aspects that breeding programmes need to address in the near-term.

Scientists also agree that new cassava breeding programmes should be more proactive in heading-off pest and diseases.

"We need not wait until they (diseases) become prominent before we work on them. Action must be taken at the first sign of an infection," Dixon stressed.

Breeding programmes must continue producing varieties that are better resistant to important diseases like the mosaic virus and cassava brown streak.

Prof. Malachy Akoroda of the Department of Agronomy, University of Ibadan, said cassava had gained prominence because of its unique qualities for poverty reduction.

Citing the cassava drought resistance qualities for example, Akoroda said the crop had the ability to mitigate the impact of climate change in Africa.

He stressed that cassava presented numerous opportunities and what was needed was for African governments to identify and tap those opportunities.

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