Women farmers will be fully involved in the storage of cowpea in Nigeria, says the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture’s (IITA) representative in Kano, Dr. Tahirou Abdoulaye.

According to the agricultural economist, “the new technology will focus on women farmers, and a special demonstration will be conducted in villages just for the benefit of the women farmers, who take the lead in the most crucial phases of processing and preparing cowpeas, as well as storage.” He, however, revealed that it is expected that about 40 women technicians, who were trained by the Institute recently, will continue to work with women farmers across the 12 Northern states of Nigeria to increase female farmers’ access to the technology.

It is well known that poor storage of cowpeas in Northern Nigeria’s Kano, led to several losses of lives in the state during the past months, while many other victims of the product’s consumption were hospitalised. The situation was also confirmed by the representative. “We have a lot of cases of food poisoning due to chemical storage, leading to what is commonly called ‘killer beans’. Because many farmers don’t have functional storage facilities and do not receive the full value of their cowpea harvest,” said Dr. Tahirou Abdoulaye. It’s difficult to protect cowpeas from beetles and other pests and farmers typically sell their harvest as early as possible to offload the risk; but this means they get a low price as they sell at harvest time, when the market is flooded.

Cowpeas are important staple food in Northern Nigeria where the black eyed beans are cooked with rice and made into cakes known in Hausa language as kosai or they are made into a pudding called alala. Dr. Abdoulaye told our correspondent that the new technology called Purdue Improved Cowpeas Storage (PICS) is a non-chemical storage technology which has proved to be very effective and safe. It is a straightforward idea where the bags are sealed up in a hermetically-sealed plastic bag that does not allow air in, limiting the survival of insects that damage cowpeas. He said that, based on the pilot demonstrations held by the institute, the method, which involved the use of three layered bagging, proved very effective and the project aimed at storing almost all produced cowpea using the new technology by 2011.

This simply eliminates the need to use any chemicals for storage, says Abdoulaye. Each PICS bag, which will be available from licensed vendors, consists of two high-density polyethylene plastic bags, and an outer sack of nylon that protects them. Abdoulaye explains that any insects sealed in with the beans will quickly use up all the air in the sealed bag and then it can be stored safely for eight to 12 months without being damaged by insects. Cowpea producers in Kano Idris Musa admitted that they
were using chemical methods like using pesticides and insecticides to preserve their cowpea, the majority of which, he said, end up being destroyed by beetles every year. Hajiya Amina Usman, a commercial cowpea producer also revealed to our correspondent that “insecticides were the only storage technology they have and some farmers misuse them, thus making the cowpea deadly and harmful.” To avoid getting a fake product, the institute only gave one accredited vendor the technology for production and sale, advising that farmers must obtain from the vendors to be sure of getting authentic and effective bags. It is recalled that the IITA has made significant efforts in improving the production of cowpea in sub-Saharan Africa. They developed varieties thus increasing resistance to diseases and pests. Farmers loose a huge amount of the grain annually to beetles and other insects due to the lack of quality storage facilities.