PLAYING WITH HUNGER

THE REALITY BEHIND THE SHIPMENT OF GMOs AS FOOD AID

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Friends of the Earth International

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Friends of the Earth International is a federation of autonomous environmental organizations from all over the world. Our members, in 68 countries, campaign on the most urgent environmental and social issues of our day, while simultaneously catalyzing a shift toward sustainable societies.

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"It is very interesting to note that for the first time Zambia was being forced to accept a gift. Doesn't this worry us as recipients that the giver is insisting that we take the GM foods. Are the Americans just concerned about our stomachs or there is something behind the gift"

Zambia Daily Mail. November 5, 2002

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A controversy over genetically modified (GM) food aid arose in 2000 and grew increasingly in 2002, when several Southern African countries refused GM food aid during a food crisis. African countries were presented with a false choice of either accepting Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) or watching people starve. This situation, where GM food aid was presented often as the only solution to hunger was advanced primarily by the US which is also aggressively marketing Genetically Modified (GM) crops in developing countries.

GM crops and Hunger

Today it is widely recognized that GM crops are not the solution to hunger, and are not at all on the priority list of African and other developing countries. Despite that, in 2003, President Bush and his Administration launched one of the biggest campaigns ever to convince developing countries that GM crops are a key to solving hunger in Africa.

Nations such as Zambia are asking the world to provide non-GM food aid from local sources and to provide assistance in achieving sustainable and diverse agriculture to avoid famine in the future. The fact that the US gives priority to the promotion of GM crops in third world countries, rather than promoting solutions desired by recipient nations, is a major consequence of the economic interest of the multibillion dollar biotech industry in the US.

"Is it better to die than to eat GM food?"

This question, often raised in the Southern Africa food crisis, presented a scenario where there is nothing but GM food available. This scenario has been proven incorrect, as other options were possible - large quantities of non-GM food were available to be used as food aid and, indeed, were provided by Japan, members of the European Union and other donor nations.

A real right to choose?

The World Food Programme (WFP) already operates on the principle that all governments have the right to choose to accept or reject GM food aid, and if accepted, to set terms for such food import. But that principle was not observed during the Southern Africa food crisis in 2002, since alternatives were not initially provided by the WFP. The WFP and the US Agency for International Development were aware of some countries refusing GM food aid as early as 2000, but ignored that concern when they failed to offer an alter-

native and failed to inform recipient nations about the GM content in their shipments.

Another issue of serious concern arose on May 15th 2003 when the US Senate passed a bill tying assistance on AIDS to acceptance of GMOs.

The need for strict regulations on food aid

Food aid is being used, particularly by the US, as a tool for facilitating export surpluses or as a marketing tool to capture new markets. There is a need for stricter regulation of food aid in order to prevent it from being used as a marketing tool. There is also an urgent need for rules governing food aid to be directed at achieving food security: responding to local food needs, emphasizing local purchasing, not undermining an adequate long-term food supply, and providing direct grants rather than loans requiring purchase of imports.

Some principles for food aid

Pressure to accept food aid or face starvation should not happen again. US legislation to tie food aid, or financial aid for AIDS prevention to the acceptance of GM food aid is immoral and unacceptable. Instead, Friends of the Earth believes that donors (both countries and international institutions such as the WFP) should apply 5 principles when dealing with food aid:

1. Every country has the right to decide the type of food it wants to accept for its citizens, and alternatives should always be available. Third world countries should not be faced again with the dilemma of either accepting GM food aid or nothing. At the same time countries that choose not to take GM food aid should not be penalized or punished. This principle should be adequately implemented and the alternatives should be real.

2. Food aid in cash should be increased, and local and regional purchases of food prioritized.

3. Each country should be informed and prior informed consent should be granted before GM aid is introduced.

4. Food aid, which consists, contains or may contain GMOs should be identified and labelled accordingly.

5. Assistance in the form of support for development of sustainable agricultural practices should be made a priority so that all nations can avoid food crises in the first place.

INTRODUCTION

A controversy over genetically modified food aid arose in 2000 and grew increasingly in 2002, when several Southern African countries decided to refuse GM food aid during a food crisis. African countries were presented with a false choice of either accepting GMOs or watching people starve.

WFP and USAID ignored concerns

As very rightly pointed out by one famine relief organization, Save the Children, when the controversy in Southern Africa started in July 2002: "the GM issue should have been anticipated earlier by all actors".[i] Indeed it should have been anticipated and prevented. The World Food Programme (WFP) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) were certainly aware for some time previously of problems and controversies over food aid and GMOs. In several countries between 2000 and 2002, many complaints and denouncements of the use of GMOs in food aid were issued. In one of the cases, a Latinamerican government even ordered in 2001 that the WFP stop using GM ingredients in two food programmes and ordered the destruction of the GM material. In 2001, an African government did not allow US food aid in the country because the US did not respect the labelling standards set by domestic legislation.

Such cases and others described below show that WFP and USAID were very aware of the concerns of developing countries over food aid and GMOs long before the Southern Africa crisis happened. Taking into account the controversy, and the scientific uncertainty surrounding the impacts of GM crops on the human health and the environment, the WFP had an obligation to inform the recipient countries of the type of food aid, and to offer and guarantee alternatives.

US pressure to force GM food aid

Particularly, the US Government has used the crisis to make a case for GM crops in developing countries. They have not respected the concerns, nor the right to choose of the recipient countries and have put pressure on them to force the acceptance of GM food aid. [ii]

The US has even used the food crisis to attack the European Union (EU) moratorium on GMOs, by accusing the EU of being responsible for the African rejection. EU leaders' response to the US has shown the real motives of US policy behind their attacks: "Food aid to Southern Africa should be about meeting the urgent humanitarian needs of those who are starving. It should not be about trying to advance the case for GM food, or planting GM crops for export, or finding outlets for domestic surplus. This in turn is immoral." [iii]

Ecuadorian children protesting against the use of GMOs in food aid programmes in 2001

FOOD AID AND GMOs: CASE STUDIES

Since 2000, the fact that GMOs were introduced via food aid shipments in regions and countries without prior information, or where GM food was not allowed has been severely criticized by civil society groups and in some cases met with recipient government opposition.[iv]

Ecuador: ordered destruction of GM Food

In 2000, Ecuador received a large food aid donation which included 30,000 metric tonnes (MT) of bulk soya paste. The WFP sold these products, and the money obtained was used in food aid programs for low-income sectors, especially indigenous populations.[v] Civil society groups monitored food donations in 2001, and found out that the soya was genetically modified. In the two programmes monitored, one aimed at children between ages of 6 months and 2 years and the other at 90,000 lactating mothers. Nutrisoya (imported soya from the United States) was used in spite of technical stipulations stating that national products should be used.[vi] GM ingredients were forbidden also by the technical requirements of such programmes.[vii]

After the findings the Director General of the Ecuadorian Health Ministry stated in May 2001 that "we will not allow these types of products to be consumed in the country, especially if we take into account that both products are destined to children under 6 years of age, and pregnant mothers".[viii] In a letter addressed to the World Food Programme (WFP) by the Ecuadorian Minister of Social Welfare in 2001, the WFP representative was told to stop the production of the two products with GM ingredients unless the WFP is sure they don´t contain GMOs. The Ecuadorian authorities ordered the destruction of the product which contained raw GM material.[ix] They also decided not to stop the food relief programmes but asserted that aid could be replaced by quinoa, beans or non-GMO soya existing at the national level.

Bolivia: StarLink found in USAID donation

In May 2001, in Bolivia, civil society groups denounced the presence of GM ingredients in food aid sent by the US.[x]

Despite a moratorium at that time on the introduction of GM food in the country, the US violated those measures. The US ambassador Manuel Rocha said "Those who don't want our donation should not travel to our country, because this is the only food we can offer to our visitors".[xi] One year later, in May 2002 the groups discovered in US food aid sent to Bolivia, StarLink, a genetically modified variety of maize not authorized in the US for human consumption, despite the promise by Dan Glickman, Secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 2000 that the agency would make sure StarLink did not enter food aid.[xii] When this variety was found in the US food supply it was immediately recalled. Nevertheless, despite the letters written to USAID to take similar measures in Bolivia, US authorities did not do anything.

US Food Aid bag where StarLink was found in Bolivia in 2002

Colombia: GM soya withdrawn from food aid programmes

In Colombia, US food aid containing GM ingredients was found in May 2001.[xiii] The levels of GM content found in the samples tested were as high as 90%, the highest levels documented to date. After the discovery, the GM soya was withdrawn from national food aid programmes aimed at young children.[xiv]

Nicaragua: contaminated corn seed sent as food aid to a center of origin of corn

Civil society groups in Nicaragua denounced the presence of GM ingredients in food aid samples in June 2002. In a news release dated May 24, 2002, the World Food Program declared that "The WFP does not distribute food that is not acceptable for human consumption by the citizens of the producing countries (donor countries) and by the countries that receive the food assistance". However one of the seed samples donated by Germany via WFP tested positive for GMO content at 3.8%, which would not respect the labeling standards existing in Germany, and would therefore not be allowed on German grocery store shelves. The organizations that made the findings raised the concern that food aid with GM seed may be another pathway of genetically engineered crops into the birthplaces of corn, creating a form of biological pollution that cannot be recalled.[xv]

Guatemala: WFP says not to allow GMOs

Civil society groups from Guatemala also denounced the existence of GM ingredients in food aid in the form of corn seed

WFP Food aid bag donated by Germany to Nicaragua where GM contaminated maize grain was found

from the WFP in June 2002.[xvi] The GMOs were not authorized in the EU and the fact that Guatemala as well as Nicaragua, is a center of origin of corn raised the concern that corn as food aid could contaminate Guatemalan corn. The GM presence was a contradiction to previous statements by the World Food Programme in Guatemala, which said in April 2002 that "All food given by the WFP is certified by the health authorities of the Minister of Agriculture, Ranching and Food and the Minister of Public Health and Social Assistance in order not to allow the introduction of GM products".[xvii]

Uganda: Food aid not allowed for lack of labelling

In 2001, Uganda did not allow the entrance of a consignment of corn soy blend which was part of a US food for peace agreement, because it was contrary to the nation's labelling requirements. The Uganda National Bureau of Standards noted that the food aid did not indicate the list of ingredients, the name and address of manufacturers, nor instructions for use.[xviii]

India: US food aid rejected by government

The first documented complaint about the shipment of GMOs in food aid occurred in June 2000, in India, when food aid donated by the USAID and WFP containing GMOs was denounced.[xix] In December 2002, India rejected a large shipment of food aid from the United States because it contained genetically modified ingredients.[xx]

A. M. Gokhale, chairman of the Indian committee that rejected the consignment last year said that "if there is reason to believe that there may be damage to human health, we have the right to reject any import." Among the concerns raised by the competent authorities was the fact that there was no full guarantee that StarLink GM corn not authorized for human consumption in the US was not in food aid.

Several agencies like CARE-India and the Catholic Relief Services (CRS) pushed the Indian Government to allow the authorization in the beginning of 2003, but again in March the Genetic Engineering Approval Committee (GEAC) rejected it. The Committee stated that one of the important causes was the fact that importers of the food aid didn't want to certify the consignments as StarLink-free.[xxi]

> "As the concerned parties are not willing to certify that the said consignment would not contain any traces of Starlink corn or any other GM traces hazardous to human health, the committee, under circumstances, is unable to permit such imports."
>
> *Indian Genetic Engineering Approval Committee (GEAC). March 2003*

In December 2002 StarLink was again found in Japanese imports of US corn. Paradoxically the introduction of US food aid is being pushed while India has 65 million tonnes of surplus non-GM wheat or rice in their Food Cooperation stocks.[xxii]

Eastern Europe: US food aid withdrawn in Bosnia

In January 2001 Bosnian authorities asked US officials about donated corn and demanded thorough information on possible effects on both humans and animals. The US did not reply, but chosed instead to withdraw a four million dollar donation of 40,000 tonnes of genetically engineered corn for animal feed.[xxiii]

THE SOUTHERN AFRICA REFUSAL

In 2002 a food crisis affected many countries in Southern Africa, namely Angola, Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Lesotho, Mozambique and Swaziland. Zimbabwe was the first country that rejected US food aid. Others followed. After a few months some of them accepted food aid milled to at least avoid the prospect of accidental planting of GM seed from food aid. Only Zambia decided to reject GM food aid as both grain and milled.

The right to choose impaired

African countries that decided to take a precautionary approach to GM food aid and asked for non-GMO food aid were initially left with little choice. The US and even the WFP told them they should accept some GM content. The right to choose was clearly impaired. An unnamed US official even said that "beggars can´t be choosers".

But African consumers leaders who met in Zambia in November 2002 established their position on GMOs and food security and reaffirmed the right to choose as a cornerstone for consumers. "Consumers have the right to choose what they want to eat (...) such decisions must be respected".[xxiv]

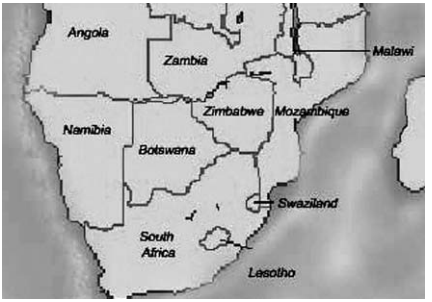
Providing real alternatives: the role of donors

The WFP already operates on the principle that all governments have the right to choose to accept or reject GM food aid, and if accepted, set terms for such food import.[xxv] At the same time the EU has already expressed a clear position on this and stated that "choices for developing countries should not be limited to "accept GM food aid or starve." [xxvi]

But the principle should be associated with a real mechanism of implementation, which guarantees that those countries effectively have a choice. That did

not happen during the Southern Africa crisis. As Norway's Minister of Development acknowledged "This principle should be real and not illusive. The current situation does not seem to provide countries with sufficient choice. In fact, if GM-food is offered in an emergency situation, and no other competitive alternatives are provided, neither in quantity nor in price, significant pressure will be the result when there is food scarcity".

Several countries though, decided to finance food aid in cash which would respect the desires of the recipient countries. Japan, the Netherlands, Norway,



and the EU Community have sent financial resources for the purchase of non-GM food for those countries which made that choice. The overall EU (EU Community and the Member States) response to the Southern Africa humanitarian crisis amounts to 326 million euro, which is equivalent to 40% of the total needs of the region. This amount was destined primarily for the hardest hit countries, i.e. Zimbabwe, Malawi and Zambia. 90% of the food aid given by the EU Commission is given for purchases at the local and regional levels so as not to disrupt local markets or local consumption habits.[xxvii]

Prior informed consent and labelling

In order to guarantee the right to choose, the WFP and other donors should have informed recipient countries about the GM content and requested prior informed consent. The Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) guidelines on GMOs recommend that "Food aid that contains or may contain GMOs has to be delivered with the prior informed consent of the recipient country",[xxviii] and that all consignments have to be clearly identified and labelled in accordance with national legislation or in accordance with Article 11 of the OAU African Model Law on Safety in Biotechnology.[xxix]

Environmental and health concerns

GMOs have been introduced too quickly without adequate knowledge about their impacts on health and the environment.

The shipment of whole corn kernels as food aid raised the concern over genetic contamination because the GM grain could be planted in countries without any biosafety regulation, and without capacity to deal with GM crops. Those concerns include negative impact on agro-ecosystems, such as development of resistance in target insect pests, harmful effects on non-target insects, development of herbicide tolerance in weeds, and genetic erosion or loss of traditional crop diversity as

a result of genetic contamination through cross-fertilization. To avoid these potential risks most of the countries decided that the GM food aid should at least be milled, so grain would not be planted.

But milling the maize did not take into account any possible potential risk derived from the consumption of GM food. According to Norway's Minister of International Development, "there might also be a probability of higher risk when one is in a food crisis situation, consuming only one GMO-product over time".[xxx] Many third world based organizations have been very critical on this aspect and considered that the "assumptions on alleged GM food safety are based on a limited range of experiments that do not take into account the specific situation of people in developing countries".[xxxi] It is their opinion that populations fed via food aid are particularly vulnerable due to malnutrition and lack of food, especially children, and any potential danger that these foods may present would increase when an immune-depressed population consumes them. According to UK Chief Scientist Professor David King forcing GM foods into Africa as food aid is "a massive human experiment".[xxxii]

"Is it better to die than to eat GM food?"

This question, often raised in the Southern Africa food crisis, presented a scenario where there was nothing but GM food available. This lack of choice was illusory and has since been proven wrong. Alternatives could have been made available and are now being made available in large quantities. Current research shows that there is enough non-GM maize and non-GM cereals in the world that could have been sent to those countries which decided not to accept GM food, from the African region, India, and Mexico. Even in the US it has been shown that there is non-GM corn that could be sent.[xxxiii]

The WFP argued, despite those facts, that the main problem would be to meet the short term food needs at the end of 2002. Particularly regarding Zambia, which was the only country to decide not to accept food aid either in grain form or milled, the WFP said that it would be impossible to mobilize non-GM food fast enough, since to organize those operations requires considerable time and resources.

But, again, the lack of choice was illusory since Zambian NGOs pledged to be able to quickly mobilize surpluses of traditional foods available in the country, like cassava, to food deficit areas, if financial resources were available.

Zambia: Using traditional foods as one of the key elements to overcome the food crisis

The drought season in Zambia affected particularly the southern part of the country leaving local maize supplies clearly insufficient. However the northern part of the country, particularly North Western Province was food secure due to the fact that cassava was the main staple

food. Cassava, one of the traditional foods in Zambia, was estimated to be in surpluses of around 300.000 MT in the northern parts of the country.

The Zambian government asked the WFP to use traditional foods in the crisis. "We have traditional foods in abundance. I do not know why there is this maize mania when some of our provinces do not even grow maize, traditionally," said Mundia Sikatana, Zambia's minister of agriculture.[xxxiv]

WFP refused to finance cassava as food aid in Zambia. Instead, the WFP brought barley from the United States, which is not a staple food in the country and is only used in Zambia for producing beer.

Particularly cassava has a long history of being used as a key crop for food security. But, cassava was not even included in the calculations of the food deficit of the country, and the WFP has not considered it as a possible alternative for the crisis. Cassava apparently has been considered by WFP as an inferior food, though it is eaten by more than 200 million people in Africa and constitutes the main staple food of 30% of the Zambia population.[xxxv] "If we can buy cassava then we have won the war on this hunger and farmers will become solvent to produce more food for the next season," said Sikatana.

A coalition of groups comprised of churches and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), working with the Zambian government formed an alliance to raise funds to buy cassava from areas of surplus and distribute it to the food-deficit areas.[xxxvi] Despite the recognition that it was a good project, the WFP has refused as of April 2002 to give support to such an initiative.

Taking into account that the WFP in Zambia channels the financial resources of donors and coordinates all food relief efforts, their refusal has prevented the project from being implemented.

Cassava leaves

Cassava tubers

Cassava in Zambia

Cassava is a major staple food in most rural households in the northern Zambia. The frequent droughts experienced in Zambia in the recent past have made cassava especially vital for the rural farming community. Cassava requires little rain and therefore makes it very good crop for drought vulnerable areas.

It is important to note that consumption of poorly processed cassava could lead or expose consumers to unnecesaary negative effects. Fortunately, there are so many methods of processing cassava that remove the toxic effects. Besides an example of the method of producing quality cassava flour, which involves the following stages: After the cassava is harvested it should be inmediately peeled (1), washed (2), grated (3), dewatered, dried, and grinded or milled (4).

Every part of cassava is useful. The roots are used for energy provision in people´s diets, the leaves used as relish contain protein, iron and vitamins as well as provision of relish. The stem is the planting material for propagation or future production.

Also it can be stored in the soil for a long time and only harvested when needed, minimising storage losses.

More than 200 million people in Africa depend on cassava. In Zambia cassava is the main source of energy in Luapula Province, North Western, Northern and parts of Western Province.

Source: Muleka Luhila, F. 2000. Household Cassava Processing in Zambia. PAM Training Guide n 1.

Instead, the WFP brought barely from the United States, which is not a staple food in the country and is only used in Zambia for producing beer. This goes clearly against the principle that food aid should be socially and culturally acceptable to recipient countries.

THE WRONG POLICIES OF FOOD AID

> "There is a value to the United States in that food aid can open up new and emerging markets down the road"
>
> *John Miller, Chairman of the North American Export Grain Association Milling & Baking News, March 11, 2003*

Another problem is related to food aid per se. Food aid in kind has been criticized for being more damaging than helpful. As the development organization OXFAM said: "Food aid programs have historically been used inappropriately with industrialized countries using them to dispose of surpluses and create food dependencies".[xxxvii] Dr. Wilma Salgado, Ecuadorian economist and former employee of the World Food Programme said that "The wrongly called "Food Aid" is in reality an aid to northern farmers in order to widen their market.[xxxviii]

Indeed, the US has used its food aid programmes not only to get rid of its agriculture surpluses but also as a tool to open new markets. A Research Service for the US Congress presented a report in 1994 recognizing that food aid has been an important tool for the spreading of commercial markets for American agricultural products exports.[xxxix]

US Agribusiness corporations such as Cargill and ADM which control most of US

US Agribusiness Corporations are the winners

"The corruption of aid delivery can be seen from the point of origin. Eighty percent of the funds for the goods and services provided through Public Law 480 (US Food Aid Programme) do not go to meet needs in developing countries; rather they are spent in the US.

On the macro-level, food aid has further benefits to the US. Eligibility for food aid assistance is often more closely attuned to the market potential of recipient country markets than their need. For example, in 2002, Peru , with its abundant natural resources, received the same amount of food aid –about $40 million worth- as Ethiopia, a country with three times the population but very little to offer the US in the way of markets. That said, without careful articulation with local market economies, food aid in quantity has also been shown to undermine local farmers and their markets because of the dumping of unregulated food aid by agribusiness."

Source: OXFAM America Briefing Note. March 2003. US Export Credits: Denials and Double Standars.

corn exports have been one of the main beneficiaries of US food aid Programmes.

Linking HIV support to the acceptance of GM food aid

An issue of serious concern arose on May 15th 2003 when the US Senate passed a bill tying assistance on AIDS to acceptance of GMOs. The United States Leadership Against HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria Act of 2003 urges African states to accept GM food aid, implying this is a condition for release of assistance funds.[xl] USAID implements programs on AIDS/HIV in more than 50 countries.[xli] In January 2003 the Bush Administration announced the Emergency Plan for AIDS relief which would provide $15 billion over five years.[xlii] This initiative targets specifically the 14 most affected countries in Africa and the Caribbean. Several countries where GM food aid has been rejected due to concerns over GM food, like India and Zambia are also recipients of US AIDS assistance.

Promoting local/regional purchases of food aid

The most adequate system of food aid is the one given in cash that purchases the food locally or regionally: "the EU's own policy is to source food aid regionally, thus ensuring that the countries in need receive the foodstuffs to which they are accustomed as well as helping local economies."[xliii] Local purchase also contributes to the development of local markets, reduces costs, and improves timing. "Whenever possible, these purchases should be made from local producers' organizations, thereby promoting their access to the market".[xliv]

The option of cassava in Zambia is an example of a good alternative for the food crisis since cassava growers in the north don't have adequate markets. Using cassava would improve the livelihoods of local producers and also benefit people in the south of the country. Despite that, Richard Ragan, the WFP representative in Zambia was quoted saying that the regulations prevented him from buying food locally: "the government has been asking us to use the funds mobilised to buy food locally but we are constrained by our regulations".[xlv]

GM CROPS AS THE SOLUTION TO HUNGER?

The US has been strongly promoting GM crops as a solution for hunger in developing countries, as they did during the World Food Summit in June 2002. At that Summit the US Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman said "Biotechnology has tremendous potential to develop products that can be more suited to areas of the world where there is persistent hunger". The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) launched a 10 year, 100 million dollar called Collaborative Agriculture Biotechnology Initiative to invest in research of GM varieties in developing countries.[xlvi]

Being really committed to solving hunger would mean supporting a comprehensive

policy to eradicate the causes of poverty and hunger. However, the US policy on agricultural subsidies clearly shows the real face of the US. The US Farm Bill adopted in May 2002 subsidizing US farmers at 15-20 billion dollars per year for crops alone works directly against the interests of the developing world where hunger problems are most acute. Those subsidies unfairly encourage the US to sell crops often below the price at which farmers in other countries can grow them. This depresses food prices for these farmers and ultimately undercuts the capacity of their nations to grow food. Far from being a free market, the US dumping of subsidized crops puts local farmers at a competitive disadvantage, forcing many out of business and contributing to the need for food aid. Subsidized US food aid then completes a viscious cycle. As the Brazilian Agriculture Minister Marcus de Moraes said: "If we could eliminate all these subsidies for just 24 days, we would eliminate hunger in the world". Thozo Didiza, agriculture minister for South Africa, said "The signal they (the United States) have indicated does not bode well for developing countries and reducing hunger in the world".[xlvii]

WTO: Bush attack on EU GMO moratorium as a cause of hunger in Africa

Beginning May 2003, the issue of Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) in food aid faced renewed controversy. In the World Trade Organisation (WTO) case filed by the US against the EU in May, the US Government blamed the EU moratorium on GMOs as the cause of African rejection of GM food aid.[xlviii] President Bush in his speech to thousands of participants in a biotech conference in Washington, D.C. on June 23rd said that "For the sake of a continent threatened by famine, I urge the European governments to end their opposition to biotechnology".[xlix]

The European Union found US Government accusations as unacceptable, and asserted that developing countries have "their own legitimate right to fix their own level of protection and to take the decision they deem appropriate to prevent unintentional dissemination of GM seeds".[l]

(African) Countries have not adopted biotechnologies not because of EU restrictions, but rather for other reasons, such as lack of suitable technologies, and lack of regulatory laws and capacity. Consequently, no sub-Saharan African nation joined the US's challenge to Europe's ban, and even Egypt withdrew from the complaint. In contrast, 20 African countries have filed petitions against the United State's own cotton subsidies.

Third World Network. 2003. Genetically modified crops and sustainable poverty alleviation in Sub-Saharan Africa: an assessment of current evidence.

The real causes of hunger

GM crops are not the right answer to the causes of hunger and poverty in southern countries and clearly are not going to

address the underlying political and economic causes of hunger.

In the Southern Africa food crisis, for example, the model of agriculture liberalisation imposed by international financial institutions has been considered one of the key causes of poverty and food insecurity. Affected countries include Mozambique, Zambia and Malawi. In 15 years, those countries have been pushed towards radical reforms of their agricultural sectors to a system purportedly based on free markets. Those reforms were part of lending conditions placed by donors like the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and supported by most donor countries. It is widely documented that the dismantlement of the state's role in agriculture in those countries has accentuated poverty and undermined food security.[li]

Technological solutions such as GM crops will not tackle the key causes of hunger. As the magazine New Scientist says "The real causes of hunger in Africa are poverty, debt, a lack of infrastructure and the Western farm subsidies that make it difficult for African growers to compete in world markets. Today´s GM crops will not ease any of these problems. They might even make them worse".[lii]

Corporate control of the food chain

GM crops are not at all a priority in the list of the key needs of Africa and other developing countries. The fact that the US gives priority to the promotion of GM crops in developing countries, rather than promoting solutions preferred by recipient countries, is a major consequence of the economic interest of the multibillion dollar biotech industry in the US.

“Genetic modification is being used to increase farmers' dependence on the companies themselves ... and reveals a consolidation of control over the food chain in the hands of a small number of companies whose primary motivation is profit and not the best interests of developing country agriculture”.

The role of corporations in the promotion of GM crops is clear. Christian Aid research into the biotechnology industry's involvement in rural economies of three developing countries concluded that "genetic modification is being used to increase farmers' dependence on the companies themselves ... and reveals a consolidation of control over the food chain in the hands of a small number of companies whose primary motivation is profit and not the best interests of developing country agriculture".[liii] Five development and food relief organizations in the UK (Action Aid, CAFOD, Christian Aid, Oxfam, and Save the Children) are concerned about the fact that "the development and marketing of GM technology is concentrating power over food production in a very few companies. With little effective capacity at the national level and no mechanism at the international level to regulate corporations, the trend

in market concentration raises serious questions about the influence large transnational corporations may wield over every aspect of the food supply .... There is a danger that the hasty application of GM technology and the spread of patented GM crops may further accelerate this trend".[liv]

Monsanto is at the forefront of the promotion of GM crops worldwide. Seeds with Monsanto traits accounted in 2001 for more than 90% of the hectares planted worldwide with biotech crops. One of the key strategies of Monsanto is to open new markets. The company is very actively pushing many GM crops in developing countries like Brazil, India and the Philipines.[lv]

GM crops today not suitable for Africa

A recent assessment done in 2003 of GM Crops in Africa gives more evidence about their inability to alleviate poverty. It examined three GM crops in Africa at present – GM cotton, sweet potatoes and maize - and concluded that in general their nature is inappropriate for poverty alleviation in sub-Saharan Africa. The report shows also that genetic modification is a relatively ineffective and expensive tool, and the evidence assembled in the report supported the view that "there are better ways to feed Africa than GM crops".[lvi]

Moreover, Mr. Bush's State Department notes on its development agency website that genetically engineered corn sent to Africa as food aid "would be expected to perform poorly in African growing conditions" and is "not well suited for planting".[lvii] This is a concern, since it is a common practice of food aid recipients in rural areas to save a part of the grain for planting. Farmers in famine stricken areas who plant U.S. biotech corn can expect lower yields and less food in the future.

Towards sustainable agriculture and food security?

GM crops are driving agriculture into further industrialization focusing on producing cash crops to be sold on world markets rather than meeting the needs of local communities and promoting agricultural biodiversity which plays a key role in food security and food sovereignty.

According to a letter by the UK famine relief groups, the trends towards GM move away "from support for sustainable agriculture approaches that meet the needs of the poor and hungry in developing countries".[lviii] The model of GM crops in agriculture fosters increasing dependence on pesticides and use of monocultures, threatening the environment and endangering food security. Diversity is key for sustainable agriculture and food security. The Southern Africa crisis in Zambia shows, for example, that local communities which didn't cultivate one single crop like maize, but multi-cropped with traditional staple foods like cassava, were still food secure in the face of drought and a maize failure.[lix]

The large scale introduction and further homogenization with transgenic crops will exacerbate the ecological vulnerability already associated with monoculture agriculture. At present there are alternatives that are cheaper, more accessible, more productive in marginal environments and culturally and socially more acceptable.[lx]

THE WAY FORWARD

Applying the precautionary principle

GMOs are being introduced too quickly and without adequate knowledge about their environmental, health and socioeconomic impacts. Friends of the Earth International, on the basis of the precautionary principle, supports the right of any country to impose a moratorium or ban on the introduction of GMOs into the environment and the food chain, until inocuity of GMOs has been proven through comprehensive and independently conducted assessments.

Promoting Sustainable Alternatives

The promotion of GM crops as the solution to hunger is undermining President Bush's own stated goal of feeding the world. GM crops today are inappropriate for African conditions and inadequate to alleviate poverty. There are better ways to cope with hunger, and those should be prioritized.

The need for strict regulations on food aid

Food aid is being used, particularly by the US, as a tool for facilitating export of surpluses or as a marketing tool to generate more sales. There is a need for stricter regulation of food aid in order to prevent it from being used as a marketing tool. There is an urgent need for rules governing food aid aimed at achieving food security like responding to local food needs, emphasizing local purchasing, not undermining an adequate long-term food supply, and providing direct grants rather than loans requiring purchase of imports.

Some principles for food aid

Pressure to accept food aid or face starvation should not happen again. US legislation to tie food aid, or financial aid for AIDS prevention to the acceptance of GM food aid is immoral and unacceptable.

Friends of the Earth believes the following principles should be applied by donors when dealing with food aid and GMOs:

1. Every country has the right to decide the type of food it wants to accept for its citizens, and alternatives to GM food aid should always be available. Third World countries should not be faced again with the dilemma of taking GM food aid or nothing. At the same time countries that choose not to take GM food aid should not be penalized or punished. This principle should be adequately implemented

and the alternatives should be real.

2. Each country should be informed and prior informed consent should be granted before GM aid is introduced.

3. Food aid which consists, contains or may contain GMOs should be identified and labelled accordingly.

4. Food aid in cash should be increased, and local and regional purchases of food prioritized. This would allow a better implementation of the principle that food aid should be cultural and socially adequate to the recipient countries.

5. Assistance in the form of support for development of sustainable agricultural practices should be made a priority so that all nations can avoid food crises in the first place.

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Any genetically modified organism or product of a genetically modified organism shall be clearly identified and labelled as such, and the identification shall specify the relevant traits and characteristics given in sufficient detail for purposes of traceability.
Any genetically modified organism or any product of a genetically modified organism shall be clearly labelled and packaged, and shall comply with such further requirements as may be necessary to indicate that it is, or has been derived from, a genetically modified organism, and, where applicable, whether it may cause allergies or pose other risks."

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"(g) SENSE OF CONGRESS RELATING TO FOOD ASSISTANCE FOR INDIVIDUALS LIVING

WITH HIV/AIDS-
(1) FINDINGS- Congress finds the following:
(C) Although the United States is willing to provide food assistance to these countries in need, a few of the countries
object to part or all of the assistance because of fears of benign genetic modifications to the foods.
(2) SENSE OF CONGRESS- It is therefore the sense of Congress that United States food assistance should be accepted by countries with large populations of individuals infected or living with HIV/AIDS, particularly African countries, in order to help feed such individuals." (Note that the "sense of Congress" is not mandatory)
To view full text of the bill Go to Congressional record:
http://thomas.loc.gov/r108/r108.html, Click on Daily Digest, May 15, and afterwards click on Senate passed H.R.1298, United States Leadership Against HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria Act. Then click on the last version, Section 104a

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"It is very interesting to note that for the first time Zambia was being forced to accept a gift. Doesn't this worry us as recipients that the giver is insisting that we take the GM foods. Are the Americans just concerned about our stomachs or there is something behind the gift"

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