

# Cassava, Uganda's Food Security Crop

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Source: <http://www.africancrops.net>

Cassava, a tropical root crop is the third most important source of calories in the tropics, after rice and corn. According to FAO, more than 600 million people depend on the cassava in Africa, Asia and Latin America. For Uganda, cassava provides around 13 percent to the daily caloric intake. According to Dr. Robert Mwanga of NaCRRI, cassava is an assured way to attain some of The Millennium Development Goals (MDG's) in particular, the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger. This is because its roots provided food, the leaves a vegetable delicacy and the stem is a planter that can be turned into wood for cooking, thus the Baganda saying that 'wamalako nga Muwogo' (you complete as Cassava). Cassava has also increasingly demonstrated its role as a key raw material in the industrial sector owing to the various uses to which its starch can be put to. Certainly, to sustain cassava's duo roles for food and non-food uses, it's critically necessary that its key production constraints be addressed in order to attain optimal productivity. The colonial government in Uganda made the first attempt in 1941, through variety selection, to increase cassava productivity. During this period (1941-1958), introductions from Amani, Tanzania and a few local varieties were screened at Serere and Bukalasa, and promising clones multiplied and released to farmers. Further interventions to sustain cassava productivity in Uganda were done in the 1990's with collaboration with the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA). Together, these colonial and post-colonial cassava selection schemes resulted into the release of cassava varieties that significantly increased cassava productivity at farm level.

Unfortunately, throughout the crop's growth to harvesting, it experiences a continuous assault from a plethora of pests and diseases that cause substantial yield losses. For example in 2007 the country reported an outbreak of the cassava mosaic virus and cassava brown streak disease which threatens to undermine prospects. Worse still, are the increasing challenges from recurring droughts, persistent low-input cultivation, and market limitations in form of reduced shelf life, poor quality standards and lack of an effective and national cassava industrialization strategy. The heterozygous nature of the crop, low fruit set and susceptibility to inbreeding depression further undermine breeding initiatives aimed at improving its genetic potential. In response to some of these challenges, the National Cassava Programme has since then implemented activities to address some of these challenges, principle of which is the integration of end-user participatory approaches, appropriate biotechnology tools and traditional breeding methods to make cassava a highly competitive starchy crop for both food and non-food applications. This is being done in partnership with local, national and international collaborators. The National Cassava Research Programme is optimistic that this initiative will both increase the competitiveness of cassava in the industrial sector and reduce food security problems in Uganda.