

## **TELA DOCUSERIES – Where technology meets stories of hope and resilience**

***Written by Kefiloe Manthata***

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:

### **Make Mnisi –Salubenza – Spreading the good word**



The women of Salubenza, a remote village situated a stone's throw away from Kruger National Park in Mpumalanga, South Africa, are on a mission to ensure food security for their families and prevent the scourge of hunger in their community. The TELA RAO team set off to Salubenza to meet Make Mnisi who introduced us to a community of women working hard daily, against all odds to make sure that their loved ones never go hungry. It is through her that all the other women came to know of and trust TELA maize varieties. She also acts as the liaison between the Department of Agriculture and the small farming community of Salubenza. The hard-working farmer says that the reason for her dedication to helping women in the community achieve consistent successful harvests is because she knows that the empowerment of women in communities leads to the liberation and development of those communities.

Make Mnisi farms on a 2-hectare piece of land in Salubenza on which she plants maize, groundnut, and butternut. She also plants maize in the front yard of her home. She uses her past experiences as examples and cautionary tales to encourage farmers in her area to plant TELA crops to avoid facing the same issues she did when she first started. I know what it is like to fail. I use to plant other varieties before

and come harvest time, I was left feeling despondent because crops would either be ravaged by pests or they would succumb to the drought,” she says. Since using TELA maize varieties, Make Mnisi says that her anxieties have been alleviated. “I worry about theft, I worry about planting implements and the cost of planting. I never worry about whether or not my crops will survive the drought or be destroyed by pests. Those are the concerns of farmers who do not plant TELA maize.”

While she acknowledges that farming comes with unique challenges that vary across geographical and economical demographics, Make Mnisi also expressed gratitude for the continuous efforts to develop varieties that aim to lift a lot of the heavy burdens from the farmer’s shoulders. “We are able to feed our families and sell to community members who do not farm. The difference that planting this variety has made, is huge



