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#### **South Africa Civil Society organisations object to GM wheat imports**

In a letter to the Registrar of Genetically Modified Organisms, the South African Council of Churches and 38 other civil society organisations have opposed the granting of a commodity clearance permit that would allow the US chemical firm Monsanto to import genetically modified (GM) wheat into South Africa.

Noting the lack of conclusive studies of the impact of GM crops on human and environmental health, the letter said: "We do not believe South Africa should be the first country to take the risk to allow GM wheat (seeds or seeds for milling) if the social, environmental and economic impact is of such concern to the rest of the world." It raised concerns that South Africa could be used as a dumping ground

for GM crops and a gateway for their distribution to other parts of the continent.

Pending more thorough study and debate, the organisations called on the South African government to declare a moratorium on the import and growing of GM wheat. "The government should, at the very least, follow the precautionary principle decided upon at the WSSD and not fast track a technology that is still inadequately tested," they warned. The letter also urges government to launch a transparent review of the Genetically Modified Organisms Act of 1997 to ensure that it is consistent with strict bio safety standards.

The letter was signed by amongst others the South African Council of Churches the Congress of South African Trade Unions and the Landless People's Movement.

## **Africa - the new frontier for the Genetic Engineering industry**

Mariam Mayet

The Genetic Engineering (GE) industry is facing a shrinking global market as more and more countries adopt biosafety laws and GE labelling regulations. Moreover, as a result of widespread and mounting consumer rejection and the difficulties experienced by Monsanto in obtaining regulatory approval of its GE wheat, it has decided to pull out of the European cereal market.

Africa and Asia are the new frontiers for exploitation by the agro-chemical, seed and GE corporations. The potential for US agri-business to profit from hunger in Africa through, ostensibly the provision of food aid, technical assistance, capital investment, agricultural research and the funding of bio safety initiatives are enormous. The United States' Agency for International Development (USAID) appears to be at the forefront of a US marketing campaign to introduce GE food into the developing world. It has made it clear that it sees its role as having to "integrate biotechnology into local food systems and spread the technology through regions in Africa."

Through USAID, in collaboration with the GE industry and several groups involved in GE research in the developed world, the US government is funding various initiatives aimed at bio safety regulation and decision-making in Africa, which if successful, may put in place weak bio safety regulation and oversight procedures. USAID is also heavily involved in funding various GE research projects in a bid to take control of African agricultural research.

### **Biosafety under threat**

The Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety finally came into force, after years of negotiation, on 11 September 2003. This international binding environmental agreement is specifically designed to protect human health, the environment and biodiversity from the risks posed by GMOs. It was countries from the South,

and the African group in particular, that consistently championed bio safety and reaffirmed the right of importing countries to ban or severely restrict imports of GMOs in the face of scientific uncertainty, based on the precautionary principle. By January 2004, 65 countries had ratified the Protocol. Only 18 countries in Africa have so far ratified the Protocol but many more could be persuaded to do so, in order for them to qualify for one or other of the numerous bio safety capacity building initiatives taking place on the continent.

However, the hard earned victories won under the Bio safety Protocol may be under serious threat from these GE 'bio safety' initiatives. There is an ever present danger that African countries will be overwhelmed by the volley of technical experts they are peppered with by USAID and GE industry money and expertise, that they will succumb, despite their valid concerns, to these formidable forces. The fad is the drafting of national bio safety frameworks. With their failure to prevent the Bio safety Protocol from coming into existence, the opportunity to exploit the implementation of the Bio safety Protocol to promote weak and ineffective bio safety legal regimes and redirect capacity building towards GE rather than bio safety, has been seized in an attempt to garner much needed support for this dangerous technology.

### **Examples of USAID's Biosafety Initiatives in Africa**

USAID through the Association to Strengthen Agricultural Research in East and Central Africa (ASARECA) facilitates collaborative research between their 10 member countries, US public and private sectors and international agricultural research centres. It has developed a model for regional technical reviews within these member countries in close collaboration with national bio safety focal points.[6] The concern is that this initiative may well be used as a launching pad to foster regional acceptance of GE through weak bio safety regulations, and thereby promote the technology transfer and private sector investment in GE in Africa.

USAID's Agricultural Biotechnology Support Project (ABSP) has established a partnership with seven Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries - Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe - to similarly provide technical training in bio safety regulatory implementation. Its ostensible goal is to promote conformity with the science-based standards of the World Trade Organisation's Sanitary and Phytosanitary agreement and the Bio safety Protocol. Needless to say, taking into account the US's WTO challenge of the European Union's de facto moratorium on GMOs, it is anticipated that every attempt will be made to ensure that biosafety regulations are consistent with the US interpretation of the WTO rules, rather than the Bio safety Protocol.

USAID has awarded the Program for Bio safety Systems (PBS), a consortium, \$14.8 million to assist developing countries to enhance Bio safety policy, research, and capacity. Included in this list of developing countries are a number of countries in East and West Africa. The International Service for National Agricultural Research (ISNAR) heads the consortium. The consortium is reported as having amongst its goals, the rendering of assistance "to governments in making science-based decisions about the effects on biodiversity of introducing GMOs into the environment" and assisting such countries in regulating and conducting experimental field trials. If this is the case, then these goals are preposterous as they are unashamedly aimed at usurping decision-making powers of countries and their sovereign rights to perform regulatory functions. It is extremely ironic that the US, still not a Party to the Convention on Biological Diversity and cannot therefore ratify the Bio safety Protocol (and will not do so in the foreseeable future) should want to promote bio safety in Africa and the implementation of the Biosafety Protocol.

It appears that the US and the GE industry are pursuing a well-orchestrated strategy in Africa to lower resistance to GE and

gain acceptance of this extremely controversial technology. These initiatives may be given considerable impetus by the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) plan to establish a high level advisory panel aimed at "facilitating trade in GM products between African countries by harmonizing bio safety regulations". However, this panel has not yet been established and its terms of reference made public. The direction that such panel would therefore take will reveal itself in the future.

It is worthwhile also to mention that the United Nation's Environmental Programme (UNEP) with funding from the Global Environmental Facility (GEF) is conducting a worldwide capacity building project involving more than 100 developing countries, several from Africa. The main objective of this project is "the preparation of National Bio safety Frameworks in accordance with the relevant provisions of the Bio safety Protocol." Its overall efficacy in capacitating African countries to establish sound bio safety frameworks remains to be seen. Crucially, the nature of its linkages with the USAID/GE industry bio safety projects if any will also become apparent with the passage of time.

Finally, what remains to be seen, is the extent to which South Africa's bio safety law will be used as a basis to harmonise bio safety laws on the continent. Zimbabwe, the only other country aside from South who that has bio safety laws in Africa has already followed South Africa's example. South Africa's Genetically Modified Organisms Act is a poor example of bio safety regulation. It is in effect, merely a permitting system designed to expedite GM imports into the country and releases into the environment. It specifically mandates that bio safety risk assessment involve no more than a paper audit, which entails a review of the 'safety' information generated by the corporations during product development.

#### **Africa's redeeming assets**

While on the surface, this picture appears bleak; there is a groundswell of NGOs,

consumers, farmers, government officials, parliamentarians and scientists opposing GE in Africa. Benin for example, has imposed a moratorium on the imports and cultivation of GMOs.

Last year, several countries in Southern Africa resisted and seriously questioned the donation by the US through USAID, of GE food aid. Zambia refused to accept the food aid and effectively took a decision to ban the distribution of food aid within its borders. Malawi, Mozambique and Zimbabwe requested that all US imported GE maize be milled prior to distribution in order to prevent its inadvertent use as seed. Lesotho and Swaziland authorised the distribution of non-milled GE aid but not before it warned the public that the grain should be used strictly for consumption and not cultivation. This saga played an important role in heightening the debate within Africa on the health, social, economic and environmental impacts of GE crops. An offshoot of this is the publication by the SADC Advisory Committee on Biotechnology and Bio safety of their recommendations regarding GE food aid. These are significant because a key recommendation is that donors of GE food aid should comply with Prior Informed Consent principles and the notification requirements of the Biosafety Protocol. This is extremely important, given that the World Food Programme has admitted that it has, since 1996 been delivering food aid that included GE food products, without warning the recipient countries. It also calls for the African region to develop harmonised policy and regulatory systems based on the OAU African Model Law on Safety in Biotechnology (Model Law), and the Biosafety Protocol.

The Model Law is a set of holistic and stringent bio safety rules drafted by a number of African bio safety experts crafted specifically to protect Africa's biodiversity, environment and the health of its people from the risks posed by GMOs. The African Union Summit held in Maputo during July 2003 pointedly encouraged African countries to use the Model Law as a basis for biosafety

regulation. The adoption of the Model Law in Africa will give countries leverage to resist attempts by the powerful GE industry to use Africa as experimental and dumping grounds for their products. Africa's biodiversity and the health of its people, can only be protected from the risks posed by GMOs if Africa as a whole, subscribes to common and uniform bio safety standards, based on the precautionary principle.

These gems are important contributions towards maximizing Africa's chances to limit the risks posed by GE. It is clear, however, that much needs to be done. One of the key challenges for African civil society in particular, is to embark on strategies and initiatives directed at influencing and shaping policy, legislative and procedural frameworks on the continent and engage national and regional bodies such as SADC and NEPAD.

*\* Mariam Mayet is an environmental lawyer and heads the African Centre for Biosafety.*

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### **Resisting GMOs in Africa**

Raymond K. Bokor

Uptake of biotechnology in Africa is growing at an increasing rate as multinational corporations continue to flood it with genetic engineering technology. This uptake cannot go without negative impact on biodiversity, the environment, producers as well as consumers. Most significant impact is on the numerous poor farmers. Most farmers will never be able to afford technology fees and the chemicals to grow these new GE seeds. It is even possible now to genetically engineer plants to produce sterile seeds, stopping farmers from saving their seeds for replanting the next year. About a third (1.4 billion) of humanity depends on saved seed for their survival. Genetic engineering (GE) in its present form cannot form part of the solution of the food crisis in Africa. It is part of the problem. Most farmers in Africa live an egalitarian life and are able to save, sell and exchange seeds freely so

biotechnology will dissolve these good values and prohibit farmers from such practices.

In the first place, genetic engineering in Africa is a complex one and its solution is not clear or well articulated. Unfortunately, and miserably to say, the majority of Africans neither know of GE implications to health and the environment nor do they understand what genetic engineering is and for that matter what genetically modified foods are and the threat it poses to health and environment. Some of these problems are complex due to economic and political reasons. For instance, most of the genetic information is hidden from the public and only confined to scientific environment and to the politicians. The majority across Africa become mere consumers of public goods and do not know where and what kind of food is available to them especially when it comes to receiving and distributing of food aid.

Food aid comes as a result of the myth of hunger. Hunger in Africa is unevenly distributed and this largely as a result of inequitable economic systems, which deny the poor access to food and land, not merely inadequate supplies of food.

Many corporations particularly the agribusiness giants think Africa lacks technological expertise in meeting her food needs and therefore have lured governments to adopt the genetic engineering technology as a panacea to end hunger as well as to bring economic and social relief to the masses.

In 2002 about 14.4 million people according to UN Food programme needed food aid in southern Africa due to grain shortages. The US. government through the World Food Programme donated a lot of genetically modified foods to some starving African countries particularly in the south as food aid with no option for the recipients/governments to make any choice. As a matter of fact, resistance to genetic engineering and genetically modified food aid in Africa has been gaining public support in recent times. A

statement from Bread for the World Institute April 2003 argued out "any potential benefits of crop biotechnology must be weighed against potential risks and considered within a broader African agricultural and economic development framework."

This is overview of GE resistance in some of the countries in Africa. In December 2000, Algeria banned the importation, distribution, commercialisation and the utilization/cultivation of GMO foods and raw materials. Egypt also banned the import of GE wheat as well as imports of canned tuna from Thailand in January 2000, believing them to be packed in genetically modified soybean oil.

In addition, many other countries have been trapped to accept GE food aid by pressure and the creation of artificial conditions to necessitate their acceptance. For instance there were reports that Malawi's government was forced by IMF and the World Bank to sell off their 2001 food reserves for debt repayment in 2002 so that Malawi would have no choice but to accept GE foods. About 250 000 metric tones were shipped to Malawi during the drought in 2002. Incidentally, after the government embarked on civic education to sensitise farmers about the dangers it could cause to the environment and the health risks to human consumption. Even though the government had asked them not to use relief maize for planting, farmers ignored this advice and planted the seeds. Government officials, some NGOs and civil society spreading the resistance message in the famine stricken targeted population not to accept the GM maize uprooted all the GM maize planted in Malawi. (Source All Africa Global Media, January 10 2003).

Zambia and Zimbabwe both rejected GMO grains offered by US through the WFP last August as a result of famine in some part of the regions. About 3 years ago a Monsanto representative visited Ghana and tried to lure the government for bringing what he termed "golden corn" to end hunger. This was resisted and articles were published advising the government

against that. Kenya continues to be the resource pool for testing, research and development of GE crops.

South Africa, as the gateway to southern Africa, is an attractive option for agribusiness. Its strong commercial seed market has made it easy to introduce new seed varieties, good agricultural infrastructure and in deed the privatisation of public research institutions, and a highly vocal and active scientific lobby, have led to the rapid expansion of GE in the country. Few local products have been developed in South Africa and approximately US\$16 million is spent on biotechnology research and development annually as against Nigeria's US\$4 million. This goes a long way to burden the taxpayer. Over 600 biotechnology research projects exist at present in the following sectors/areas: medical and pharmaceutical; agricultural/plant; environment; food and beverage; chemical; veterinary; and bio-safety.

Approximately 55 companies are involved in biotechnology and locally commercialised products are mostly in the plant and medical sectors. In fact, South Africa's uptake of GE has been one of the fastest in the world. In 1999, over 250 000 hectares of the country were planted with GE Crops. In 2000, this figure increased by 100 000ha, a 50% increase in one year. At least 175 field trials are underway, and 5 commercial releases have been approved. The geographical extent of plantings is wide; involving 8 of South Africa's 9 provinces. Already, 28% of cotton and 6% of maize planted in South Africa is genetically engineered. Permits have been granted for field trials and experiments with cotton, maize, soybeans, apple, canola, wheat, potatoes, sugar cane, eucalyptus trees, grapes, and a host of micro-organisms. However concern has been raised that the public was paying a high price for what was essentially an experiment that primarily benefited the developers of the technology. For instance, given that the Department of Agriculture has admitted its inability to properly monitor or inspect the growing of

these crops, the maximum price for licensing of GE crops of only US\$1200 was clearly inadequate. This is insufficient to finance clerical oversight of applications, let alone field inspections, public participation, technical testing and other costs.

During the 2001/2 seasons, GE white maize for human consumption was planted, the first GE food staple in the world, which holds profound implications for Africa's poor.

In 1997 the South African Government promulgated the GMO Act that was intended to regulate the genetic engineering of agricultural products. In essence the legislation did little to address concerns at the likely negative implications of GE. In 1998 a network of concerned organizations and individuals convened to explore ways to address the threats raised by the states acceptance of GE.

A resource person from the UK "Five year freeze" was brought there to explore the possibility of a similar campaign in South Africa. The purpose was two-fold, to bring together the groups and individuals who wanted to challenge the unregulated introduction of GE into food crops in South Africa and secondly to establish a framework for a GE freeze campaign. The culmination of this visit was the establishment of a steering committee whose first task was to launch the campaign nationally. Seed funding was secured and a coordinator was appointed whose task was to launch the campaign nationally. In July 2000 SAFeAGE, the South African Freeze Alliance was formally launched. The launch took place in Cape Town where the Coordinator was based. Launches also took place in other major centers, including Johannesburg and Durban. By August 2000, the campaign had set up the necessary infrastructure to support its activities:

To date about quarter of a million members and 120 organizations have pledged their support in South Africa. Over 100 international groups have signed onto this campaign in support,

representing an additional half a million individuals. Mass pressure from SAFeAGE's work and liaison led the government to hold a GMO conference in Stellenbosch near Cape Town on the 15th and 16th of April 2003. A promise was made that the government would soon ratify the Cartagena Biosafety Protocol (BSP) and thus bring the legislation into line with the BSP framework-- the international framework agreement to regulate GE products globally. There was also a promise of greater transparency and public participation, that had until then been completely lacking.

There is strong grassroots opposition to GMOs in the region and industry is working hard to break this down and has already gotten the attention of both South African and other governments.

#### **Closing thought**

There are many reasons for the current and projected food crisis. Among the most important are lack of income to buy food, lack of infrastructure like roads to get products to market, trade policies that disadvantage farmers in the developing world, lack of inputs, lack of information, and unsustainable farming practices. More productive crops will do little to alleviate hunger if deficiencies in those areas are not addressed as well. Resistance to GE in Africa must be viewed fertile and must be widely supported. It is fertile and vital because, unlike Europe, where sub-zero temperatures could destroy GM organisms, which escaped into the natural environment, Africa has a tropical or sub-tropical climate that would enable these organisms to survive. And unlike rich nations, Africa could not afford to start from scratch if GM turned out to be a mistake. It is true that the world has enough food but it is also not acceptable that people lose or ignore the capacity to produce food just because others have it.

Shipment of GMO foods and the development of genetic biotechnology in Africa are not in the best interest of a sovereign respect for humanity. If biotech corporations and international agencies want to feed the hungry, they must

encourage sustainable land reform, which puts farmers back on the land, and push for wealth redistribution, which allows the poor to buy food of their choice. Finally leadership on the continent must be worked at and leaders must focus on sustainable food sovereignty. Further, a need to build and strengthen anti-GMO movements, regional and global network for information sharing to break up the power of multinational firms and research centres in Africa is necessary. It is imperative that an immediate freeze on genetic engineering in food and farming is declared throughout Africa until we have assessed and understood all the implications for consumers, farmers and the environment. Biotechnology may soon serve as potential tool for biological weapons of mass destruction especially in the sub-regional conflict if not halt now. We need your support in stimulating and promoting weapons of mass instruction on the African continent.

*\*Raymond K. Bokor is an Agro-Ecological Technician working with the Agricultural Reform Movement in Ghana. This paper was presented at a biodivestation conference, St. Louis, Missouri.*

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#### **Editorial: Embracing GM crops is to attach our livelihoods to markets**

Percy Makombe

In January 2004, Monsanto, a multinational agribusiness company quit Zimbabwe because of what it called "poor economic conditions". On 19 January 2004, Monsanto SA (Pty) Ltd revealed that it had applied for a food and feed safety clearance in South Africa for its genetically modified (GM) Roundup Ready wheat. Such a clearance would mean that future importers of the GM wheat would not need to obtain import permits, more seriously it would mean that importers do not have to comply with bio-safety rules. On 9 March 2004, UK's Environment Secretary, Margaret Beckett announced that UK ministers had agreed in principle to the growing of a single variety of GM maize in England. This agreement comes after five years of intensive national debate in which more

than 50% of the Britons who participated said NO to the introduction of GM crops.

There is no doubt that the push for genetically modified food is coming from big business. While previously the cry was that GM products would widen consumer choice, now the lie is being peddled that GM crops and seed are good because they will help developing countries deal with hunger. Multi-national agribusiness companies have been at pains to display their credentials of feeding a hungry world. If the aim of big agribusiness companies like Monsanto is to feed the hungry, why would it withdraw from a country like Zimbabwe where over 40% of the population need food aid?

The point must be made that far from dealing with hunger, GM crops could worsen it. Through patenting seeds, multinational agribusiness companies will establish a monopoly on food production. Because of advancement in technology, these companies can manufacture seeds that will not grow without patented chemicals. Seeds can also be created in such a way that they cannot reproduce. This would do much harm to farmers, indigenous people and local communities, in terms of their rights and interests, including the right to use, save and exchange seeds and other biological resources.

Much of what has been touted as development has failed to bring happiness and social justice to the majority of peoples of the world. In many countries particularly in the developing countries people are deprived of natural resources that constitute the bedrock of their lives. Agriculture is an extremely important sector in Africa, as it provides food and livelihood for its people and is the backbone of African economies. There seems to be no overwhelming benefit of GM crops other than profit for transnationals.

In South Africa, social movements are strongly opposing the granting of a commodity clearance permit that would allow the US firm Monsanto to import

genetically modified wheat into their country. This is a legitimate concern because South Africa risks becoming a dumping ground for GM crops. Mariam Mayet's article in this *Bulletin* points out that the genetic engineering industry: "is facing a shrinking global market as more and more countries adopt bio safety laws and GE labelling regulations. Moreover, as a result of widespread and mounting consumer rejection and difficulties experienced by Monsanto in obtaining regulatory approval of its GE wheat, it has decided to pull out of the European cereal market." Africa should therefore be on guard not to fall for the marketing charm of companies like Monsanto who will go all out to open new markets in the continent.

No doubt Africa will be told that allowing companies like Monsanto to establish businesses in the continent will encourage foreign direct investment. This is exactly the kind of foreign direct investment that Africa should not accept because it will harm the continent's bio-diversity and communal ownership agreed under the Convention on Bio-Diversity.

There is need to be ever sensitive to the issue of appearance versus reality. Those who have ever watched a magician's show will know how the success of the show is determined by the extent to which the magician has mastered the art of deception through distracting attention. The magician misdirects with one hand while the other hand does the tricks. Those who support GM crops have become magicians. They say GM crops will reduce world poverty and hunger. When this argument is questioned they change tune and say we shouldn't worry about GM crops because most of them are being grown to feed livestock rather than people. As if to appease us we are further told that GM crops will be grown and managed under conditions that will not harm people and the environment.

In the interests of justice and morality we must ignore the magician's tricks and demand to have a look at his other hand -- the hand that is always under the table. It

is the hand under the table that is pushing small farmers out of business. It is the hand under the table that is seeking to establish food monopolies. It is the hand under the table that is threatening traditional food industries. We should not allow a situation that reduces peoples livelihoods to a magic show.

Embracing GM crops unquestioningly is to attach our livelihoods to the markets. It is to disregard recognition of and provision for, the rights of farmers, indigenous people and local communities, in relation to their knowledge and biological resources.

*\*Percy Makombe is the Assistant Editor of the Bulletin.*

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