

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 Joseph Mnisi - A dream deferred, not a dream denied



When he was just a little boy, following his grandmother everywhere she went around their village in Bushbuckridge, South Africa, Joseph Mnisi was told by his beloved grandmother as her eldest grandchild, that he would one day be responsible for growing the family farming business. Filled with his ambitions of moving to the city and starting a career there, he laughed off his grandmother's words and carved his life in a completely different direction. "My choices in life have always been guided by the desire to make lots of money. Looking around my community and seeing how small-scale farmers were living, I was not at all interested in pursuing that life" he said.

His grandmother's dream of seeing the family farm flourish would lay dormant for years. He went on to become a Refrigerator Technician, building a home and settling in the city. It was not until 2018 that Mnisi decided to return home and finish what his grandmother had started all those years ago. The road to becoming a commercial farmer has not been without pitfalls for Mnisi. There were many obstacles to overcome. There would be seasons when he planted and did not harvest much because of the drought or Fall Armyworm infestation. Still, Mnisi was determined so he persevered. Things started to turn around during the 2020 planting season when he stumbled across TELA maize variety WE6209B at Farmer's Market in Nelspruit, Mpumalanga.

Since then, Mnisi has become one of the more prominent farmers in his area, and somewhat of a TELA

maize advocate. He volunteers to teach neighbouring farmers planting protocols and assist them with their planting processes to ensure that they get the most out of their crops. 'I never would have believed that I would one day love and enjoy farming as much as I do now. My stress is limited, I never worry about pests or my crops dying from drought,' he says.

Mnisi is optimistic about what the future holds for his farm, He is currently exploring entrepreneurial avenues and teaching his children the ins and outs of the business to create a succession pipeline. He is currently in the process of establishing a bakery where all the confectionaries they will be offering will be baked with maize meal as the base ingredient. "I want people to stop thinking of maize as a one-dimensional crop. I want to explore and showcase its versatility as far as I can."



