

## **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 Ndlhovu – The women of Salubenza**



The number of female-headed households is increasing. The women of the rural village, Salubenza in Mpumalanga, South Africa have taken these changing times in their strides and adapted their lives to find new ways to take care of their families while their husbands work in the cities. Make Ndlhovu of Salubenza is one such woman. She walks a 2km from her home daily to tend to her maize fields. She took the TELA team on this trek to show us what a day in her life looks like.

Down the river, up the mountain, and across the fields until we reach a large gated fence, passing indigenous fruit and vegetables growing along the path, the view on the way to Make Ndlhovu's farm is scenic. She speaks of a time when she dreamed of having something that is solely her own. She has always been a homemaker, relying on her husband to earn a living. "My father was a farmer so I grew up learning how to take care of plants and how to work the land. I stopped for a while when I got married, but I always knew I would return to farming." She says.

She says that once she decided to join the other women of Salubenza who were pursuing farming as

a means to make a living, she too was met with some unprecedented challenges. “Between the high production costs and the relentless worm, we just could not get it right, she says. She was introduced to Make Mnisi, who she says sold her TELA maize seed that she used to plant in the 2020 planting season. She was in awe of the fact that for the first time, all her worries were shifted to only production costs. “They taught us how to plant if we want to have good yields. They told us exactly how much space we should leave and how to protect the good seed. I have not had any problems with worms or dry maize since then.”

Make Ndhlovu is optimistic about the future of her farm. She believes that she will continue to grow and teach her children to work the land, just like her father taught her. She says that it is important to ensure that all that you have worked for does not all go to waste when you leave the earth. “They must know that all this is theirs to enjoy and take care of as well. For as long as we have good seed, and we tend to our farms, we will always have food.” She is not alone, women like her in Salubenza are using TELA varieties to rewrite the narrative.



