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## Feed a company, starve a country

Monsanto purchased a Brazilian sugarcane ethanol company for \$290 million

Posted by [Meredith Niles](#) (Guest Contributor) at 7:17 AM on 11 Nov 2008

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At a time when many people were questioning causes of the recent food crisis, many more were investigating how our food systems can move forward to sustainably feed the increasing world population. Recently, the U.N. Task Force on Trade, Environment and Development released a report touting the [noteworthy yields and economic benefits of organic agriculture in Africa](#). Even recognizing that organic production offers significant hope for increasing food security. Another report released earlier this year by the [International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development](#) noted that a "radical change" was needed for agriculture, and that agricultural biotechnology held little promise. But corporations like Monsanto took a different approach to the problem -- exploiting the food crisis as a means to sell more of their own biotech seeds.

[Monsanto's website](#) is rife with articles discussing how its applications of biotechnology will supposedly solve the food crisis. Back in June, on the cusp of the World Food Summit, Monsanto announced plans to double crop-yields by 2030 with biotechnology. The *New York Times* [covered the story](#) including a quote from a soybean genetics expert at the University of Nebraska who stated, "The hype-to-reality ratio of that one is essentially infinity ... seeing an exponential change in the yield curve is unlikely." But while experts were doubting Monsanto's claims, a [Business Week article](#) quoted Hugh Grant, the head of Monsanto, saying, "That isn't a feel-good thing ... Satisfying the demand curve is a great business opportunity." Grant may consider that quote a gaffe, but it was a telling sign regarding where Monsanto's true interests lie: not with people, but with profits.

Last week Monsanto [purchased Aly Participacoes Ltda](#), a Brazilian company involved in sugarcane breeding and sugarcane ethanol. Monsanto's press release noted, "Global demands for raw sugar and biofuels are beginning to rise at a faster pace than the current production levels in sugarcane, a crop that is essential to meeting these demands," said Carl Casale, executive vice president of global strategy and operations for Monsanto. Last time I checked, hungry people can't eat ethanol and probably can't afford sugar. So why, in the middle of a food crisis, is Monsanto investing in sugarcane ethanol?

Monsanto's real focus is a profit margin that unfortunately comes at the expense of small-scale farmers and the environment. Last month Monsanto proudly noted on its website that its 2008 fiscal year net sales topped \$11 billion. This is in excess of \$3 billion more than net sales in 2007. Gross profit for 2008 is expected to pass \$6 billion -- nearly \$2 billion more than in 2007. At the same time, seed and fertilizer prices dramatically increased throughout the world, and farmers in the developing world scrambled to pay for not only agricultural inputs, but also basic commodities. So, in 2008, as Haitians were eating dirt and food riots broke out throughout the world, Monsanto made record profits.

Monsanto claims that it is feeding the world and developing crops to increase yields. But why haven't we seen a single commercially-available, nutritionally-enhanced GMO? And why do

countless controlled trials show their flagship GMO, Roundup Ready soy, yields 5-10 percent less than conventional soybeans? Monsanto's homepage also states the company is "reducing agriculture's impact on our environment." But, a [groundbreaking study](#) published in *Science* magazine this year noted that sugarcane ethanol production in Brazil is increasing greenhouse gas emissions. Other research based on USDA data shows that since the introduction of GMO crops in the United States, pesticide use increased by 122 million pounds between 1996 and 2004.

It is estimated that there are more hungry people in the world today than ever before. As this looming crisis continues unabated, Monsanto's strategic move into the ethanol business demonstrates their commitment to profits over people. Their new role in the energy sector comes at the further expense of the environment and small-scale farmers throughout the world like [those with whom I worked in Mozambique](#). I applaud the U.N. and others that are looking for real solutions to food security based on real situations and best practices. Monsanto is not solving our food crisis, and it's not helping our environment. Sifting through its claims can be a bit daunting, but what seems increasingly clear is that the only real priority Monsanto has is to increase profits.

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