

Media Alert

Africa's Banana Mama to Speak on Using Biotechnology to Alleviate Hunger

Dr Florence Wambugu, CEO, Africa Harvest Biotech Foundation International, Kenya is a passionate believer in the power of biotechnology to boost food production and fight hunger and poverty in the developing world. She argues that the African continent, more than any other, urgently needs agricultural biotechnology, including transgenic crops, to improve food production.

Dr Wambugu is also a highly vocal critic of the mainly European anti-biotech lobby, through gross misinformation and political maneuvering, whose primary achievement, she claims, has been to keep safe and nutritious food out of the hands of starving people.

Dr Wambugu is a keynote speaker at the AusBiotech Annual Conference in Melbourne (October 26-29).

Determination goes a long way if you want to change things for the better in Africa. Florence Wambugu, a Kenyan plant pathologist and virologist and chief executive of Africa Harvest Biotech Foundation International, is living proof of this.

In August, this year, she collected the 2008 YARA prize, which recognises outstanding contributions to African agriculture, at a gala ceremony at the African Green Revolution Conference in Oslo, Norway.

Wambugu was recognised for her work introducing tissue culture bananas in Kenya. Tissue culture exploits the regenerative properties of shoot tips, allowing up to 2,000 plantlets to be produced from a single shoot in six months. In addition to improving plant characteristics, the techniques also prevent the transmission of fungi, bacteria and pests from parent to child plants.

The project, which started ten years ago, has improved crop yields and lifted Kenyan farmers out of poverty.

Known as Africa's "banana mama", Wambugu studied for her Bachelor's degree in Kenya, moved to the United States for her Master's degree and did her PhD in virology in the United Kingdom. But it was a commitment to make an impact at the grassroots level that made her return to Africa. "I remembered the investment made to train me by my government and my community, and knew that back home people were suffering from hunger, poverty and malnutrition. I felt strongly that I couldn't be comfortable in the United States or in the United Kingdom. I needed to go back home and be part of the solution," she said.

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