

[HOME](#)



East Africa: Moderate Use of Fertilizer Will Double Banana Yield, Says Study

Mike Mande 15 February 2010

Nairobi — Moderate use of mineral fertilizer could yield double the production of bananas in East Africa thereby improving the lives of over 70 million people who depend on the crop for food and income.

According to the USAid-funded study carried out by the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA) in nearly 200 farmer fields in Uganda, few banana growers are using fertilizers in the region, missing out on the opportunity to maximise their crop's food and income potential.

The study showed that modest fertilizer use can significantly increase the crop's yield - the crop doubled from 10 tonnes to 20 tonnes per hectare per year in

Central Uganda with modest fertiliser application.

The study, led by an IITA agronomist based in Uganda, Dr Piet van Asten, and Lydia Wairegi, a PhD student at the Makerere University, also found that less than 5 per cent of the farmers used fertilizer on their crop.

Dr Asten said that application of fertilizers not only increases bunch weight but also shortens the crop cycle so the plants produce more bunches in a year.

"The farmers surveyed in the study said that they do not use fertilizers because they are expensive, not readily available, and that they are not available in small, convenient and affordable packs," he said.

The researchers also cited lack of access to credit facilities, limited knowledge on fertilizer use, and misinformation about fertilizers' negative effect on soil quality and on the taste of bananas.

A related farmer sensory evaluation carried out by IITA and Uganda's National Agricultural Research Organisation showed that fertilizer use not only increased yields, but also improved the quality of bananas for making matooke, a popular dish made from steamed bananas.

According to the evaluation, fertilizer treatment improved the appearance, odour, texture, and overall acceptability of the matoke.

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