



FIRST PERSON Fending Off Hunger With Chickpeas

New variety of seeds helps farmers combat drought, feed families



Photo: USAID/Kim Wylie

Lugonda Magaiwa has high hopes for a profitable harvest of chickpeas at his farm in Shinyanga, Tanzania.

“Next year, I’ll only plant the improved variety,” said Lugonda Magaiwa, a chickpea farmer in Tanzania who took a gamble and planted half his field with a new variety of chickpeas introduced by USAID.

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In the semi-arid region of Shinyanga, Tanzania the difference between a good or failed harvest is measured in millimeters of rainfall. These Tanzanian farmers are often hit hard by drought and in 2005 many staple crops failed completely. To survive, the Sukuma people in the area sold off some of their prized cattle to feed their families and send their children to school.

In 2006, USAID is helping to even the odds for a good harvest by introducing “Kabul” chickpea seeds into the community. Results have been remarkable. The improved seeds are drought resistant and produce considerably larger chickpeas than traditional varieties. Nearby farmers are curious, and buyers are very interested; in a country where malnutrition is very common, the chickpea is loaded with nutrients.

Only halfway through the long dry season, Shinyanga’s vast plains appear black and bare, with intermittent wisps of yellowing grass. Huge granite boulders and tall cactus-like succulents dot the landscape. Dust blows everywhere and a journey from the main town to Lugonda Magaiwa’s farm takes hours on a rugged dirt road. Standing in his chickpea field under a bright blue sky, it’s hard to believe that anything can grow in that ground. This is “cotton soil” country, so called because of the type of soil that can miraculously absorb and retain whatever rain falls within its crevices and pores. This soil provides plants such as chickpeas the healthy start they need to survive. But as the soil dries out, what remains resembles lava rock more than soil.

Yet judging from Mr. Magaiwa’s chickpea plants, the moisture was enough to keep his plants alive. A father of 14, he explains his initial fear of investing scarce resources in the new seed. He took a risk, planting half his plot with the traditional variety and half with “Kabul.” Today, Lugonda smiles as he compares the two varieties in his hands: the new is double the size of the old. “Next year,” says Lugonda with a smile, “I’ll only plant the improved variety.”