

TELA DOCUSERIES – Where technology meets stories of hope and resilience

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The TELA Maize Project is a public-private partnership between the Agricultural Research Council and its partners that is working towards initiating the commercialisation of transgenic drought-tolerant and insect-protected maize varieties to enhance food security in Sub-Saharan Africa. The TELA Maize Project builds on progress made from a decade of excellent breeding work under the Water Efficient Maize for Africa (WEMA) Project. WEMA's purpose was to develop drought-tolerant and insect-protected maize varieties for farmers to produce more reliable harvests under moderate drought conditions and protect maize from insects.

The Mpumalanga Department of Agriculture, Rural Development, Land and Environmental Affairs (DARDLEA) played a vital role in helping The Agricultural Research Council gain access to smallholder farmers to conduct interviews and gather testimonials. Through its extensive network of local agricultural extension officers and community leaders, the Department was able to identify and connect the research team with farmers in remote and rural areas who would have otherwise been difficult to reach. Thanks to the Mpumalanga Department of Agriculture's support, the Agricultural Research Council was able to collect valuable insights and testimonials from these farmers. These are their stories:

Farmer Abel Bonang Seoke – The “magic” of science



The Seoka family was rocked by the death of their eldest brother in the spring of 2021. He was the sole breadwinner and pillar of his family and his death left them vulnerable and exposed. Younger brother Abel Seoka decided to step in and provide a livelihood for his family.

Farmers in Bushbuckridge, Mpumalanga where Abel lives, who have adopted the use of TELA maize mostly plant the WE6209B TELA maize variety. Upon seeing how their maize fields fared in comparison to those of other farmers in his area, Abel sought counsel from TELA maize farmers, asking them to assist him in planting his first crop. “They told me about this drought-resistant, insect-repelling seed and while it seemed unbelievable, I was intrigued.” They assisted him in acquiring the seed and then further invited him to information sessions where he would come to learn about proper planting protocols. He followed the planting guidelines to the letter and saw what he describes as “amazing growth”. “It feels like a long, tedious process, and at times while planting. We argued a lot as I wanted to break some of the rules, but farmer Andrew Mahunda who was assisting me, made sure I plant correctly and assured me that the results will indeed be extraordinary” said Abel. At the time of our visit, Abel was eagerly awaiting his first harvest. He says that he can already see that it will be a good one.

Abel Seoka has been asked on many occasions by neighbours and other farmers around his area to share the secret potion that makes his maize crop grow strong and healthy, withstanding drought and unbothered by pests. “I tell them the “magic” is in the seed technology and adhering to TELA Maize planting guidelines.” Abel, who farms with his nephew, his late brother's eldest son, explains how difficult it is for non-expert individuals to understand that not all seeds are made equal and that some seeds far outperform others. “They continue to ask for the magic, they insist that there must be a secret ingredient, hopefully, one day when they try TELA maize varieties for themselves, they will be convinced,” he said. Abel also stresses the importance of following the planting guidelines diligently.



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