

\$10m project launched to support smallholder farmers

By: EMMANUEL NTIRENGANYA

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RAB's head of Research Division, Dr. Patrick Karangwa (left), and Kent Nnadozie say it is important for countries to work together to find solutions to diseases and drought affecting crop productivity. / Emmanuel Ntirenganya

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The fourth round of the global benefits sharing fund for crops, which will support smallholder farmers to access seeds to adapt to climate change and environmental stresses, has been launched in Kigali.

Kent Nnadozie, the secretary of International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture, told Sunday Times that the \$10 million project will provide funds to support farmers in developing countries to get access to the seeds.

Nnadozie was speaking shortly after the just concluded Seventh Session of the Treaty's Governing Body which took place in Rwanda. Delegates from 144 signatory countries to the treaty attended the conference.

“The launch of the (two-year) project cycle starts very soon. So, farmers and other research centres can apply to get support from that Fund,” he said.

One of the outcomes of the conference, Nnadozie noted, is that all countries agreed on a roadmap for improvement of the system that provides seeds to famers.

The treaty's innovative solution to access and benefit sharing, puts 64 of our most important crops – crops that together account for 80 percent of the food we derive from plants – into an easily accessible global pool of genetic resources that is freely available to potential users in the Treaty's ratifying nations for some use.

“Our main concern is that farmers have access to planting materials, what they can use to plant and cultivate. We are for anything that supports local farmers to increase their livelihood and improve productivity for them,” Nnadozie said.

“And, one of the decisions that have been taken is to start a work programme on farmers' rights that recognizes the contribution of farmers and ensures that they have access to seeds, benefit from development and research related to seeds and crops”.

Dr Patrick Karangwa, the head of Research Division at Rwanda Agriculture Board (RAB), said countries that benefit more from sharing crops contribute to the fund, and the money is invested in supporting crop conservation and access to seeds in poor or developing countries.

“There are varieties that are developed by researchers in Rwanda; but, there are other varieties resulting from research that was done by other countries which we are introducing so that we move fast in finding solutions to diseases affecting crops,” he said referring to cassava crop that has been affected by a cassava brown streak disease in Rwanda.

The session examined, among other issues, the possibility of expansion of the scope of crop species contained in the treaty, enhancing the functioning of the multilateral system for access and benefit sharing and safeguarding of farmers' rights to equitable benefits sharing from the use of plant genetic resources.

On the importance of the establishment of the Benefits Sharing Fund, Majory Jeke, one of over 2000 smallholder farmers who benefited from the fund's third round project from 2016, said with such financial support, small farmers were now able to grow a diverse range of crops and withstand the effects of drought.

“Since the project inception in January 2016, we smallholder farmers are growing other cereal crops such as sorghum, pearl millet and finger millet besides maize,” she said.

So far, Nnadozie said, the fund has disbursed about \$20 million mostly to farmers in developing countries all around the world, to help them get climate change resistant crops.

“My plea is to make this fund bigger so that more people especially those living in countries like Zimbabwe will be assisted to keep the rich crop diversity in their hands,” Jeke requested.

editorial@newtimes.co.rw

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