

New app to connect Kenyan farmers with climate-smart seeds

By [Chris Arsenault](#) 17 Jun 2015

A new app launched in Kenya on Wednesday could help millions of farmers adapt to climate change by offering information on the best seeds for changing growing conditions, agriculture experts said.

Agriculture accounts for more than 70 percent of Kenya's employment, according to U.S. government figures, so an increase in food production would dramatically improve living standards.

The free "MbeguChoice" app is the first tool of its kind in sub-Saharan Africa, and was developed by a 25-year-old Kenyan software engineer. "MbeguChoice" means seed choice in Swahili.



It comprises an online database which is also available via a website, and could be expanded to other countries if its roll-out proves successful, officials behind the project said.

"The platform provides information on special characteristics (of different kinds of seeds) for drought tolerance, and the best altitude and area for growing a particular crop," Philip Leley, an advisor to the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization who gave the developers technical information, said in a telephone interview from Nairobi.

If a farmer in the mid-altitude region of Makeni County, for example, searches for drought-tolerant corn varieties to plant during the rainy season, the app would show five kinds of seeds the grower could buy which would do well in that area.

The online database, containing more than 200 crop varieties, is backed by seed producers who believe it will help drive business.

More than half of Kenya's 44 million people own a cellphone, and the app's developers expect two million people to start using the tool in the next seven months.

They eventually want to provide small farmers with up-to-date market information on crop and fertilizer prices, rather than just data about seeds.

"Our research shows that a lot of farmers don't have the correct information about what seeds work best," Paul Wanyagah, CEO of Kenya Markets Trust, a business group supporting the new platform, said in a telephone interview.

Rural farmers tend to rely on what they hear from neighbours rather than relying on crop science, he said.

"This platform will help farmers make better decisions on planting."

Kenya's fast-growing population depends largely on rain-fed agriculture for its food, and precipitation patterns are expected to shift due to climate change.

About 80 percent of the country's land is dry, according to the U.N.'s World Food Programme (WFP), so the country will need to use water more efficiently as temperatures rise due to global warming.

About 1.5 million Kenyans depend on food aid for survival, the U.N. agency said.

Digital tools like MbeguChoice could help accelerate a current trend of young people becoming more interested in farming, its developers said.

"The profile of the farmer is changing," Wanyagah said. "Agriculture is starting to become cool for young people."

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