

# Heated debate in Uganda over super bananas

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Green cooking bananas, or matooke, are a feature of almost every main course for 38-year-old Semakula, his wife and four children, while sweet yellow ones make for pudding.

Matooke is a national staple in Uganda, and many say a meal isn't a meal without it.

"When I spend a week without eating matooke, I don't feel good," said Semakula, who lives and farms 16 kilometres (10 miles) outside the capital Kampala. "It's rare not to find it regardless of what part of the country you're in."

But in recent years a deadly bacterial disease, known as "banana wilt", has had a devastating impact, driving some farmers to abandon their beloved crop altogether. It has also sparked a Ugandan version of the global row over genetically modified (GMO) foods.

Across the world, heated debate surrounds the development and use of new foods whose DNA has been manipulated to incorporate traits not found naturally.

Backers claim that engineered strains offer a future of plentiful crops, resistant to drought and disease.

Their opponents insist that the long-term health risks and environmental impacts are not known, and warn that global corporations behind GMO foods exercise undue influence over governments and farmers.

With his banana crop under threat, Semakula is among those who want Uganda's parliament to pass a contentious bill permitting the use of GMO crops in the hope it will deliver disease-resistant bananas.

Supporters of the GMO bill argue that the crops are both safe and vital for the health of Ugandans.



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"We are interested in solving a problem," said Professor Wilberforce Tushemereirwe, director of research at the National Agricultural Research Laboratories.

Uganda has been conducting trials of disease-resistant GMO [bananas](#) since 2007. In 2010 [government](#) scientists expanded the range of tests to include rice, maize, cassava and sweet potatoes.

But for Semakula, it is all about the banana, while his faith in the government is total. "Vaccines and drugs come into the country. I don't need to know where they came from, how they process them. Government approves and I benefit. My confidence is in the government," he said.

## 'A neo-colonial conspiracy'

Others however are sceptical.

"It's a neo-colonial conspiracy to make the developing world more dependent on food and seeds from rich governments and corporations," said Edie Mukiibi, 28, who grows 12 different varieties of banana on his farm in Mukono, in central Uganda.



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Opponents of GMOs argue that they threaten the sustainability of farming in Africa with accompanying restrictions that remove farmers' right to choose their own crops and seeds.

"Real nutrition is when you have diversity of crops in your garden to choose from, not having only one crop everywhere," said Mukiibi, who is also a vice-president of the Ugandan branch of the global organisation Slow Food International, which rejects GMOs and advocates "good, clean and fair food."

"GMOs are unreliable from a scientific point of view, inefficient in economic terms and environmentally unsustainable," the Italy-based network contends on its Internet site. "Little is known about them from a health perspective... They have severe social impact, threatening traditional food cultures and the livelihoods of small-scale farmers."

Despite strong opposition, Tushemereirwe expects the bill to sail through Uganda's parliament and claims that GMOs have the backing of President Yoweri Museveni, in public and in private.



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"The last time I personally talked to Museveni he said: 'You continue with science. When you need a law, I'll give it to you'," said Tushemereirwe.

Mukiibi agrees that it is a matter of when, not if, the law is passed and promises to step up his opposition.

"We will intensify the campaign to preserve our biodiversity, as well as educating consumers about the problems around GMOs," he said, adding that farmers need to be advised by "independent bodies" and not just government-backed institutions.

"We cannot just sit and see our rights to choose our planting materials, seasonal cropping and local seed preservation hijacked by a few individuals and corporations who want to own all the seeds on earth."

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