Kenya's decision to open the door to GM maize is a good omen

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I don't know much about Kenya's new president, William Ruto, but I already like his approach to agriculture. In the first week of October Ruto's administration lifted the country's ban on the cultivation and importing of genetically modified (GM) white maize.

Ruto, a scientist with a PhD, made this change in response to growing food insecurity in Kenya. The country has struggled with drought in the recent past and remains a net importer of maize.

There will be an assessment of each GM trait by the Kenyan Biosafety Authority before actual imports and cultivation can occur. Assuming some of this scientific legwork has already been done, we could see imports start in the next few months.

Just as well. In the 2022/2023 season Kenya needs to import a substantial volume of maize, estimated at about 700,000 tonnes. This is roughly unchanged from the previous season, which also posted poor domestic production.

In the 2021/2022 season several sub-Saharan African countries, including Zambia, Tanzania, Zimbabwe and SA, had ample maize harvests. This made it easy for them to meet Kenya's import needs, with Tanzania and Zambia leading the way.

However, this year things are different. Tanzania's maize harvest is down roughly 16% year on year to 5.9-million tonnes due to sparse rainfall at the start of the season combined with armyworm infestations and reduced fertiliser usage in some regions because of prohibitively high prices.

The fall in production and firmer domestic consumption mean Tanzania will have less maize to export. The numbers I have seen thus far point to available maize for export of just 100,000 tonnes. This is well below the previous season's exports of 800,000 tonnes, which saved Kenya when the country was most in need of maize.

The country in the region with the most abundant supply of maize at present is SA, whose maize exports for the 2022/2023 season are forecast at 3.5-million tonnes. SA struggled to access the Kenyan market for many years because of its ban on imports of GM products. But Ruto's move has changed all that, offering a new opportunity for SA exporters (provided the Kenyan Biosafety Authority gets its ducks in a row).

In future the liberalisation of the Kenyan seed market should benefit its farmers in the same way as in SA, Brazil and the US. In fact, the sentiment towards the cultivation and importation of GM crops is changing worldwide, partly because of the global food crisis and countries' efforts to boost domestic production.

For example, at the beginning of June the Chinese National Crop Variety Approval Committee released two standards that clear the path for cultivating GM crops. Now that this hurdle has been cleared, the commercialisation of GM crops in China is a real possibility. The EU is also

reviewing its regulations on cultivating and importing GM crops, an essential step in a region that has long had an anti-GM stance.

As I have pointed out in these pages before, SA was an early adopter of GM technologies. We began planting GM maize seeds in the 2001/2002 season. Before their introduction average maize yields in SA were about 2.4 tonnes per hectare. This has increased to an average of 5.6 tonnes per hectare in the 2020/2021 production season.

Meanwhile, the sub-Saharan African maize yields remain low, averaging below 2 tonnes per hectare. While yields are also influenced by improved germplasm (enabled by non-GM biotechnology) and improved low and no-till production methods (facilitated through herbicide-tolerant GM technology), other benefits include labour savings and reduced insecticide use, as well as enhanced weed and pest control.

With Kenya struggling to meet its annual maize needs, using new technologies, GM seeds and other means should be an avenue to boost production in future.

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