

Insect-resistant maize

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Many farmers in Sub-Saharan Africa suffer heavily from crop losses due to stem borer pests, a problem that also extends to maize. Insecticides are often too expensive or not available, and where they are the often substandard quality makes them unreliable in pest management especially for small-scale farmers. Therefore, the more sustainable strategy should be to make maize plants resistant to diseases. Numerous national research centres, private companies, but also international research (CIMMYT, the Mexico-based international agricultural research centre that deals with maize and wheat) are working on this issue, with mixed results. The 'Insect Resistant Maize for Africa' (IRMA) project in Kenya was aimed at developing new varieties both by conventional breeding methods, and by biotechnologically incorporating the endotoxin produced by the soil bacterium *Bacillus thuringiensis*. In this book Bürgi documents IRMA's activities, giving an impartial and chronological account of its endeavours, and supplements this historical review with discussions of agricultural development policy and descriptions of Kenyan smallholders, and the project team. He also takes critical and rational position on the use of modern plant breeding techniques, biotechnology and development policy in general.

Bürgi is a journalist which helps explain the book's fluent prose. He was offered the opportunity to accompany the project during its execution and to report on its progress, successes but also failures. He was allowed to participate in numerous internal project meetings and events, and to ask the (in)appropriate questions. This 'final' document thus presents the findings of an independent observer, guided by IRMA's staff (including a UGent agricultural faculty alumnus...). The book presents the country, and both crop and pest in great detail, providing the proper background information allowing the reader to immerse him/herself in the matter. All protagonists are presented in detail, which very much helps to bring the 'making of a research project' to life. The focus is more on processes, opinions, dynamics, etc... than on 'hard research results'. In this respect, the book offers useful insights into what to do if one wants to engage into multidisciplinary research. Target audiences are thus interested scientists, but also scholars, and professionals working within NGOs, governments, academia, policy think-tanks, and so on.

Via its discussion on breeding and biotechnology it gives useful comments and provides an illuminating example of how technology can positively impact on the lives of poor farmers. As such, this is a book of hope: hope for Africa, but also for the rest of the developing world. It invites an affirming: Yes, it can be done!

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