Available online at
http://agrospheresmagazine.vitalbiotech.org/

ISSN (E): 2582 – 7022

Agrospheres:e- Newsletter, (2025) *6*(7), 30-32

Article ID: 752

Strategies for Increasing Maize Yields in Variable Climates

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Open Access

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Article History
Received: 25. 06.2025
Revised: 30. 06.2025
Accepted: 04. 07.2025

INTRODUCTION

Maize (Zea mays L.) is one of the most widely cultivated crops in the world, serving as a primary food, feed, and industrial raw material. However, its yield is highly sensitive to climatic conditions, especially during pollination and grain-filling stages. Climate variability—characterized by erratic rainfall patterns, prolonged droughts, extreme temperatures, and unexpected frost events—poses significant threats to maize production.According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), climate-related factors are responsible for more than 60% of yield variability in sub-Saharan Africa. Therefore, enhancing maize productivity under changing climatic conditions is critical for food security and rural livelihoods.This article discusses strategic interventions for boosting maize yields under climate variability, emphasizing adaptive and sustainable agricultural practices.

2. Genetic Improvements and Climate-Resilient Varieties

2.1 Drought-Tolerant and Heat-Resistant Hybrids

The development and dissemination of climate-resilient maize varieties is perhaps the most effective long-term strategy. Advances in plant breeding have led to hybrids that tolerate drought, high temperatures, and even certain pests and diseases. For example, the **Drought Tolerant Maize for Africa (DTMA)** initiative has released varieties that yield 20–30% more than conventional ones under drought conditions.

2.2 Early-Maturing Varieties

Early-maturing maize varieties are crucial for regions where the rainy season is shortening. These cultivars reach maturity within 90–110 days, helping farmers harvest before the onset of drought or early frost. They also enable double-cropping, increasing land-use efficiency.

 ISSN (E): 2582 – 7022

Source: https://www.agrifarming.in

2.3 Biofortified and Pest-Resistant Varieties
Genetically improved maize can also address micronutrient deficiencies (e.g., Vitamin A) while reducing the impact of biotic stressors. Bt maize, which contains a gene from *Bacillus thuringiensis*, resists stem borers and reduces yield losses significantly.

3. Climate-Smart Agronomic Practices
3.1 Conservation Agriculture (CA)
CA practices, including minimum tillage, crop rotation, and permanent soil cover, help improve soil health and water retention. By minimizing soil disturbance and maintaining organic matter, CA increases maize yields and system resilience under erratic weather.

3.2 Intercropping and Crop Diversification
Integrating legumes such as cowpea or soybean with maize enhances soil fertility through nitrogen fixation and provides an insurance mechanism against total crop failure. Crop diversification also reduces pest pressure and stabilizes farm income.

3.3 Timely Planting and Improved Seed Placement
Adjusting planting schedules based on seasonal forecasts can help avoid heat or water stress during critical growth stages. Precision planting tools also ensure optimal spacing and depth, maximizing plant vigor and uniformity.

4. Improved Water Management
4.1 Rainwater Harvesting
In areas with low or erratic rainfall, rainwater harvesting systems like zai pits, contour bunds, and farm ponds can store water for later use. These systems improve water availability during dry spells, especially for rain-fed maize farming.

4.2 Supplemental Irrigation
Even limited irrigation during flowering or grain-filling can significantly increase yields. Technologies like drip irrigation and low-cost sprinklers enable efficient water use, especially in resource-constrained environments.

4.3 Mulching and Organic Amendments
Organic mulches conserve soil moisture, suppress weeds, and moderate soil temperature. Combining this with compost or farmyard manure improves soil structure and enhances the maize root zone's water-holding capacity.

5. Use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT)
5.1 Climate Forecasting and Decision Support
Mobile apps, SMS alerts, and radio broadcasts now provide localized weather forecasts and agronomic advice. These tools help farmers make informed decisions on planting dates, input application, and pest management.

5.2 GIS and Remote Sensing
GIS-based tools allow farmers and extension workers to monitor soil health, crop vigor, and water stress in real-time. Satellite imagery and drones are being increasingly used to assess field variability and optimize inputs accordingly.

5.3 Digital Platforms for Knowledge Sharing
Online platforms and farmer forums facilitate peer learning and knowledge exchange. They offer access to best practices, market prices, and crop advisory services, especially for smallholder farmers with limited extension support.

ISSN (E): 2582 – 7022

6. Soil Fertility and Nutrient Management

6.1 Integrated Soil Fertility Management (ISFM)

ISFM combines the use of inorganic fertilizers with organic inputs such as compost and green manures. This approach enhances nutrient availability, reduces leaching, and promotes sustainable soil productivity.

6.2 Site-Specific Nutrient Application

Precision agriculture technologies enable variable rate application of fertilizers based on soil nutrient mapping. Tailoring nutrient inputs to specific field conditions ensures efficient use and reduces environmental harm.

6.3 Use of Biofertilizers

Biofertilizers containing beneficial microbes like *Azospirillum* or *Rhizobium* improve nutrient uptake and boost maize growth, particularly in degraded or low-fertility soils.

7. Institutional and Policy Support

7.1 Access to Credit and Insurance

Financial tools such as weather-indexed insurance and subsidized credit enable farmers to invest in adaptive technologies and recover from climate-related losses. Expanding access to these tools is essential for resilience.

7.2 Extension Services and Farmer Training

Robust agricultural extension services help disseminate innovations and ensure correct implementation. Training in climate-smart practices, pest scouting, and post-harvest management directly correlates with yield improvements.

7.3 Research and Development Investment

Governments and NGOs must invest in research on region-specific challenges. Participatory breeding, agroecological research, and climate impact modeling are areas with high potential for innovation.

8. CONCLUSION

Increasing maize yields under variable climates requires an integrated, multi-level approach. While genetic improvements and agronomic innovations provide the foundation, the adoption of these technologies must be supported by farmer education, access to finance, and responsive policies. The future of maize production lies in the ability of farming systems to adapt, diversify, and evolve in response to climatic uncertainties. Promoting inclusive, data-driven, and sustainable agriculture is key to ensuring that maize remains a reliable staple for millions worldwide.

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