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ISIS Report 26/11/04

Feeding the World or the Corporations?

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Food agencies are feeding corporate greed while an estimated 880 million people in the world go hungry. [Sam Burcher](#) reports

FAO report condemned, GM food aid rejected

The United Nations Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) has upset a broad coalition of consumers, farmers, environment groups, peasant organisations and social movements by producing a report overtly biased towards promoting the interests of multinational corporations like Monsanto and Syngenta. The report omits to mention that Monsanto control over 90% of total world area sown to transgenic seeds.

The FAO report, Agricultural biotechnology: meeting the needs of the poor? states that GMOs could be key to solving world hunger, and pushes for more funding. The report was denounced by 650 worldwide civil society organisations in an open letter to the Director of the FAO in Rome. The letter, signed by 800 individuals from more than 80 countries, demanded structural changes in access to land, food and political power, to be combined with support for sustainable technologies in farmer-led research. It was also rejected by five international NGOs at a Hunger, Food Aid and GMOs meeting at Maputo, Mozambique in July 2004.

Via Campesina, an organisation representing the interests of peasant-farmers worldwide said that promoting a technological solution to the problem of hunger in the form of GM crops is "a slap in the face for those who defend food sovereignty." The development of industrial agriculture has already caused millions of rural people to be displaced from their lands and condemned them to lives of misery. GM crops, the latest offering in industrial agriculture, will only intensify that trend.

Consumers International Regional Office for Africa, União Nacional de Camponeses (UNAC) Mozambique (Via Campesina), Environmental Rights Action (Friends of the Earth Nigeria), the Oakland Institute and the Third World Network (TWN) said that the FAO's report has betrayed rural people and consumers by recommending GMOs. Their consensus is that the donation of GM food developed from untested and unreliable technologies can only complicate hunger issues. It is unacceptable at least until the safety of GM food and feed has been proven beyond any reasonable doubt.

ISIS was the first to call for GM-free food aid in 2002 on grounds that the malnourished with compromised immune systems would be especially susceptible to the potential hazards of GM food ("GM-free food aid!" [www.i-sis.org.uk/GM-freefoodaid.php](#)).

Consumers International (CI), which has 250 member organisations in 115 countries worldwide, became concerned about GM food aid in 2000 when a shipment of US GM maize arrived in Africa without any labelling or any indication as to the nature of the cargo. A petition was immediately sent to the then Clinton Administration and the UN, requesting that food donations be positively and explicitly labelled so recipient countries could give informed consent to donations *after* having been made aware of their contents.

The petition served to attract marginalized groups of farmers, NGOs and environmentalists who together decided that GM food aid raised the broader issue of the denial of fundamental consumer rights.

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In May 2004, 65 groups representing farmer, consumer, environmental and development organisations from 15 African countries sent an open letter to the World Food Programme (WFP), protesting against the pressure exerted on Sudan and Angola over their respective decisions to impose restrictions on GM food aid.

They demanded that the WFP and USAID (US Agency for International Development) immediately desist from misleading the governments of Angola and Sudan with a scenario of no choice, and from forcing them to accept GM food aid. They called on the WFP to respect the decisions of recipients of food aid, and to actively seek alternative food - or cash donations to purchase food - available at the local and regional level.

Corporate propaganda misleading the public

Polls conducted in Europe have firmly rejected GM crops across the board except on the issue of feeding Third World hunger. Some 55% of people believe that GM can solve Third World hunger, mainly because they were misled by corporate propaganda. Many African nations reject handouts or dependence on corporate owned seeds. Instead, they want self-sufficient sustainable agricultural production methods to enable them to feed themselves. (See Public Say No to GMO's [SIS 19](#), 2003)

Africa fights for self-sufficiency against GM crops

In 2002 Zambia, under intense pressure from the UN, nevertheless refused GM food aid (see "Africa unites against GM to opt for self-sufficiency" [SIS 16](#)) and went on to double their own maize yield and successfully fed themselves and neighbouring countries for the following year. The African country of Benin has placed a moratorium on the import and cultivation of GMOs.

As consumer demand for genetic engineering shrinks and more countries adopt biosafety laws and labelling regulations, so the volume of surplus GM crops increases. Rejected by Europe, GM giants Monsanto and Syngenta have turned their attention to Asia, and in particular, Africa, to profit from dumping GM food as aid, and to support agricultural research and 'biosafety' initiatives designed to facilitate acceptance of their untested products. The US based aid agency USAID, which funds the African Agricultural Technology Foundation, is in turn funded by Monsanto, Syngenta and the Rockefeller Foundation. USAID clearly states its intention to "integrate biotechnology into local food systems and spread technology throughout regions in Africa."

The huge sums invested in the biotech industry supposed to alleviate world hunger have failed to deliver thus far. The USAID-funded Consultative Group for International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) has recently received \$100 million towards its "Harvest Plus Plan" to produce "second generation" GM crops - maize, cassava and sweet potato in Africa. But there is already evidence that organic farmers are achieving record yields with their crops in Africa without the need for GM varieties (see "Greening Ethiopia" series, [SIS 23](#)).

At the World Food Summit in 2002, the FAO engaged with the NGO Forum on Food Sovereignty to make a commitment to strengthen the principle of patent-free seeds and local food production by rural people. But they have clearly reneged on their commitment in saying that hunger can be solved by genetic engineering.

With this change of mind, the FAO now appears to be open to supporting terminator technology (sterile seed lines), which would be another radical departure from their stance only four years ago. And this has called their independence and integrity into question. This effective support of corporate bio-piracy is responsible for threatening the collective work of farmers over countless millennia in creating new breeds of agricultural crops.

Ten years of GM failures

The first decade of commercial GM crops have failed even the biotech companies. Promises have been broken and benefits from GM have not materialised. Moratoriums and bans against GM crops have been put into place in many countries mainly because of

concerns over health and transgenic contamination. Citizen opposition in Europe has ensured that GM products are kept off the shelf and consumer and retailer rejection has forced Monsanto to delay commercialisation of GM wheat planned for 2004. The biotech vision of predominant GM monocultures will fuel mounting concerns over the ecological impacts of industrial agriculture. Fortunately, there are many sustainable low input alternatives that are safe and more cost effective. (See [The Case for a GM-Free Sustainable World](#), ISP Report.).

How civil society can safeguard their civil rights

Aside from the UN Guidelines for Consumer Protection, Consumers International has identified four crucial tools that civil society can use to safeguard their civil rights:

- **The African Model Law on Safety in Biotechnology**, which provides for clear labelling on GM foods and advocates participation in decision making to protect Africa's biodiversity, environment and health from risks associated with GM. The Model Law's provisions are also very comprehensive and provide for strict regulation, taking into account the importance of Africa as a centre of origin and diversity of many food crops.
- **The Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety**, which puts into operation the Precautionary Principle. It also establishes the principle of prior informed consent with regard to the import of GMOs and preserves the right of a country to reject applications for the import of GMOs. So far only 27 African countries have ratified this protocol and more must be persuaded to do so.
- **The Food Aid Convention Articles iii, viii and xiii**, which state that GM food aid should only be accepted after recipient countries have discarded alternatives and non-GM food aid as non-options.
- **The Rio Declaration**, in which Principle 15 endorses the Precautionary Approach to be applied by States where scientific certainty of safety is lacking.

Steps must be taken to improve citizens' rights to redress, so that farmers are adequately compensated for damages and losses incurred when GM crops fail in harvest, or GM seeds and pollen contaminate local crop varieties. CI also supports consumer education rights whereby critical information on the development of biotechnology is accessible and wholly in the public domain. It cautions against measures that destroy existing healthy food production systems, exclude the majority of small-scale farmers (1 in 6 people in developing countries are food producers) and reduce the diversity of food bases for the future.

Historically, hunger is a political problem that requires political will to create stable markets for small food producers and to encourage land use by rural families. This would enable the production of larger amounts of quality foodstuffs in rural areas through investing in truly sustainable alternatives such as agroecology and biodiversity management (see "[Corporate hijack of sustainable agriculture](#)", *ISIS report* 17 Nov 2004).

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