

Agricultural Technologies and Innovations : Meeting Local Needs in a Globalized World?

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Biotechnology and the Third World: A Question of Social Morality

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Thank you for your invitation to join the annual conference of CropLife. When I received your invitation letter, I was struck by the line, “The use of agricultural technology has become more than a technical issue of profit, efficiency, and environment. It is an issue of social morality, and for many, survival.” In this panel on environment, access, trade and business implications of agricultural technology, my presentation will focus on social morality and survival issues with reference to genetic engineering in agriculture for the Third World.

Speaking at a graduation ceremony at the US Coast Guard academy, Mr. Bush asserted that Europe’s refusal to allow GE foods into their markets had discouraged Third World countries from using this technology and thus undermined efforts to end hunger in Africa. A week before, his administration had filed a suit at the World Trade Organization (WTO) to force Europe to lift its moratorium on GM foods.

In a press release, CropLife America commended the US decision and Isi Siddiqui, Vice President of CropLife America was quoted as saying, “the EU’s illegal moratorium had a negative ripple effect of creeping regulations which have resulted in denying food to starving people.”

Social morality requires that instead of corporate PR campaigns based on ‘poor washing,’ conferring legitimacy and preventing debate over a policy by spurious suggestion that the poor will benefit from it, we should acknowledge that we live with the paradox of hunger amidst plenty. According to our

research at Food First (www.foodfirst.org), abundance, not scarcity, best describes the world's food supply. Enough wheat, rice and other grains are produced to provide every human being with 3,500 calories a day. That doesn't even count many other commonly eaten foods-vegetables, beans, nuts, root crops, fruits, grass-fed meats, and fish. Enough food is available to provide at least 4.3 pounds of food per person a day worldwide: two and half pounds of grain, beans and nuts, about a pound of fruits and vegetables, and nearly another pound of meat, milk and eggs-enough to make most people fat! It is not the shortage of food production, but poverty that keeps people hungry.

My country, India, home to over 350 million hungry people, is the third largest producer of food in the world. In 2000, while starvation deaths were reported from across the country, the granaries of the Food Corporation of India (FCI) were overflowing with 80 million tons of excess food grains, and the government of India was unable to find enough export markets. They even contemplated dumping rat infested grain into the sea. This year, India has over 40 millions tons of excess food grains, yet millions starve.

Hunger in the Third World is a complex phenomenon and not likely to be reversed by genetically engineered (GE) crops. Almost 78% of countries that report child malnutrition are food exporting countries. Over a third of the grain grown in the developing world is destined for livestock which in turn is eaten by consumers in wealthy countries. Hunger has nothing do to do with some deficit of food production, but a shortage of people's purchasing power! Given this state of affairs, social morality demands the industry give a better rationale for their promotion of GE crops in the Third World than hunger.

Egypt, an original partner in the U.S. suit against Europe, showed social morality, when it announced that it would not join the WTO challenge. The government declared that it "recognized the need to protect and preserve adequate and effective consumer and environmental protection." While Mr. Bush and private industry claim that European regulations discourage Third World nations, let them be reminded that Africans, Asians and Latin Americans, can actually think for themselves.

In March 2003, the Washington Post reported that Monsanto, Dupont, Syngenta, and Dow agreed to share their technology free of charge with African scientists, in an attempt to increase food production

in a continent, where mass starvation is a recurring threat. Social morality requires that we ask why no support was given to local African efforts to diversify food production. When Zambia refused GE corn food aid from the United States, it failed to get requested support to promote and distribute cassava, a traditional food. “Better dead than GM fed?” was the derisive response of the *Economist* magazine. Tony Hall, the U.S. ambassador to UN food agencies went a step further, equating Zambia’s rejection to a crime against humanity. He claimed, “All of it has passed U.S. food safety and environmental impact testing –the most rigorous in the world. For this reason we do not need to separate genetically modified (GM) and non GM foods.” It seemed ludicrous to Hall, a representative of the bastion of democracy and social morality that a debate should even be allowed in African nations over the health and environmental risks posed by GE crops.

Tony Hall’s arrogance requires a degree of official amnesia. For example, he forgot that only 1% of the USDA’s (United States Department of Agriculture) biotech research budget is allocated for risk assessment of GE fish, GE seeds, GE trees, GE crops – less than a million dollars. The industry recognizes the need for risk assessment, but it is not willing to foot the bill. Mr. Hall forgot that the StarLink corn controversy in September 2000 that led to a nationwide recall of more than 300 kinds of corn-based foods. In December 2002, traces of StarLink were found in a U.S. shipment bound for Tokyo’s markets, much to the surprise of the USDA since they believed that StarLink corn had been destroyed in 2001. And he forgot that while we are told that GE crops are safe for consumers, traces of corn , genetically engineered to protect piglets from diarrhea, were found in the autumn soy harvest of November 2002, mixed with beans that would be processed into dozens of groceries, from ice cream to salad dressing. And who will tell the people that according to a study conducted by North Carolina State University in collaboration with researchers from 12 American universities, 92% of Americans support labeling of GE foods while only 1% oppose it.

The biotech industry’s carefully planned response, with its handful of Third World spokespeople, while muting the voices of opposition from the global South, wishes away the public debate. One such debate was organized by the Zambian President, in consultation with parliament. Through this Zambia reached its decision not to accept GM food. It hides the fact that real aid was not offered to Zambis, instead, U.S. \$51 million was given as a loan to Zambia for the private sector to import GE corn from the U.S. When it was imported, Zambia was not informed that it was contaminated, nor did

the U.S. seek its prior consent to ship GE corn. While the U.S. accused Zambia of starving its people, offers of GE free corn came in from India, China, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda. Japan actually provided GE free corn food aid.

Social morality would require an acknowledgement that not just Africa, but the Third World has largely united against U.S.-pushed GM crops, opting instead for self-sufficiency. Internal debate within Third World nations pits mostly U.S. trained technocrats, seduced by technological fixes, against farmers and consumers who are overwhelmingly saying no to GE crops. In 1998 all African delegates (except South Africa) to the FAO negotiations on the International Undertaking for Plant Genetic Resources released a statement, "Let the Nature's Harvest Continue," in response to a publicity campaign in European newspapers, trying to convince the readers that the world needs GE foods to feed the hungry. Organized and financed by Monsanto, that campaign was titled, "Let the Harvest Begin." In their statement, the African delegates objected "to the use of the image of the poor and hungry by corporations, to push a technology that is neither safe, environmentally friendly, nor economically beneficial to us."

The farmers' movement in India has found a new use for an old slogan of the Indian liberation struggle. They reissued the "Quit India" ultimatum, this time to corporations like Monsanto, and under their "Cremate Monsanto" they have burned field trials of GE crops, which were planted against their wishes.

BT cotton has failed in India, despite the claims to the contrary in a speculative research paper published in *Science*, based on data provided by the seed company Mahyco, Indian subsidiary of Monsanto. The agriculture ministers of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka have announced the failure in the media. The Indian daily *Financial Express* reported on April 13, 2003, "As per the state government survey, cotton yield was lower in the areas where BT cotton seeds were sowed, compared to conventional cotton areas. Conventional cotton varieties produce 10-15 quintals, but BT cotton had reported yields of just 2-4 quintals. In addition, BT cotton has shorter staple lengths which brings in Rs. 100 less than the medium size staple produced by normal cotton varieties. It also weighs less, inflicting a serious financial loss to farmers. As a result the Genetic Engineering Approval Committee (GEAC) of India has rejected the proposal to commercialize BT cotton in Punjab and

other Northern states after its failure in the South. Earlier the GEAC had rejected a U.S. offer of GE food aid, despite pressure from U.S. based relief organizations like CARE and Catholic Relief Services.

If industry cared about social morality, it would recognize that Monsanto and its Indian subsidiary employ some 17,000 Indian children for 50 cents a day, who get no education. More than 11,000 work for Syngenta, Advanta, and Proagro. Social morality would question U.S. Senator Frist, whose AIDS bill suggests medical blackmail in the form of withholding AIDS medications from African nations if they refuse GE food aid. Social morality would question USAID, who has advised that the USDA report any Third World nations who refuse GE food aid so other assistance can be turned off to them as punishment. Social morality would question corporations who claim that GM foods pose no threats, since they are the same as old varieties, while they rush to patent offices to secure patents of innovation, claiming they are different.

It would question corporations like Monsanto who claim genetic engineering offers new agronomical benefits to farmers. Do they perhaps mean benefits from their lawsuit against over 2,000 farmers in the U.S. and Canada for patent infringement? It would question Monsanto's monopoly on GE soy, a patent on all varieties of GM soy valid until 2014. It would question the top two chemical companies who control 40% of the global market. And question Monsanto who seeks royalties on GE soy illegally planted in Brazil. It is not surprising that the landless workers movement (MST) in Brazil has taken it upon itself to expel Monsanto from Brazil. After two actions in Ponta Grasso, Paraná, against Monsanto's test farms, the BBC reported today that some 2,000 activists took over another Monsanto farm in Santa Helena. Monsanto's response has been a simple threat to the Brazilian government: "failure to crack down on land invasions, damages the image of the country and jeopardizes international investment in Brazil."

In the Philippines, farmer leaders launched a hunger strike, demanding a moratorium on the field testing and commercialization of GM foods. Their call: "Transnational corporations should not make the decision on what we should eat. This decision is only ours to make."

This is not news to you. Industry can choose to dismiss concerns around safety, environmental risks, Intellectual Property Rights, and corporate personhood. Industry might choose to ridicule the opposition to GE foods. But industry does know that dissent is growing, and is fueled by the corporate attack on seeds, which are humanity's heritage, and has resorted to tactics that defy all principles of social morality and threaten the food security of the Third World. Dupont and Monsanto are spending millions buying up local seed companies in their effort to control our food system. Seeds are the first link of the food chain. Control of the seed, is control of the food system.

Industry fears the truth- and the truth is that it is losing. Monsanto suffered a loss of 20% in stocks price last year. This year it has already reported a loss of 15%. It is time to accept that food and agriculture are sacred for farmers and communities in the Third World. This is about our culture, our life and our livelihoods, and we are not about to surrender it to corporations to boost their profits. And as far as social morality is concerned, as long as corporate efforts gag the voices of the poor, indigenous people, and the campesinos, the biotech industry cannot offer us an agricultural system which is just, sustainable, or honorable.