

## **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:

### **Mma Mohlala – It takes a village**



Banyabetjeng Phinea Mohlala is a powerhouse. She has a petite, unassuming frame, but she is a fiery leader who is determined to help herself and the members of the farming cooperative she chairs succeed in becoming commercial farmers. It has been a long journey to her becoming confident enough to take the reins in what to her, seemed to be a male-dominated industry. "I started farming a long time ago. I would plant vegetables in my yard and get so excited when they grow. But I never dared to call myself a farmer. I just felt like to be a farmer, you had to be doing so much more than I was" she said.

In 2016, Banyabetjeng decided to wholly commit to farming and started planting maize crops on the farm that she shares with other members of their farming cooperative. "I knew that to be successful, we would have to consolidate our efforts. We are a close-knit community so we work together and encourage each other to reach our harvesting goals."

Banyabetjeng was the first amongst the cooperative members to plant TELA maize varieties. Many of the Matibidi community farmers had abandoned their farms due to the hopelessness brought only by the Fall Armyworm. When she found out about the seed that could turn things around for them, she did not hesitate. She recalls how shocked and elated she was the first time she harvested 54 bags of maize (10000kg). She had never experienced a harvest that bountiful and she opted to plant TELA maize variety WE6206B again the following season. Once the cooperative realised that planting TELA varieties came with increased yields, they sought to come up with a plan to process their maize and monetise their farming. With the money from their first harvest, the cooperative erected a security fence to protect their maize from roaming livestock and maize theft.



