Kenyan farmer wants the best crop tech for Africa

To many people around the world, the cassava is an exotic crop that they have never eaten. Or so they think. Yet anybody who has tasted tapioca pudding has profited from this versatile plant: Tapioca is a starch that comes from the cassava, a tropical shrub whose tuber is edible.

I don't eat much cassava either. Farmers don't grow it in my part of Kenya. Yet it's a staple crop on my continent — a rich source of carbohydrates for millions of Africans.

"Cassava is to the African peasant farmers what rice is to the Asian farmers, or what wheat and potato are to the European farmers," says Alfred Dixon of the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture.

In Tanzania, researchers have figured out how to improve the cassava through biotechnology — a development that everyone ought to celebrate and promote. This progress comes at a good time because the cassava brown-streak virus has become the leading threat to food security in many parts of East Africa.

Yet that will happen only if politics doesn't get in the way of science. In Africa, unfortunately, politics always seems to intrude. Too often, we turn over our public policies to special-interest groups that despise biotechnology for reasons of ideology.

The result is a tragedy for Africa. Our continent routinely fails to feed itself.

In the United States and elsewhere, GM crops have produced an enormous bounty. This year, corn farmers in the Midwest are shattering all-time yield records, in large part because they can grow the best crops science can offer. From the eyes of this African farmer, though, every year is a pretty good year for American growers. I wish we could enjoy similar levels of success.

The difference is technology. Americans have embraced it — and now they're growing more food than ever before. In Africa, our governments have resisted GM crops — and we continue to suffer from hunger and malnourishment.

Read full original article: Africa's Farmers Want to Plant the Best Crops Science Can Offer