

In free market, seeds of Africa's food solution

By DONNA BRYSON

CATANDICA, Mozambique, May 22, 2011, 6:38PM ET

Peter Waziweyi is bouncing around the lush countryside of Mozambique in his 30-year-old truck, visiting his customers' maize fields and relishing the sight of their rich, ripening crops.

In an East African country that tried and failed to run its economy on Marxist lines, it is now the turn of small-time businessmen like Waziweyi to step forward. Waziweyi is a seed salesman and part of a chain linking scientists and farmers that experts hope will help Mozambique and other African countries solve their chronic food crises.

Waziweyi has gone from aid worker to entrepreneur, producing high-yield, drought-resistant hybrid seeds and selling them through the company he and his wife founded last year, called "Nzara Yaperá" -- "an end to hunger."

"That's what we call positive results with immediate impact," he says after meeting a farmer who has seen what hybrid maize seeds can do and wants to buy them.

Better seeds fueled the "green revolution" of higher, more reliable crop yields that transformed farming in many parts of the world.

But Africa has come late to the green revolution, and Mozambique later than most. The former Portuguese colony is almost a laboratory specimen of the continent's post-independence woes: 17 years of civil war, spells of flood and drought, one-party rule tainted by corruption and antidemocratic tendencies. Like several African countries last year, it suffered riots over high food prices.

Gradually, the government is relinquishing control of the economy. A state-owned seed giant was broken up recently into an array of private producers, and Antonio Limbau, Mozambique's deputy agriculture minister, said he wants the profit motive to spread.

Across Africa, experts say, only 20 percent of farmers are using state-of-the-art seeds. In Mozambique, Limbau said, it is just 5 percent.

While genetically modified seeds raise objections here just as they do in some Western societies, hybrid seeds and other modern techniques go down well in Africa. Success stories cited by researchers include cocoa in Ghana, cotton and coffee in Uganda, flowers in East Africa and beans in Rwanda.

But the World Watch Institute, a Washington, D.C. think tank, cautions that better seeds are not enough: Farmers need ways to keep their soil nourished, reliable customers and roads to bring their produce to market.

While free-market approaches may have some effect in Mozambique and elsewhere, however, the drive for better seeds is led by charities and other nonprofit organizations, because Africa is too poor to be of interest to big international seed companies, says Joe DeVries, a Kenya-based seed expert. He works for the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa, or AGRA, set up in 2006 by The Rockefeller Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

AGRA is working to get governments to leave seed distribution to the private sector. In Mozambique, it gave \$1.5 million to train small merchants to run better businesses, develop links with suppliers and learn tips to pass on to farmers. The three-year project is run for AGRA by the International Fertilizer Development Center, based in Muscle Shoals, Alabama, and financed by the U.S. and other governments.

One of those attending an IFDC dealer-training session last year was Paulinho Wilson. He used to sell packets of vegetable seeds and the odd bag of maize seed out of his grocery in Catandica, a town in west-central Mozambique. Now, using his newly acquired entrepreneurial know-how, he has sold 20 25-kilogram (55-pound) bags of hybrid seed. He also advises farmers on how to use fertilizer wisely.

He has even come up with an advertising ploy, hiring a farmer to plant a crop of hybrid-seed maize outside town where farmers would notice it. Now, he says, customers are urging him to sell less soap and cooking oil and more seeds out of his tiny store. "Business has really expanded," he says.

The IFDC's Gil Mucave said some 25,000 farmers in northern Mozambique saw such demonstration plots or received other information about hybrids last year, and he is hoping to reach 60,000 this year. The training projects also put dealers in touch with banks willing to give loans.

Waziweyi, a short, white-goateed man, buys stock from government researchers to mass-produce seeds for sale to dealers -- Wilson is one of them -- or directly to farmers. Last year he produced 100 tons of seeds on more than 100 hectares (250 acres), and believes he has enough buyers to justify tripling his output this year.

One of his favorite farmers is Joseph Dzindwa, who has expanded his maize fields eight-fold to eight hectares (about 20 acres) in the last few years. Dzindwa said he could not have done it without hybrid seeds.

Waziweyi visits Dzindwa regularly to check on his progress and offer advice. "If he continues to grow, then our company will grow," he said.

Meanwhile, Catandica offers plenty of evidence of how hybrid seeds can help improve lives. The fruits and vegetables in the roadside market stalls are testimony to the soil's richness and the farmers' hard work. Yet behind the stalls, Mucave, the development worker, points to row after row of stunted maize raised from traditional seeds and untouched by modern technology.

"It's really true," he said, "seeds can change the world."