TELA DOCUSERIES – Where technology meets stories of hope and resilience

Witten by Kefiloe Manthata, ARC-CO

The TELA Maize Project is a public-private partnership between the Agricultural Research Council and its partners that is working towards initiating 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. Team RAO-RSA represented by Lebogang Madubanya and Kefiloe Manthata visited farmers in Mpumalanga, South Africa to speak to them about their experiences with the variety. These are their stories.

Farmer Lettie Ndlovu (Barberton) - Building a lasting legacy

Lettie Ndlovu, or Make Ndlovu as she is affectionately known, is a mother of five who says that her main motivation for pursuing maize farming, is to ensure that she sets the foundation for a family legacy that will far outlive her. Unlike many in her community who farm chiefly to feed their families, she is on an entrepreneurial journey to grow her business and become a commercial farmer. Lettie's children, the youngest of whom is 27 years old, are her pride and joy. Her wish is to one day pass on the family maize farming business to them.

Situated at the head of a scenic hill in Barberton, in Mpumalanga Province, Make Ndlovu uses her large backyard to plant maize crops. She started planting maize in 2018 after an encounter with seed producer Xolile Dlamini (Imbewu Seed Supply) at a Farmer's Day organized by TELA South Africa in collaboration with the Department of Agriculture in Mpumalanga. Before this, she had been attending various farmer information sessions, gathering information that will help her get started. She says that meeting Xolile who introduced her to TELA maize was the turnaround moment in her life. "I am so grateful that I did not have to go through trial and error processes trying to find the right seed. The TELA maize variety that I was initially introduced to yielded far better results than my neighbours who had been farming long before me", she says. Some farmers in the area are growing increasingly despondent in their struggle against a Fall Armyworm infestation that is ravaging their crops.

Make Ndlovu planted TELA product WE6206B, one of the five TELA hybrids available for cultivation in South Africa. The other available products are WE6207B, WE6208B, WE6209B, and WE6210B. All five hybrids are easily attainable from seed companies licensed to sell TELA maize in South Africa. TELA products provide farmers with pest protection from stalk borers and fall army worm. This is because TELA products contain a Bt gene that is

derived from MON89034 event, specially designed to provide protection from stalk borers and incidentally, also fall army worm.

She recognizes the difference between her field and those of her surrounding neighbors who plant other varieties and the yearly increases in yields are the assurance she needs that her decision was the right one. “For as long as TELA Maize technology is available in South Africa, I will never opt to use any other variety.”