

Misinformation on GM crops and improved seeds hurting Kenyan farmers and hungry citizens

Rose Rono has lived and farmed in Limuru, Kiambu County, in Central Kenya for the last 10 years.

In a good season, she says she harvests 10 bags of corn weighing from her two-acre maize farm. Each bag weighs 90 kilograms.

But for the last three seasons, she has realized [dismal harvests](#) because of [failed rains](#).

“This season is the worst. I will not harvest any corn as I’m planning to sell these stalks to livestock farmers so that I can at least get something from my farm,” says Mrs Rono.

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Corn stalks are wilting

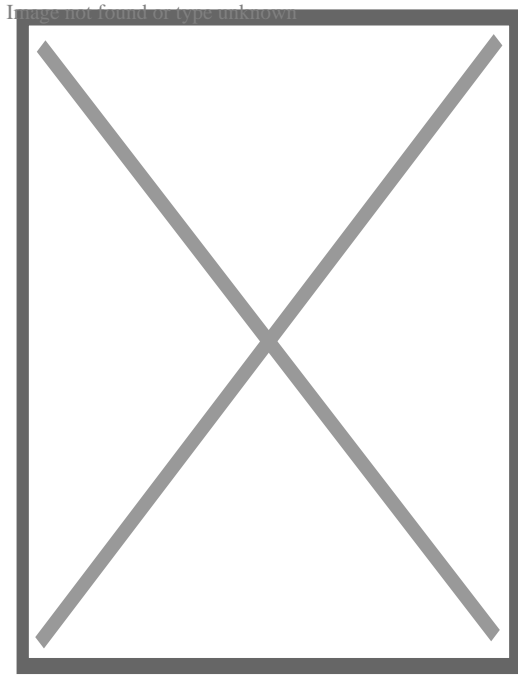


Wilting maize crops on a farm in Limuru, Central Kenya. Credit: Godfrey Ombogo

Across many fields in the Red Hill area of Limuru, livestock farmers are having a field day, cutting down corn stalks that are wilting to turn them into animal feed.

They buy the stalks at throw-away prices from farmers who fear losing everything to the drought.

John Njoroge, 57, who was born and bred in Limuru, says he has never seen the area so dry.



Confined field trials showing the insect protection provided by GM corn (right) compared to non-GM varieties (left). Credit: Nkechi Isaac

“Limuru has always been known for [chilly weather](#) throughout the year and bumper harvests that feed many areas, including the city of Nairobi. But nowadays we have nothing to eat,” says the vegetable farmer.

About 120 kilometers away in Murang’a County, which is known for large-scale farming of coffee and avocado for export, the situation seems worse.

Negative things about GMOs

People are asking for [relief food](#) from the government, a situation Mercy Njogu says she is witnessing for the first time.

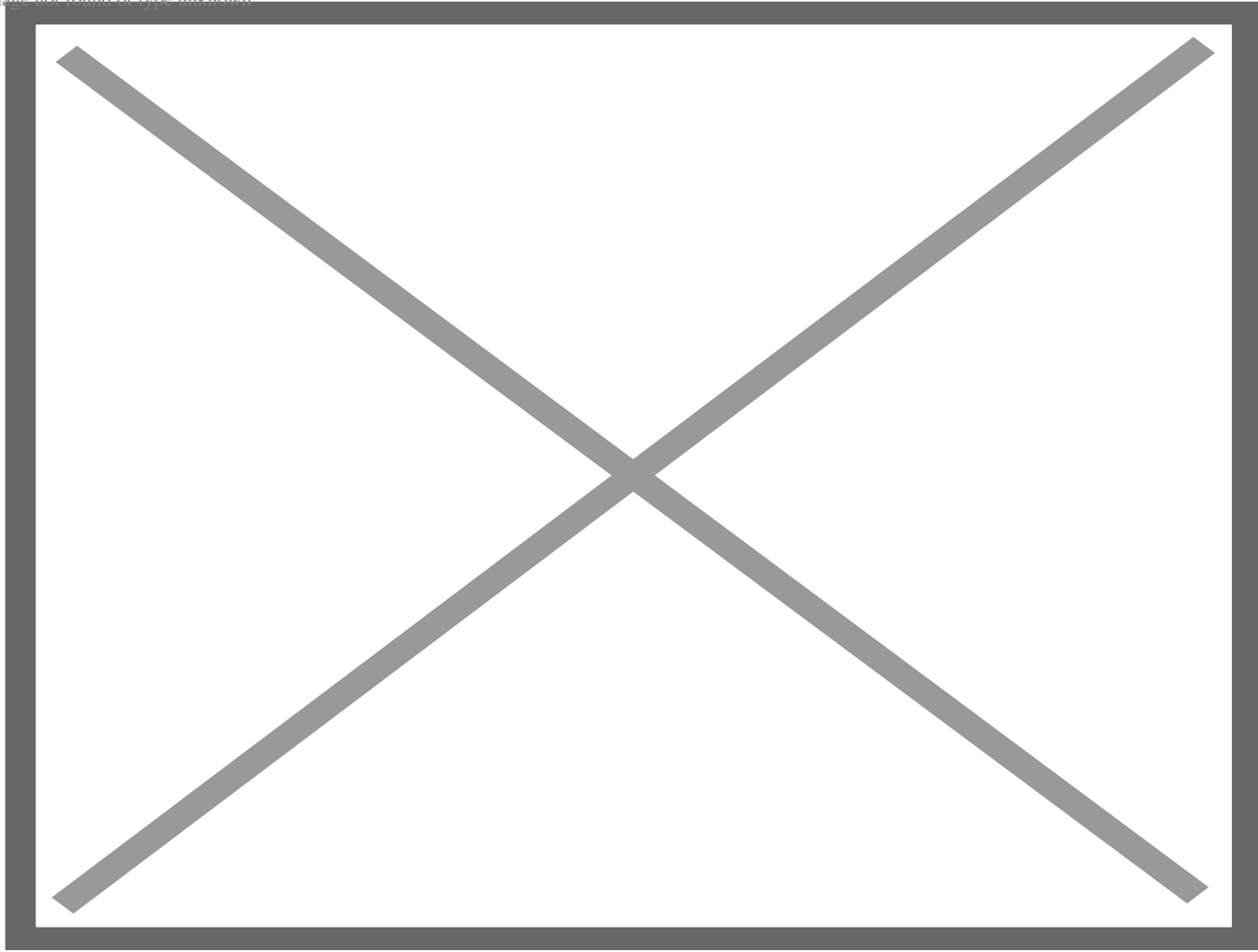
Yet, even in this dire situation, Ms Njogu says her village mates would not accept any relief food if it is genetically modified.

“A lot of negative things have been said about GMOs and I would rather keep it away from my food store,” she says.

Even though Ms Njogu is a school teacher and should be better informed, she says what she reads in the

media, and what the politicians say about GMOs leaves them confused.

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Workers carrying corn stalks that they will turn into animal feed to a waiting lorry in Limuru, Central Kenya. Credit: Godfrey Ombogo

According to a recent [study](#), 151 out of 376 articles published by 14 of Kenya's top media outlets between October 2022 and January 2023 contained unchallenged [negative misinformation](#) about GMOs.

"This equates to 40 percent of media coverage by volume in Kenya promoting negative misinformation about GMOs. Only 3 percent of articles contained pro-GMO misinformation," says the [study](#) conducted by Alliance for Science.

The study further says that 178 articles (47 percent) had no misinformation, while only 29 (eight percent) challenged misinformation on GMOs.

Continuous training in science reporting

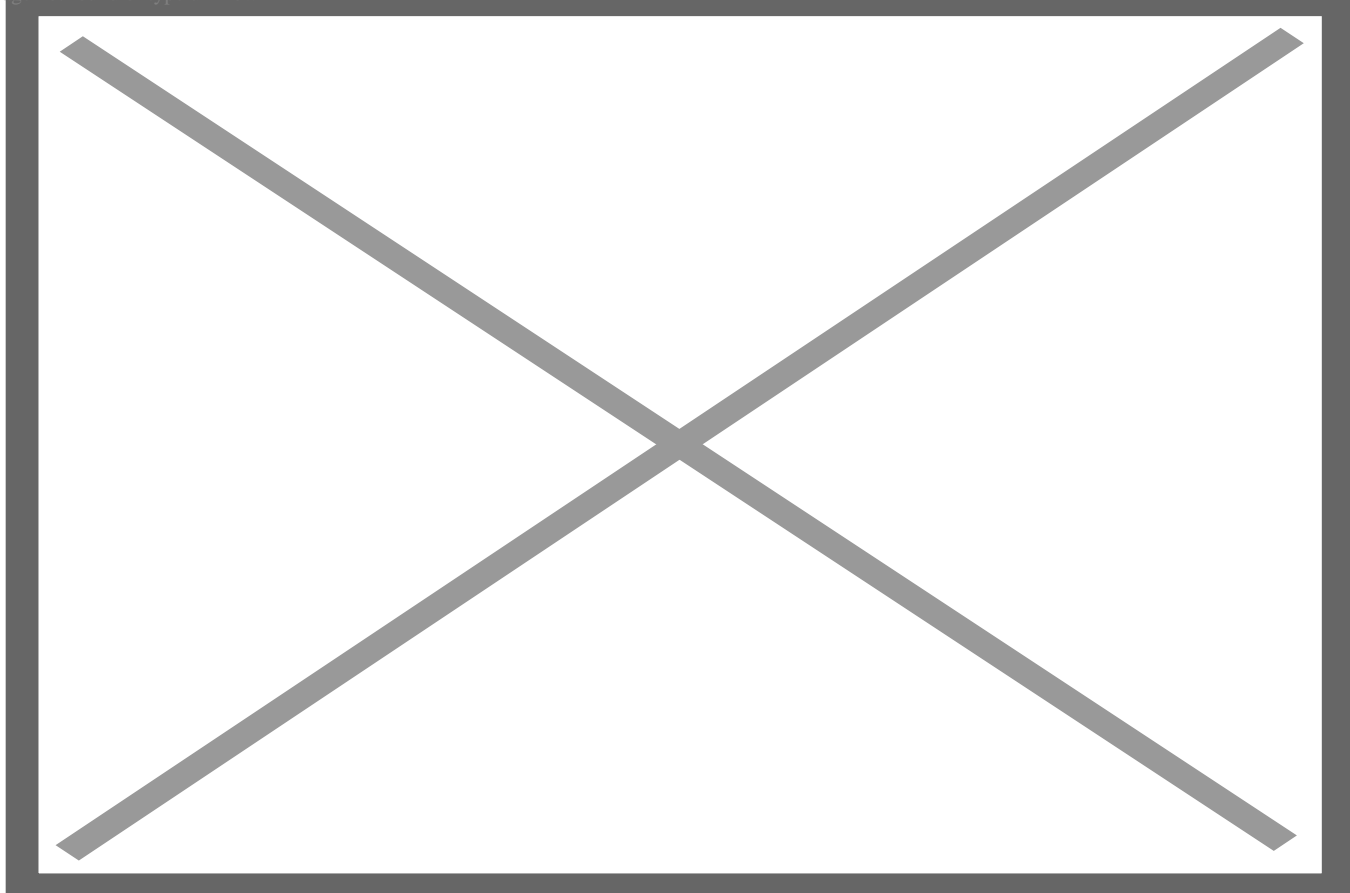
The Kenyan government [lifted a ban on GMOs](#) in October 2022 and opposition politicians immediately said President William Ruto and the Cabinet did not conduct public participation before making the decision.

Since then, there has been an [intensified campaign by politicians](#) both pro and against the lifting of the ban, with a lot of unverified information about GM foods flying around.

Njoroge now believes that GM foods have been in Kenya for long and he does not understand the fuss about the lifting of the ban because “we have been eating these foods for years”.

To him, propagated food crops such as [tissue culture bananas](#) and [grafted oranges](#) or mangoes are GMOs, a clear indication that ordinary Kenyans do not understand what GMOs are, opening up a vacuum to be easily filled with misinformation.

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Dr Sheila Ochugboju, Director, Alliance for Science. Credit: AFS

Speaking to [CNBC Africa](#), [Alliance for Science](#) Executive Director Dr [Sheila Ochugboju](#) said the study found that Kenyan media's misinformation on GMOs is probably the [worst in the world](#) and this could negatively influence policy decisions on biotechnology.

[African Seed Trade Association](#) (AFSTA) communications officer [Aghan Daniel](#) says misinformation on GMOs is rampant in Kenyan media because communication about the subject has been left to non-scientists, and misinformed activists.

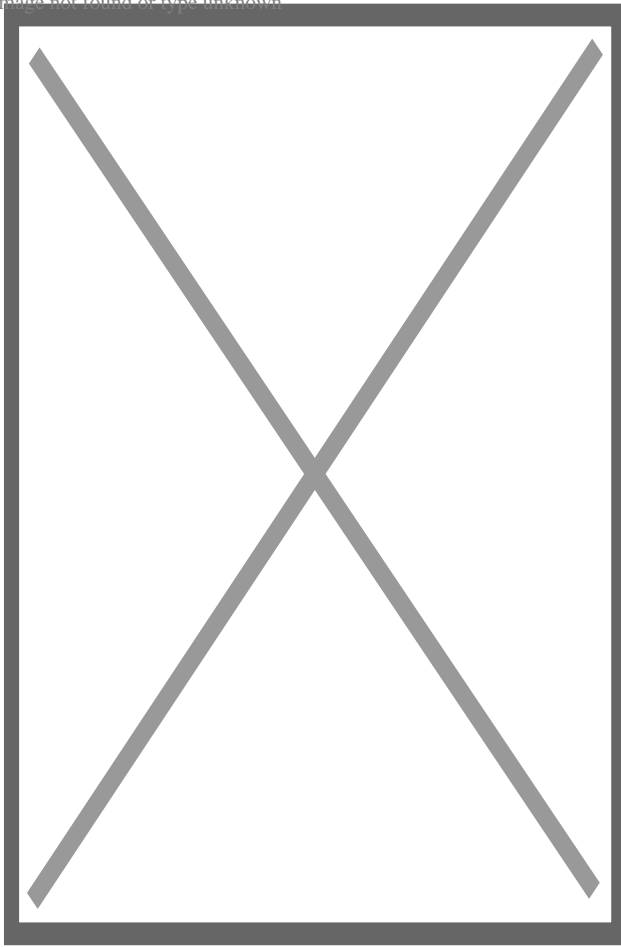
"The question is who or what organizations are the media quoting? They are mostly shady organizations that only feed people on hysteria," says Aghan.

"And the journalists run away with this hysteria because it sells. It's all about news value; what excites or what scares should be published, but facts are cold."

Aghan, who says he has been in seed and biotechnology communication for over a decade, also questions the training and background of journalists, including editors, writing science stories.

"Are they backgrounded in science? Even if they are not, do they take their time and not publish a story until they have their facts right?" he poses.

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Dr Martin Mwirigi, Director of Biotechnology Research Institute at KALRO. Credit: AFS

He says reporters and editors should be keen on continuous training on science reporting, an undertaking that the [Kenya Agricultural and Livestock Research Organization](#) (KALRO) is committed to, according to [Dr Martin Mwirigi](#), the acting Director of Biotechnology Research Institute at KALRO.

GMOs are not new

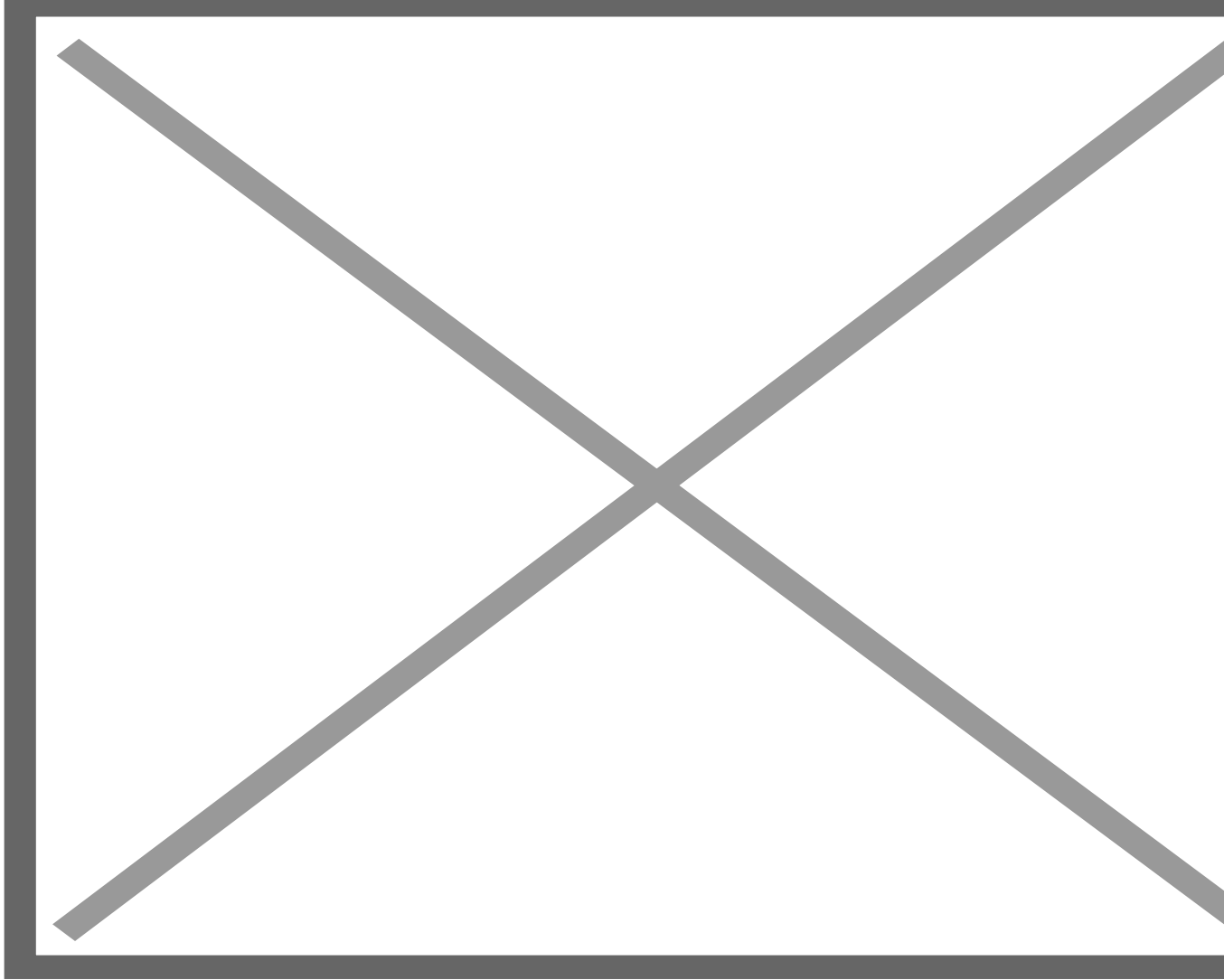
Dr Mwirigi is more optimistic about the future of science communication, saying many journalists are now more informed, thanks to the training by KALRO, which continues.

“We have trained enough journalists by now and most of them have been exposed. So unless somebody deliberately wants to misinform the public. We may not have trained all journalists, but we expect this misinformation to reduce significantly in the future when we will have trained more,” he says.

Dr Mwirigi says GM crops are not new. The only difference is that now there is technology to fast-track the process, as is the case in all sectors.

“Technology is not static in agriculture and we need it for optimum production. KALRO has developed many technologies; GM is just one of them and it has undergone all the legal requirements and regulations,” he says.

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A livestock farmer cutting corn stalks on a farm in Limuru, Central Kenya. Credit: Godfrey Ombogo

Aghan urges scientists to be open to talking to the media so that activists do not get a chance and reason to mislead the masses.

For Mrs Rono, however, the government needs to do a lot of sensitization about GMOs to enable ordinary

citizens to make an informed decision.

She says even those against the lifting of the ban should provide clear evidence of why they think GM foods are not fit for human consumption.

Dr Ochugboju advises people like Mrs Rono, Ms Njogu, and any other Kenyan not to be passive recipients of information, rather they should question every story that they read.

“We can create our filters and raise our [appetite for truth](#),” she says.

Godfrey Ombogo is an editorial consultant and consulting science editor for Media for Environment, Science, Health and Agriculture (MESHA). You can reach Godfrey at gombogo@rocketmail.com or follow Godfrey on Twitter [@The_Jarachar](#)

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