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Bigger and healthier maize is helping to counter the effects of severe drought caused by the warming effects of an El Nino weather system that has swept across southern Africa making more than 30 million people in the region dependent on food aid.

New varieties of the most important staple food crop in southern Africa, developed by scientists at the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (CIMMYT), not only flourish in drought, but can produce bumper crops in ideal growing conditions.

“We’re targeting low-yield commercial hybrid maize varieties that smallholder farmers have relied on for more than 20 years in areas where farming is a struggle even in the good years,” said Peter Setimela, a maize seed system specialist based at CIMMYT in Harare, Zimbabwe. “Another major challenge is making farmers aware of these new high-yielding, drought-tolerant varieties and giving them the confidence to switch.”

Developing the varieties can take about six or seven years, said Setimela. “From there, you have to start promoting them.”

CIMMYT scientists demonstrate the competitive results of maize trial plantings to seed companies and non-governmental organizations throughout the region, which then sell the seed to smallholders. One of the many benefits of the drought tolerant hybrid and open–pollinated varieties, which can be recycled over several seasons, is that they also reduce what farmers spend on fertilizer and other costly inputs.

The Drought Tolerant Maize for Africa project started in the mid-1990s, led by Marianne Bänziger, now CIMMYT’s deputy director general.

Martin Kropff, CIMMYT’s director general, was on hand in Harare at the 50th anniversary celebrations of the organization, when some of the new varieties were launched.

“We can make a real dent in hunger with this maize, which offers a wholesome alternative to the old, scrawny commercial hybrid varieties,” Kropff said at 50th anniversary celebrations at CIMMYT headquarters near Mexico City. “Once farmers see the economic and nutritional benefits of CIMMYT drought-tolerant maize, they never look back.”

Maize makes up 30 to 50 percent of low-income household expenditures in eastern and southern Africa.

Find the original story on the CIMMYT website.

This news item is part of a Partner Spotlight on CIMMYT (3-7 October) on the occasion of CIMMYT's 50th Anniversary.

Each week, the GFAR Secretariat is turning the spotlight on the work and collective actions of Partners in GFAR who share in our mission to strengthen and transform agri-food research and innovation systems globally. For more information on the Partners in GFAR, and to become a Partner, click here!

Photo: Margaret holds a tiny ear of SC513 maize (R), the most popular commercial variety in southern Africa, and an improved ear of CZH13208 (L), a new CIMMYT drought-tolerant hybrid. Margaret's grandmother participated in an on-farm trial with scientist Peter Setimela in Murewa district, 75 kilometers northeast of Zimbabwe's capital Harare. Credit: CIMMYT/Jill Cairns