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FACT SHEET

USAID-supported Scientist Wins World Food Prize

Gebisa Ejeta is just as comfortable wading through knee-high sorghum fields in the most remote regions of Africa as he is in a laboratory where he creates hundreds of new crop varieties. The scientist's motivation for his research, which won him the 2009 World Food Prize, is not just to create stronger crops, but to solve societal problems in his homeland of Africa.



Gebisa Ejeta is this year's winner of the World Food Prize.

Photo credit: World Food Prize

On October 15, 2009, Ejeta stood on the steps of the Iowa State Capitol to receive the World Food Prize for developing drought and striga resistant sorghum varieties that are widely grown across Africa. The honor comes with a \$250,000 prize.

"The fact that I come from a poor background has given me the empathy to understand the difficulties of life in rural Africa," said Ejeta, who was born in Ethiopia.

Ejeta's award-winning work was funded by USAID's Sorghum, Millet, and Other Grains Collaborative Research Support Program and its predecessors.

Ejeta discovered the way the striga weed attacks sorghum, the staple crop of sub-Saharan Africa, and developed varieties that would withstand the attack. He also developed varieties that could withstand drought. The effort enhanced the food supply of millions of people, increased farmers' yields, and enabled the first commercial seed industry to develop in sub-Saharan Africa.

"Just because a drought resistant variety is available, it doesn't mean it gets to the farms," Ejeta said. "When you are operating in a developing country where few institutions are functioning, the farmers don't have an understanding of the value of agricultural research so they don't look to research to solve their problems....You need to work with farmers and demonstrate to them how this technology you developed is better than what they practice."

Ejeta said that a critical part of his work is developing institutions to ensure the new crop varieties are sustainable. This involves everything from creating businesses to sell fertilizer to making sure seed markets are accessible.

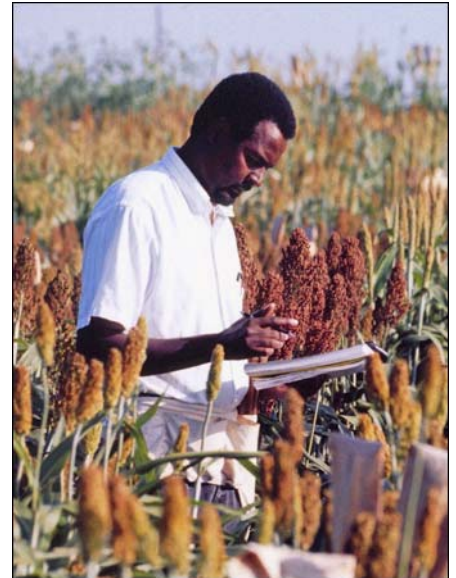
The Purdue University professor helped create thriving local markets and trained farmers across Africa in new agricultural techniques. With USAID support, his crops are now grown in his home country as well as in Eritrea, Kenya, Mali, Mozambique, Niger, Rwanda, Senegal, Somalia, Sudan, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe.

“I believe that the respect for agricultural sciences in developing countries needs to be strengthened,” he said. “It builds economies and can be a tremendous vehicle for change, but that has to be a sustained area of support.”

One of Ejeta’s top priorities is mentoring African students. He has trained 30 doctorate and 10 post-doctorate students both here and in Africa, and has been involved in a University of Wisconsin program to train 220 African PhD candidates over the past 10 years. Ejeta said he values mentoring because he received so much support during his own education. USAID supported Ejeta’s education from high school in Ethiopia through his doctorate program at Purdue.

“It doesn’t mean that this is the only way that one can get to be a World Food Prize laureate, but that was the path for me, and I am extremely grateful for those opportunities,” Ejeta said. “For USAID, or any other agency, it underscores the value of creating these educational institutions. Without that kind of foundation, it is difficult to produce the kind of the scientists that you need to solve these kinds of societal problems.”

Author: Laura Ashbaugh, USAID



The Purdue University professor came up with way to protect crops from drought and disease. *Photo credit: World Food Prize*

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