



Briefing Paper 336

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Food Sovereignty in a GMO Age

"Agriculture touches all our lives. The questions and choices in the world of agriculture have fundamental ethical and human dimensions."

*U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops
November 2003*

1. Introduction

Food sovereignty has been described as the right of each nation to maintain and develop its own capacity to produce its basic foods, respecting cultural and productive diversity. This embraces a nation's right to determine what to produce, how it is produced, and who produces it. In addition to the right to food, the demand for food sovereignty also covers the right to land and agrarian reform.¹ Genetically modified organisms (GMOs), often defined as organisms containing genetic material which has been altered from the way that it occurs in nature, were formally introduced into the country under the GMO Act 15 of 1997, bringing with them much controversy. Players in the scientific world readily promote the advantages that GMOs bring with them. However, the recent exposés regarding GMO levels in maize meal (which is one of South Africa's staple foods) and other food products, including those made for children's consumption, and the movement towards more accurate labelling of food, demonstrate that South Africans are unknowingly eating considerable levels of GMOs in their food.

Given that we are living in a GMO age, the question is whether food sovereignty and GMOs can coexist. This briefing paper, which is based on a recent CPLO roundtable discussion, will explore this issue.

2. The Roundtable Discussion

Dr Julian Jaftha from the Department of Agriculture, Forestry & Fisheries (DAFF), and Mr Glenn Ashton from Ekogaia, were the main speakers at the roundtable. Dr Jaftha, who heads up the Executive Committee for GMOs spoke on GMOs and the way in which they are regulated in South Africa. He was joined on the podium by Ms Noluthando Netnou-Nkoana, the Registrar of Plant Breeders' Rights.

It was interesting to discover that the DAFF has no control of GMOs once they have been approved; they do not monitor GM products, which is why they can be found in various products. Information on plant breeders' rights was also welcome. These are a form of intellectual property right which serves to protect the breeders' interests and ensure that the new varieties they have bred are not exploited illegally by any unauthorised person.

Mr Ashton spoke on the concept of food sovereignty, noting that our right to food is listed in the freedom charter, the South African Constitution, the Via Campesina documents, and the Millennium Development Goals. Quoting from Pope Benedict XVI's 2009 "Charity of Hope" encyclical, he observed that the root of global hunger lies in the lack of a network of economic institutions capable of guaranteeing regular access to sufficient food and water for nutritional needs. Yields have not necessarily increased due

to GM technology; there has been an increased use of pesticides, not a reduction as claimed; there are fewer farmers and labourers; GM farm sizes have increased; we have less choice in seed companies, with two American-owned firms dominating the SA market; there has been no improvement in food security, and no reduction in food prices.

Mr Ashton noted that GM food in South Africa is not traced from 'farm to fork' thereby leaving insufficient scientific knowledge of its impact. It can be said that GM crops contradict the aims of food sovereignty because they are about patents, control of technology and the agricultural supply chain. GM crops are owned by chemical companies which bind farmers to use associated chemicals from their companies. When conventional (non-GM) crops are contaminated by GM pollen, not only are agricultural traits lost, but ownership is lost to the patent holder. Moreover, farmers are not properly informed about the implications of cultivating GM crops.

The discussion part of the roundtable covered issues ranging from the safety and health aspects of GM products to the revelation that food prices are set in Chicago, and the impact thereof on food sovereignty. A participant proposed that the Competition Commission ought to look at the reasons why DuPont and Monsanto, both multinational organisations, are the only large-scale seed producers in the country. It was agreed that people have a right to choose what they eat and that labelling was not only a way of achieving this, but also quite critical from a traceability point of view. Another issue of concern was that of the emerging, so-called 'stealth GMOs', notoriously named after the way in which these products have made their way onto our supermarket shelves and into our homes. The issue with stealth GMOs is that they are unlabelled; it was argued that all biotechnology-created foods should be labelled as such.

Other participants noted that sovereignty is the capacity of people to choose what they eat, and that this is what should be focussed on. A question was posed regarding the challenges and cost implications of compliance monitoring, as well as whether GMOs were necessary at all. The need for transparency was stressed; it was suggested that governments should speak plainly and simply. The topic of GMOs is technical and can be clouded by jargon; thus, we must be careful not to exclude certain groups in the

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dissemination of information. Various features of intellectual property were briefly discussed – food sovereignty is a public issue and the biggest beneficiaries from GMOs are far from the soil. The issue of choice was a prevalent theme, with concerns about there not being enough availability of non-GM foods, with maize meal being the prime example. A stirring comment stemming from the discussion was that; if anything, GMOs have led to us ask about our food systems.

3. The Age of GMOs

One of the things that classify us as being part of a GMO age is the fact that the global area under GM crop cultivation is rapidly increasing. By 2008, GM crops (mostly herbicide-tolerant) were cultivated on 125 million hectares of land worldwide. In South Africa, 2.2 million hectares have been set apart for GMO crops.² Another factor is that GMO food commodities are now frequently encountered in international markets. For example, maize exports from countries that plant GM varieties widely – such as the US, Canada, Argentina, and SA – now account for roughly two thirds of all maize traded worldwide.³ There is no escaping GM products, and it is thus imperative that their health and environmental implications are clarified, and that measures such as the labelling of GM products are enforced to allow consumers to make informed decisions about the food they are ingesting.

The polarity between pro- and anti-GMO camps in Africa can be attributed partly to inadequate and inaccessible information for directing the decisions of policy-makers. This has in turn resulted in indecision and confusion in many African governments' responses to the numerous social, ethical, environmental, trade and economic issues associated with the development and application of modern biotechnology. A lack of African consensus and strategic thinking about modern biotechnology is the consequence.

It can be said that governments in Africa really became convinced of the need to think regionally about their GMO policies following debates that arose in 2002 regarding the import of GM maize as food aid. The concern stemmed from the realisation that, if one country in the region approved the commercial planting of a GMO crop before a neighbouring country had done so, the

chances were that routine cross-border trade would enable the transfer of GMO seeds from the former to the latter. This could compromise the neighbouring country's national system of bio-safety regulation. Yet, if the non-approving country tried to block imports in order to protect its national regulatory system, commercially important trade flows within the region would be disrupted, perhaps including critical food aid shipments.⁴

From their hasty introduction into South Africa, GMOs have been embroiled in controversy. To say that they have been met with resistance would be an understatement, considering that there has just been a decade-long legal battle that that ended up in the Constitutional Court.⁵ With South Africa being the only country in the world to have a national staple food (in the form of white maize/pap) genetically modified and commercially available to the public at large, substantial traces of GMOs being found in products such as baby food⁶, and the safety concerns being raised about GM products, it can be predicted that there will be more legal action in this area in the years to come.

4. Food Sovereignty in Africa

4.1. Gender

Women have been described as 'the key to food security', and yet women's access to food is commonly both lower and more precarious than men's. The reasons for this vulnerability include institutionalized marginalization through discriminatory laws and regulations; exclusion from male-dominated occupations and livelihoods; women's limited role in decision-making over the use of household resources; and social practices that saddle women with the weight of reproductive labour.⁷ In the countries of the global South, women are the primary producers of food, the ones in charge of working the earth, maintaining seed stores, harvesting fruit, obtaining water and safeguarding the harvest. It is worth considering that between 60% and 80% of food production in the South is done by women (as against 50% worldwide).

Despite their key role in agriculture and food however women, together with their children, are the ones most affected by hunger. The food crisis that erupted during 2007 and 2008 caused a steep increase in the price of staple foods, *BP 335: Food Sovereignty in a GMO World*

highlighting the high volatility of agriculture and the food system.

Debt payments by the developing countries have led to the privatization of formerly public goods and services (water, agricultural protections). Add to this a model of agriculture and food production in the service of 'the market', and you have the main contributing factors to the situation that has dismantled a once-successful model of peasant agriculture that had guaranteed people's food security for decades. This has had a very negative impact on people, particularly women, and the environment. Food sovereignty is a powerful alternative to this destructive agricultural model. This paradigm promotes the right of peoples to define their own agricultural policies and to protect and regulate domestic agricultural production and the domestic market. Food sovereignty seeks to regain the right to decide what, how and where to produce what we eat. It promotes the idea that the land, water, and seeds are in peasants' hands, and that we deserve to control our food systems. The current global food system has failed to ensure the food security of communities, with more than a billion people worldwide suffering from hunger—one person in six, according to data from the FAO. The global food system has also had a profoundly negative environmental impact, promoting an intensive agro-industrial model that has contributed to climate change, and collapsing agro-biodiversity.⁸

4.2. Farming

There have been attempts to alleviate poverty and hunger in rural areas through small scale farming projects that are focused on GM crops. One such project was undertaken in the Eastern Cape, where farmers were encouraged to plant crops such as yellow maize, soya, cotton, chicory, chilli and paprika. Some of the farmers who participated in the project felt that food availability and food security in the village had declined due to the fact that less time was available to focus on vegetable production, and thus they only cultivated vegetables in home gardens for home consumption. Hunger has increased since people cannot live on chillies and did not derive incomes from the projects; and sustainable employment was not created through the projects. Only short term employment opportunities came out of the project, created by chilli farmers who employed community

members to help them to plant and harvest the chillies.⁹

Africa is a rich continent with huge resources for food production, rich biological and cultural diversity, good and sustainable traditions and practices for food production – there is no doubt that Africa can feed itself. However, one of the many concerns around GM technology in Africa has to do with the way in which it affects the incomes and livelihoods of resource-poor small farmers, who comprise the majority population in developing countries. Most GM technology is in the hands of multi-national corporations (MNCs) which have developed most of the GM crops currently on the market. Increasing use of these crops could result in the loss of existing robust crop varieties and technologies, thereby reducing the diversity, flexibility and resilience of indigenous farming systems and increasing vulnerability to events that could lead to famine. It goes without saying that these factors have an impact on a country's food sovereignty.

5. Food and Faith

One of the cornerstones of Catholic Social Teaching (CST) is the dignity of every human being. The identity of all people as precious children of God is the basis of the right to life, and with this right come basic rights to those things that are necessary for them to live and thrive, including the right to food. Therefore, the policies and structures of society, as well as our individual choices ought to reflect our commitment to the value we place on each human life.¹⁰ Food sustains life itself; it is not just another product and the provision of food for all is a Gospel imperative, not just another policy choice. The importance of addressing agriculture through the lens of our faith lies in acknowledging its worth in moral and human terms.

We need to foster an understanding that for many, farming is not just another economic activity, not just another business or industry, but a way of life. Agriculture is sector that touches all our lives because it is about how we feed our own families, and the whole human family. It is about how we treat those who put food on our table and about those who do not have enough food. It is about what is happening to food and farming, and to rural communities and villages, in the face

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of increasing concentration, new technology, and growing globalization in agriculture.¹¹

The command to *feed the hungry* is an ethical imperative for the universal Church, as it responds to the teachings of Jesus concerning solidarity and the sharing of goods. Moreover, the elimination of world hunger has also, in the global era, become a requirement for safeguarding the peace and stability of the planet. The problem of food insecurity needs to be addressed from a long-term perspective, eliminating the structural causes that give rise to it and promoting the agricultural development of poorer countries. This can be done by investing in rural infrastructures, irrigation systems, transport, organization of markets, and the development and dissemination of agricultural technology that can make the best use of the human, natural and socio-economic resources that are more readily available at the local level, while guaranteeing their sustainability over the long term as well.

All this needs to be accomplished with the involvement of local communities in choices and decisions that affect the use of agricultural land. In this perspective, it would be useful to consider the new possibilities that are opening up through proper use of both traditional and innovative farming techniques, always assuming that these have been judged, after sufficient testing, to be appropriate, respectful of the environment and attentive to the needs of the people most affected by them.¹²

6. Conclusion

Opponents of GMOs strike a chord with many South Africans when they use the debate to make a wider point about the intrusion of Western interests into the African way of life. Multinational corporations, they argue, are trying to commodify nature and deprive Africans of their freedom to farm in the traditional way. Ample food availability does not necessarily mean better food access and utilization. When poor access and utilization occur, despite sufficient food availability, social protection, as well as improvements in food distribution and supplementation programmes should be prioritized.

For example, the reality that a majority of the maize produced and exported worldwide is

grown from GMO variations has made national policies designed to avoid all imports of GMOs more difficult to maintain and operate, thus impeding global food sovereignty aspirations.

16 October 2013 marked the celebration of World Food Sovereignty Day; let us reflect on this day, keeping in mind the words of Pope Benedict XVI:

“The right to food, like the right to water, has an important place within the pursuit of other rights, beginning with the fundamental right to life. It is therefore necessary to cultivate a public conscience that considers food and access to water as universal rights of all human beings, without distinction or discrimination.”¹³

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¹La Campesina

² Genetically Modified Crops for Food Security in Africa – The Path Not Yet Taken – 2012 UNDP Report.

³ Towards An African Policy On Biotechnology: The use of GMOs to improve Agricultural Livelihoods in Africa.

<http://www.africa-union.org/root/AU/AUC/Departments/HRST/biosafety/DOC/level2/AfricanPolicyOnGMOs.pdf>

⁴ Towards An African Policy On Biotechnology - The use of GMOs to improve Agricultural Livelihoods in Africa.

⁵ Trustees, Biowatch Trust v Registrar Genetic Resources and Others 2009 (6) SA 232 (CC) -

<http://www.biowatch.org.za/docs/courtcase>

⁶ Understanding the Impact of Genetically Modified Crops in Africa: An Activist’s Handbook. African Centre for Biosafety.

<http://www.acbio.org.za/index.php/publications/rest-of-africa/371-understanding-the-impact-of-genetically-modified-crops-in-africa>

⁷ Gender Equality And Food Security: Women’s Empowerment As a Tool Against Hunger. Food Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations. 2013.

⁸ Vivas, Esther. “Without Women There is No Food Sovereignty.” 2012.

<http://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article2473>

⁹ Threats to the Food Security and Food Sovereignty in the Eastern Cape - Published by Masifunde Education and Development Project Trust, December 2010.

¹⁰ *For I was Hungry & You Gave me Food: Catholic Reflections on Food, Farmers, and Farmworkers* - Committee on Domestic Policy of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), November 2003.

<http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/agriculture-nutrition-rural-issues/for-i-was-hungry.cfm>

¹¹ *For I was Hungry & You Gave me Food: Catholic Reflections on Food, Farmers, and Farmworkers* - Committee on Domestic Policy of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), November 2003.

¹² Caritus in Veritas (Charity in Truth) Encyclical Letter – 29 June 2009

¹³ Caritus in Veritas (Charity in Truth) Encyclical Letter – 29 June 2009