

Post-harvest losses still major challenge in East Africa

Smallholder farmers can reduce post-harvest losses and improve income by adopting better storage management practices and technologies. According to Food and Agriculture Organisations (FAO) about one third of the food produced globally is lost or wasted representing a loss of 1.3 billion tonnes of food per year.



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In Tanzania, results from different research studies demonstrate that farmers lose up to 40 percent of the harvest through post-harvest losses.

This has a negative impact on their income, livelihood and production incentives. However, there are challenging conditions for smallholder farmers including lack of credit for investments in post-harvest technology, unreliable electric power supply, lack of transport options, storage facilities and packaging materials as well as a host of other constraints.

Fortunately, there is a wide range of simple post-harvest technologies from which to choose and many practices have the potential of meeting the special needs of small-scale food handlers and marketers.

Congress on post-harvest technology

It is from this backdrop that the Inter Region Economic Network (IREN) moved up to organise post-harvest technology congress next year to address and reduce the level of loss that accounts for more than 30 percent of the food produced for human consumption.

IREN's Chief Executive Officer, James Shikwati, said the first-ever 'East Africa post-harvest Technology' congress and challenge will be held in Nairobi, Kenya, toward the end of next year's quarter.

"This competition will enable us to identify a range of technologies that have the potential to help the continent confront and counter the huge challenges in post-harvest management," Shikwati said in a statement from Nairobi. IREN is coordinating the congress in partnership with the USAID East Africa Trade and Investment Hub and Syngenta.

Effective post-harvest management key

Effective management during the post-harvest period, rather than the level of sophistication of any given technology is the key in reaching the desired objectives.

Simple, low-cost technologies often can be more appropriate for small volume, limited resource commercial operations, farmers involved in direct marketing, as well as for suppliers to exporters in developing countries. Obviously, post-harvest management determines food quality and safety, competitiveness in the market, and the profits earned by producers.

The major constraints include inefficient handling and transportation, poor technologies for storage, processing, and packaging involvement of too many diverse actors and poor infrastructure.

In light of the incidence of the huge post-harvest losses in the region and new challenges faced under trade liberalisation and globalisation, serious efforts are needed to reduce post-harvest losses.

This would include linking operations and actors involved more closely and systematically, modernising marketing infrastructure and technologies, capacity building of individual actors, and strengthening the policy/institutional settings for better marketing.

Identifying innovations and technologies

He said the key highlight of the congress will be the inaugural 'Post-harvest Technology Challenge 2017,' which aims to identify ten scalable innovations and technologies, from the East Africa Community block.

"IREN welcomes entries featuring post-harvest innovations and technologies that demonstrate potential for scale-up and wider dissemination from institutions, innovators, researchers and individuals aged 18 and above from the East African member countries namely Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi," he said.

The challenge centres to address challenges in post-harvest management of perishable food crop commodities, perishable livestock and fish products, and non-perishable food commodities that include grains, cereals, pulses and processed foods. Shikwati said yesterday that the main strategic partner in the congress organisation is the Rockefeller Foundation.

Others include the Netherlands Development Organisation (SNV), Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), Horticulture Innovation Engine (USAID), Post-harvest Education Foundation (PEF), Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN), East Africa Grain Council (EAGC) among others.

And top 10 contestants will be invited to showcase their projects at The 1st All Africa Post Harvest Congress and Exhibition and pitch to potential investors. A recent report by the World Bank revealed that each year, significant volumes of food are lost after harvest in sub-Saharan Africa, the value of which is estimated at four billion US dollars for grains alone.

Based on the aforementioned reasons, experts now agree that investing in post-harvest losses reduction is a quick-impact intervention for enhancing food security. Reducing food losses, therefore, offers an important pathway of availing food, alleviating poverty and improving nutrition.

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