

EAC trailing in exportation of bananas

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Tanzania and Uganda consume 50% of bananas grown in Africa, but realise only nine percent of the potential yield due to poor productivity due to pests and diseases.



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The two countries do not feature among the leading exporters of the food crop because of little efforts to boost production, quality and secure foreign markets.

"Cote d'Ivoire and Cameroon are the two leading banana exporters in Africa. What is wrong with us in East Africa?" asked Dr Cyprian Ebong, the acting executive secretary of the Association for Strengthening Agricultural Research in Eastern and Central Africa (Asareca).

Breeding Better Bananas

He was speaking at the launch of a \$13.8m Breeding Better Bananas (BBB), a banana improvement project targeting Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya, Burundi, Rwanda, and Ethiopia. The three and a half-year project aims at improving the productivity of the crop and make it a traded commodity through marker-assisted hybrid selection.

Ebong said although banana is both a food and cash crop, the region has failed to exploit the potential due to poor

production technologies coupled with disease and pest attacks.

To ensure increased productivity that would lead to commercialisation of the crop, research will be intensified for high yielding and disease resistant breeds. For the East African Community (EAC) bloc, banana production generates \$4.3bn annually, accounting for five percent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

In Tanzania, a total of 760,000 hectares of the crop, one of the major food staples and a leading income for smallholder farmers, was under cultivation in 2016 during which 3.5 million tonnes were produced.

Speaking during the planning meeting on BBB project, the vice chancellor of the Nelson Mandela African Institution of Science and Technology (NM-AIST), Prof Karoli Njau said the pan African university would establish a centre of excellence on banana research. "The centre is geared for improved management in banana production. We will deal with banana pests and diseases," he told agricultural experts from the partner organisations. He added that although over 50 million people in the East African region depend on highland bananas for their food and income, the average smallholder productivity has remained as low as less than 30%.

According to Prof Njau, banana farmers in EA were producing a small portion - about nine percent of what is possible - largely due to the devastating impact of pests and diseases.

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