



CASSAVA: A PRIORITY FOR ACTION

Combating cross border cassava diseases in the Great Lakes Region

Burundi | Central African Republic | Democratic Republic of Congo | Gabon | Rwanda | Tanzania | Uganda

Cassava is the staple food of nearly a billion people in 105 countries. In tropical Africa, cassava is one of the most important crops with production estimated at 50 million metric tonnes in 2009¹. Total African production of cassava has quadrupled in the last five decades and is now estimated to cover 12 million hectares. In sub-Saharan Africa, cassava provides a nutritional intake of more than 500 Kcal/day/person. It also has enormous potential as an industrial crop, but at present average cassava yields are barely 20 percent of the optimal yield of 70 tonnes per hectare.

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

Cassava's potential remains largely untapped in many parts of Africa despite significant unmet global demand. Yields are far below the global average due to poor agronomic practices, poor transformation processes and few market outlets. Cassava is also highly susceptible to a-biotic and biotic stresses including Cassava Mosaic Disease (CMD) and Cassava Brown Streak Disease (CBSD). CMD had a significant impact on cassava production, with an estimated reduction in yield of 15 to 25 percent in the Great Lakes Region affecting up to 80 percent of smallholders. Thanks to concerted efforts by a number of stakeholders in the region, survey evidence suggests that although CMD is still highly prevalent the rate of spread appears to be gradually reducing. CBSD, on the other hand, is rapidly spreading and may cause root production losses of up to 100 percent if adequate response mechanisms are not introduced soon.

“Efforts are underway to understand the epidemiology of CBSD, but more support will be needed for this work, and to select and bring on CBSD-tolerant varieties.”

Jan Helsen,
FAO Regional Emergency Officer – Agriculture

WHAT IS THIS PROJECT DOING?

With financial support from the European Union, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has embarked on a regional campaign to boost the capacity of individual countries in the Great Lakes Region to cope with diseases that threaten cassava production. To strengthen the resilience of cassava-producing communities and improve their preparedness to acute outbreaks of CMD and CBSD, the project has been building the capacity at the local, provincial and national levels in surveillance and disease identification and in managing quality protocols. Specifically, communities are being sensitized and mobilized for disease detection and applying community-based phyto-sanitary best practices. In addition, mechanisms have been put in place for national coordination and regulation through the establishment of the National Cassava Coordination Platforms (NCCP), which are increasingly involved in awareness raising and discussions with national partners on the need for concerted and coordinated action. In the long run, the NCCPs will become mechanisms for national planning and cross-border collaboration on regulation.

¹ FAOSTAT 2009.

ACHIEVEMENTS SO FAR

Since early 2010 the project has enabled the multiplication and provision of virus-free planting material to more than 500 000 farmers in Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Rwanda, Uganda, Tanzania, Gabon and the Central African Republic. In northern Uganda, eastern DRC and Burundi for example, the establishment of 4 000 hectares of disease-free cassava has contributed substantially to improved food security, especially among previously displaced communities. The project also undertook a Participatory Variety Selection process, which has resulted in the selection and multiplication of new CBSD-tolerant cassava varieties. Some 240 Farmer Field Schools have been established which encouraged the application of good agronomic practices, early disease diagnosis and improved management of cassava diseases. Since 2011 each target country has also established a National Cassava Steering Committee (NCSC), which has contributed to an improvement in national and regional policy and regulatory issues. Specialized training in early disease detection and data collection using digital pen technology was provided to 500 focal points, thereby improving country capacity to respond more quickly to new outbreaks.

WHAT NEXT?

Due to the rapid spread of CBSD in the region, new cassava varieties with multiple disease tolerance are urgently needed. The project will also need to continue supporting government staff, focal points and farmers in disease identification and surveillance as well as facilitating effective linkages among these stakeholders. NCSCs need further guidance to make them strong regulators, pivotal in establishing national and regional knowledge networks. Despite concerted efforts, awareness on CBSD needs to be scaled up, specifically through improved communication and information management tools as many producers still remain unaware of the problems caused by the disease. New synergies will need to be established with multi-donor programs that aim to promote the cassava sub-sector. Of specific importance are the World Bank-supported Cassava Centre of Excellence, activities envisaged with the Association for Strengthening Agricultural Research in Eastern and Central Africa, and donor funded activities carried out by the Consultative Group of International Agricultural Research and its national partners.



KEY FACTS :

- More than 4 000 hectares planted with CMD-resistant cassava since 2006.
- 500 000 people so far supplied with cassava planting material resistant to CMD.
- A pipeline with promising CBSD tolerant cassava material being tested in different countries in the Great Lakes Region.
- A functional Cassava Steering Committee in each participating country which contributes to improved coordination and regulation of the movement of planting materials.

PARTNERS :

FAO works with a diverse group of stakeholders to combat cassava diseases in the Great Lakes Region. At the regional level, FAO supports the development of seed systems with international research organizations such as the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture and Bioersity. At country level, FAO supports National Agricultural Research and Extension Systems to ensure the selection, testing and multiplication of disease free seed and also adherence to regulatory provisions. At grass root level, FAO facilitates the work of national and local NGOs and CBOs to support the effective distribution of new planting material. Through agreements with local partners in each country (such as the Central African Agency for Rural Development in CAR and the Women Rural Development Network in Uganda), FAO ensures that the seed producers are trained in effective disease diagnosis and that they improve their preparedness and response capacity to cassava diseases. Local partners such as the Seed Producers' Association for Cassava in Rwanda also support seed distribution to the most vulnerable community members. FAO strongly coordinates its activities with other donor funded projects implemented by international NGOs, such as Catholic Relief Services.

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