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SPECIAL REPORT FROM GHANA: Serious concerns in Africa over GMOs fuel demands for labelling and safety regulations

Fresh from the recent workshop on Food Security & Biotechnology in Accra attended by 20 African countries, Deborah Gabriel examines the arguments for and against genetically modified products in Africa.



Deborah Gabriel

THE CASE FOR GMOs IN AFRICA



The four-day workshop on Food Security and Biotechnology in Africa was organised and hosted by Consumer International's regional office in Africa and took place in Accra between 15 and 18 October 2005.

From L to R:
DG of Consumers Int'l, Richard Lloyd, Ghana's Deputy Minister of Food & Agriculture Dr Nii Kai Hammond & Regional Director of Consumers Int'l Africa Office, Mr Amadou Kanoute

Dr Harold Roy-Macauley is Director of the Regional Centre for the Study of Crop Adaptation to Drought in Dakar, Senegal and a consultant for the Forum on Agricultural Research in Africa (FARA), which comes under the umbrella of The West and Central African Council for Agricultural Research and Development (CORAF/WECARD).

He is also Director of CERAAS, a national laboratory of the Senegalese Institute of Agricultural Research (ISRA), mandated to implement the national research programme on plant adaptation to drought. The laboratory is also a base centre of CORAF/WECARD.

On the first day of the workshop Dr Roy-Macauley gave a presentation on the role biotechnology can play in helping to solve Africa's hunger problems.

“ We believe that biotechnology could play a role in ensuring that we cross some of the barriers

The current state of the agricultural sector

The agricultural sector accounts for 60 per cent of the total labour force in Africa and of this figure 96 per cent are small scale farmers. It also accounts for 20 per cent of total merchandise exports, a figure that has decreased over the last 20 years and accounts for 70 per cent of Africa's GDP.

that are an impediment to food production in Africa ” The production systems in Africa are very complex and poor soil fertility, HIV and AIDS all affect the labour force. Cereal yields in Africa at between 0.5 and 1 million tonnes per hectare are lower than in Asia Pacific and Latin America, where there has been an increase to 1.5 million tonnes per hectare.

Dr Nii Kai Hammond, Deputy Minister of Food & Agriculture in Ghana Between 1997 and 1999, 200 million people (around 28 per cent of the population) on the African continent were defined as being chronically hungry. Whilst the proportion of Africans affected by hunger is dropping the absolute numbers are increasing.

In 2000, Africa received 2.8 million tonnes of food aid and in 2001 the World Food Programme spent 50 per cent of its resources in Africa. However, Africa is also a large importer of agricultural produce, in 2000 spending \$18.7 billion on food imports.

According to Dr Roy-Macauley **“what is needed is an agriculture-led development that will cut hunger, reduce poverty that stands at around 70 per cent in the rural areas, generate economic growth, reduce the burden of food imports and open the way to an expansion of exports.”**

NEPAD’S vision for revitalizing Africa

NEPAD (New Partnership for Africa’s Development) would like to see agricultural production grow at an annual rate of 6 per cent by 2015 and dynamic agricultural markets among nations and between regions.

Africa should be a net exporter of agricultural products and should obtain food security in terms of availability and affordability and adequate food nutrition.

The African continent should have an equitable distribution of wealth, be a strategic player in agricultural science and technology development and have a culture of sustainable management of natural resources.

This vision was endorsed by FARA through the NEPAD Comprehensive African Agricultural Development Programme.

What can biotechnology offer Africa?

According to Dr Roy-Macauley biotechnology is one of the tools that can be used to achieve the African vision. The expert said that biotechnology can not only increase crop and animal production but it can also help preserve natural resources.

Increasing yield, combating crop and animal diseases, increasing labour

productivity, uniform harvest time and product quality are all benefits that biotechnology can bring to Africa.

NERICA (new rice for Africa) is the result of cross-breeding Asian and African rice seeds to produce a 'super' rice that produces a higher yield, has a shorter growth time, a higher protein content and is suited to harsh conditions in Sub-Saharan Africa where farmers have less access to water and fertilisers.

NERICA was produced using molecular biology which Dr Roy-Macauley said **"has nothing to do with genetic modification"**, adding that **"If we want to develop Africa we should strengthen our small scale farming systems"**

Africans must be more open minded about GMOs

In an interview with Black Britain, Ghana's Deputy Minister of Food and Agriculture said that there is a need to ensure that people have access to food all year round and not just from time to time.

However, the weather, having access to land, credits and markets for producers were all issues of concern to the government. Insects, pests and diseases further compound the problems faced by farmers. Dr Hammond said:

"We believe that biotechnology could play a role in ensuring that we cross some of these barriers that are an impediment to food production in Africa"

Dr Hammond told Black Britain that many of the fears concerning biotechnology **"are based on speculation rather than scientific facts"** adding that **"it is important that we put sentiments aside and look at the real issues."**

Dr Hammond was quick to underline that the government is also concerned about the environment and biodiversity:

"There is a need to put bio safety regulations in place and a mechanism that will ensure that as we promote biotechnology we don't forget about the impact that it could have on the environment."

When asked whether any genetically modified products are being sold in Ghana the Minister replied: **"To the best of my knowledge and what is known to the ministry and the government, no."**

However, Dr Hammond admitted that it is difficult for the ordinary citizen to know whether they are dealing with GMOs which is why the government plans to introduce testing so that it can determine exactly what is coming into Ghana.

He told Black Britain that many attempts had been made over the years to improve production by looking at improved crop varieties that have resistance to

pests and diseases stating that **“biotechnology provides these solutions.”** Dr Hammond said:

“Instead of closing our eyes and our minds to what biotechnology is all about, we should have an open mind to critically examine the situation and look at all the things that we have to put in place.”

Referring to neighbouring Burkina Faso’s introduction, under containment of genetically modified cotton, Dr Hammond said that it would give a production four times the level of Ghana.

Sounding a note of caution, the Deputy Minister said: **“We are not saying bring in GMOs but put in place mechanisms to check GMOs.”**

THE CASE AGAINST GMOs IN AFRICA

The Cartagena Protocol

At the workshop Amadou Kanoute, Consumer International’s Regional Director for Africa said that biotechnology has been touted as a way to solve Africa’s problems but it is only one tool.

According to Mr Kanoute despite widespread aversion in Africa to the presence of GMO’s , some countries are already researching and marketing crops and seeds for GMO production and therefore the urgency is to put a proper regulatory framework in place :

“For any new technology to benefit people we need to ensure that the benefits are boosted and the threats minimised.

Someone must be held accountable when things go wrong and products must be labelled so that consumers know what they are buying.”

The Cartagena Protocol on bio safety is a global treaty that incorporates a precautionary approach to biotechnology and has provisions which address consumers’ safety concerns.

Presently 125 members have signed up to the treaty including several African countries. Africa has also independently established a bio safety initiative at the African Union contained in the document: **The African Model Law on Safety in Biotechnology.**



“ Our position on GMOs is firstly, we want to stick to GMO free zones and secondly we want to stick to the precautionary principle of the Cartagena Protocol ”

Gebremedhine Birega, Vice President of the Ethiopian Consumer Protection Association

Ethiopia concerned over dependency on expensive GMO seeds

During the workshop Black Britain spoke to the Vice President of The Ethiopian Consumer Protection Association, Mr Gebremedhine Birega, who represents 71 million consumers in Ethiopia. He said emphatically:

“Our position on GMOs is firstly, we want to stick to GMO free zones and secondly we want to stick to the precautionary principle of the Cartagena Protocol.”

Mr Birega said that in spite of the poverty in his country farmers favour organic production, adding that Ethiopia is a centre of biodiversity for various species of plants and crops.

A major concern for Mr Birega is the absence of any labelling of GMO products. He told Black Britain: **“Because of that we cannot say that Ethiopia is free from GMOs”** citing Egypt, South Africa and Kenya as possible sources. He said:

We suspect that different GMO products are being brought into the country through imported food stuffs, food aid and seeds from research institutions:

“My country is one of the major recipients of food aid and the bulk of it comes from America. Of that food aid, most of it is maize, which we suspect may even be genetically modified maize.”

The consumer activist told Black Britain that the USAID support to agricultural centres for the development of GMO products **“causes us a great deal of concern.”**

Mr Birega said that the patents and intellectual property rights associated with GMO products would work against African farmers who are used to saving and exchanging seeds to use for the next season’s crops:

“Once GMO seeds are introduced our farmers will be forced to pay royalties which they simply cannot afford. That will just result in their total dependency.”

He told Black Britain that consumers have a right to safe food, to retain seeds for future use and to live in a healthy environment and as long as GMO products are not labelled his organisation would be advising Ethiopian farmers and citizens to reject GMOs.

Food distribution and not production is the problem in Africa

Benin is one of Ghana’s neighbours in West Africa and has a population of 7

million, one fifth of whom read and write in French. Romain Abile Houehou is the President of the League for the Consumers Defence in Benin.

He told Black Britain during an interview that his organisation has led a strong campaign to inform the country's citizens about issues relating to GMOs through a series of publications in French.

Mr Houehou said that those who are French-literate will be knowledgeable about GMOs but **"we are sure that those who read and write French have spread the message to others in villages throughout Benin."**

He said that despite most consumers being relatively poor, Benin has a lot of natural produce and therefore a food shortage does not really exist. Mr Houehou said: **"We do not see the need to grow genetically modified crops in our country."**

He told Black Britain that although the majority of people in Benin are against GMOs, farmers are facing increasing temptation and pressure to grow GMO crops on their farms by giant multi-nationals from the USA and Europe.

At the moment there is a five-year government moratorium on the introduction of GMOs into Benin, which has two years remaining.

Mr Houehou said that the Food Security and Biotechnology workshop had proved very useful in preparing for the end of the moratorium both in terms of learning to further the campaign against GMOs and in pushing for proper legislation.

He told Black Britain that although there is a food problem in Africa, it is one of distribution rather than production which is not going to be solved by the introduction of GMOs:

"We seek to partner with all organisations across the continent and around the world that are against GMOs. Our message to the multi-nationals from Europe and America is that we do not want GMOs in Africa."

BURKINA FASO, MONSANTO & THE CAMPAIGN AGAINST GMOs



Alarm bells ring as Monsanto pushes for the launch of GM cotton in Burkina Faso

On the last day of the workshop on Food Security and Biotechnology in Africa, Consumers International arranged a press conference on hearing the news that neighbours, Burkina Faso were on the verge of accepting GMO cotton seeds from Monsanto.

“ Our message to

the multi-nationals in Europe and America is that we do not want GMOs in Africa »

Delegates expressed concern and disbelief that such a move would be made when proper testing had not been carried out. Campaigners said that an independent panel to examine GMOs is essential, given that a lot of public institution investment in research is being taken over and influenced by the biotechnology industry.

Romain Abile Houehou, President, League for the Consumer Defence in Benin

There was a lack of confidence that public institutions are carrying out independent research as the biotechnology industry has already launched a powerful campaign to lobby governments in Africa to accept GMOs.

Dr Ferdinand D. Tay, President of the **Consumers Association of Ghana** said that his organisation plans to be **“seriously involved”** in helping the government to adopt a regulatory framework for biotechnology in Ghana.

He said that his organisation has not had access to the government Bill on bio safety and their own study shows that there is “scant” information available to the public on GMos. However, he added:

“We aim to protect consumers and give them all the necessary information to make the right choice.”

Mme. Salimata Diarra , representing ASCOMA in Mali, warned:

“GMO crops in Burkina Faso will affect crops in Mali. We want to protect our heritage.”

Leading the global campaign against GMOs for Consumer International, David Cuming told the delegates that the campaign strategy is focusing on three key objectives: labelling, bio safety legislation and prevention of contamination through the creation of GM free zones. Mr Cuming said:

“We are fighting for labelling as some countries in Africa already have GMOs but consumers have no choice in what they buy.”

He stated the need for caution as biotechnology is still a relatively new technology requiring proper evaluation:

“The issue of contamination and safety still divides the scientific community. We just don’t know what the future consequences will be.”

The controversy surrounding GM foods

Delegates at the conference were shown a documentary by Deborah Koons

Garcia entitled: **The future of food: an in-depth look at the controversy surrounding genetically modified Foods.**

The film was a grim warning of the possible consequences facing Africa based on how events have unfolded in the US. Countless ex- employees of Monsanto are now officials of America's food and drug administration and environmental protection agencies.

Voluntary testing of GMOs is carried out by companies themselves and without labelling there is no traceability. The opposition to labelling is said to be prompted by a resistance to liability and accountability.

The film identified the patenting of food crops as one of the most controversial aspects of GMOs as when contamination occurs, farmers lose their markets and in the US have faced lawsuits by Monsanto for growing their patented crops without a licence.

According to the documentary, Africa is being used to promote the virtue of GMO foods by companies' claims they can feed the starving world. But starvation has nothing to do with a lack of food.

To the contrary there is an over-production of the major commodities resulting in farmers being unable to recover their production costs. Wealthy countries that use huge food subsidies to undercut poor countries add to the problem.

As part of the workshop a field trip was organised to visit farmers in Ghana. The resounding complaint was that they cannot market rice effectively any longer due to competition with heavily subsidised imported rice from the USA and Europe.

The final message from the documentary was that taking plants grown on the African continent and patenting them will be the icing on the cake for rich American companies.

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