

Sh2 billion project to boost legume production in Africa

BY STANDARD CORRESPONDENT

A RESEARCH and development initiative, which seeks to improve production of legumes in Africa and Asia, has been unveiled.

The \$30 million (Sh2 billion) Tropical Legumes Project launched simultaneously last month in Arusha, Tanzania, and Rustenburg Kloof, South Africa will develop varieties resilient to drought, pests and disease, through marker assisted selection (MAS).

The legumes include, groundnut, cowpea, beans and chickpea, which are the staple diets of Africans. Increasing their yields could greatly improve health and wealth creation in sub-Saharan Africa.

Ms Antonia Okono, Generation Challenge Programme (GCP) communication manager, says the project will produce and distribute seeds to farmers, in collaboration with national research programmes, Kenya, which will benefit from the initiative alongside 13 other African countries has chosen beans.

The other countries, which will also build capacities of young breeders at Msc and PhD levels, include Tanzania, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Ethiopia, India, Malawi Mozambique, Mali, Myanmar, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal and Zimbabwe.

The project funded by Melinda and Bill Gates Foundation could not have come at a better time given that legumes lack genomic resources due to neglect by researchers.

The three-year undertaking aims to build on ongoing initiatives in developing genomic resources. It will also conduct genetic studies to develop traits relevant for sub-Saharan Africa. Little is known about the genetic basis of target legume traits in sub-Saharan Africa. Prof Paul Kimani of the University



PICTURE FILE

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of Nairobi's Department of Crop Science, says Kenya chose beans because, among other factors, the country has continually suffered a shortfall of 200,000 tonnes in production for the last 10 years.

Kimani, who is the project's chief scientist, says: "The consumption of beans has outstripped production, leading to a huge deficit," he said.

The country currently produces 400,000 tonnes per year against a demand of 600,000 tonnes. The deficit is usually sourced from Uganda and Tanzania, pushing the price of a 90-kg bag to nearly Sh3,000, which is almost double the

normal price. A study carried out in Kisii, early this year, found out that high market prices had driven farmers into selling their beans instead of setting them aside to eat.

"Unless something is done, we fear that the average yield may continue to tumble down hence causing a serious crisis," said Kimani.

He decried the fact that drought, lack of soil fertility and socio-economic factors have continued to deny the country its potential to import more beans. This has led to poor quality seeds as farmers have continued to rely on old varieties susceptible to drought and pests.

The Generation Challenge Programme was established partly to address this disparity, and several other recent initiatives are working to develop a broad base of genetic and genomic resources.

Dr Jean-Marcel Ribaut, the GCP director, says: "Involving scientists from national research programmes all along the research pathway ensures new tools and germplasm from the project will be relevant to local needs."

For many of the world's poorest people, legumes are the major and sometimes only sources of protein and fat.