

This article examines how the US government uses the International Agency for Development (USAID) to advance a global agenda for GM agriculture. The focus is on USAID's major programmes for agricultural biotechnology in Africa.

USAID in Africa

“For the American Corporations”

GRAIN



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

From the American people” says the USAID logo. A generous gift of financial aid from the “American” people. But in reality, the slogan should be saying “*For the American Corporations*”; USAID is more about imposing around the world a US philosophy, and in this case the US agricultural model and its genetically modified (GM) crops, that blatantly benefits US corporations.

The US currently grows more GM crops than any other country with over 60% of the global GM area. The next country is Argentina with only a 20% share of GM crops, and the other 20% split amongst another 12 countries, though most of these countries grow such a small GM area, that they are statistically insignificant. It is therefore abundantly clear that a GM crop is very much also a US crop, forced upon the world by a handful of US corporations and universities with the backing of the powerful US government. The



US government has been desperately trying to convince the world that the US agricultural model is best.

Part of this US model is an array of lax regulations. Got some GM crops to grow or test? Go to the US. Getting GM crops in the US approved is relatively cheap and easy; approximately 100 times less costly than for pesticides and 500 times less costly than for pharmaceuticals. For testing your GM crops, it's even easier: only 3.5% of applications for GM field tests were turned down by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), yet the area spanned nearly 200,000 hectares of GM crops, and this includes GM crops grown with pharmaceuticals. As the risk of contamination from these test sites is always a risk, the US regulators are at the point of allowing contamination from field trials to enter the human food chain.

The other part of the US model, is to allow for all aspects of agriculture to be privatised, even the seeds. And GM seeds are the perfect (and only) way to privatise these seeds - with patents.

So what the world needs, according to the US, are lax regulations and seeds that can be patented. Step forward USAID with its slogan "*From the American People*".

USAID

The US Agency for International Development (USAID) is officially the principal US agency for providing economic and humanitarian assistance to developing and "*transitional*" countries. However, such US foreign assistance has always had the central objective of furthering US foreign policy interests. USAID is very open about this objective, once claiming on their website: "*... the principal beneficiary of America's foreign assistance programs has always been the United States. Close to 80% of the USAID contracts and grants go directly to American firms*".

And when it comes to agriculture, there is one aspect that really does help certain US multinational companies - the spread of GM crops around the world.

It was in 1991, that USAID launched the Agricultural Biotechnology Support Project (ABSP). Under the direction of Michigan State University, a consortium of private companies and public research institutions came together to ensure the world grew GM crops. Their strategy was to identify suitable crops in various countries

and use them as Trojan Horses to provide a solid platform for the introduction of other GM crops. This platform was comprised of well-funded institutions and scientists who had wholeheartedly embraced GMOs. This in turn provided an articulate, important and powerful domestic lobby to open government doors to US biotech corporations.

At least that was the idea.

ABSP I's (1991-1996) original objective was to bring these GM crops to farmers' fields by supporting its collaborators with the research and development and eventually the commercialisation, including support in regulatory and intellectual property issues. But few of these phase I projects produced potential commercial GM crops.

The problem was that the ABSP I had not provided sufficient funds for all the costs related to national legislation on growing GM crops. Such biosafety legislation to allow for the commercial growing of GM crops is now generally considered essential. Although ABSP I did not get any crops to be grown commercially, they did manage to get many scientists to collaborate with US companies, train these scientists in breeding GM crops and initiate the political processes on biosafety and IPRs.

As from 1998, ABSP I projects were all eventually dropped and a new initiative was formed, called CABIO (Collaborative Agricultural Biotechnology Initiative). CABIO split the original ABSP I into two main programmes, ABSP II and PBS. ABSP II is responsible for the research side of the old ABSP programme but its focus is now on clearly defined "product commercialisation packages" and it is no longer interested in long-term research and development projects of GM crops that risk not making it to the field trial stage. PBS continues with and deepens USAID's work at the policy level, which was formerly handled through ABSP. Its goal is to set up "systems" in target countries that can bring GM crops to market. This means orchestrating public relations and crafting GM crop approval processes, regulations, and IPR regimes.

After many assessments, USAID decided that ABSP II and PBS would focus on a few target countries. In Africa the countries selected are Egypt (considered part of the near-East by USAID), Kenya, Mali, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda and Zambia. These are countries where the USAID presence is strong or where the biotech lobby has already made some inroads - in the words of





USAID where the process is “demand driven”.

The activities of ABSP II and PBS compliment and reinforce each other. PBS puts in place the systems that facilitate ABSP II’s GM crops, while ABSP II serves as a local reference point for the system that PBS advocates. Moreover, both PBS and ABSP II will look to USAID partners with established local networks in order to help move their projects forward, partners such as Chemonics International working in Uganda.

The first task of ABSP II is to set its priority crops, which in Africa currently appears to be led by Bt cowpea and virus resistant cassava. For Mali and Uganda, USAID found that Bt cotton is the only short-term possibility for field trials. However, ABSP II cannot work directly with cotton as internal rules prevent USAID from financing research on crops that compete with US exports. Therefore, ABSP II is putting together longer-term research projects with local scientists, such as multiple virus resistant tomatoes for Mali, whilst working with PBS to prepare the general groundwork for GM field tests. More direct support for Bt cotton from the US will take place through the funding instruments the US has mobilised to counteract international efforts to end its cotton dumping practices.

ABSP II does not implement its projects alone; it is a consortium that works through and with its various partners. One of its key consortium partners is ISAAA, a pro-GM outfit funded by the GM industry, ABSP II and USAID. ISAAA has become famous for its annual reports on global production of GM crops. ISAAA is very active in supporting GM crop projects for ABSP II and similar programmes:

- ISAAA brokers the IPR deals between US corporations and participating public research centres in the South.
- ISAAA offers fellowships to scientists in its target countries to train in GM techniques at US private and public labs.
- ISAAA carries out socio-economic impact assessments of the potential GM crops and, most importantly.
- ISAAA handles much of the “communication and outreach” work, through its network of Biotechnology Information Centres.

This makes for a lot of crossover between ABSP II, PBS and ISAAA.

When Mali became a target country for USAID’S

biotechnology programmes under the ABSP II and PBS, ISAAA was there to set up a Biotechnology Information Centre with the national agricultural research centre (the Institut d’Économie Rurale) that re-distributes a French version of ISAAA’s electronic biotech news digest in the sub-region.

PBS is also run by a consortium of groups, under the direction of IFPRI (International Food Policy Research Institute), which brings together the bulk of the groups and people involved in USAID’S biotechnology policy work. PBS is involved in the establishment of national infrastructures, mainly biosafety legislation, which accepts the growing of GM crops. PBS also unofficially pursues “bilateral responses” through one-to-one dialogues with “target countries”. This form of “bilateral response” therefore furnishes the US with far more influence over national processes than established multilateral processes. This does not mean that the US has reverted to a simple country-by-country approach. PBS’S bilateral activities are the basis for regional agendas. The biosafety systems that PBS helps to build in target countries are to serve as “templates” for the region. The eventual goal is to harmonise legislation across regions, creating regional markets for GM crops with uniform regulatory processes. PBS therefore coordinates several USAID-initiated regional processes, such as the West African Biotechnology Network (WABNET) and the South African Regional Biosafety Program (SARB). USAID states that SARB’S “specific objective is laying the regulatory foundation to support field testing of genetically engineered products in four [Southern African] countries by 2003”. PBS now also manages USAID’S biotech collaboration with CORAF (le Conseil Ouest et Centre Africain pour la Recherche et le Développement Agricoles), the Association for Strengthening Research in East and Central Africa (ASARECA) and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa.

Where PBS really hurts other countries, though, is in its insistence that the US agricultural model of lax legislation is the only practical approach for poorer countries. As PBS say themselves:

“... modelling biosafety systems for developing countries, based on the complex and resource-intensive approaches for developed countries [i.e. Europe], is inappropriate”. [From the PBS website at www.ifpri.org]

And

“If developing countries want the benefits of transgenic products developed for their needs, they will need to

make it possible, if not easy, to conduct field tests under local conditions ... [PBS] is an important and essential initiative that must become effective as soon as possible to provide an alternative to the anti-technology 'precautionary principle' being disseminated widely by the United Nations Environmental Program and nongovernmental organisations throughout the developing world". [Lawrence Kent from the Donald Danforth Plant Science Center]

In other words, 'let's keep regulations to a minimum, just like we have back in the US'.

These types of statements directly attack the precautionary principle which forms the basis of many other initiatives and agreements such as the Convention on Biological Diversity, the African Union Model Law on Biosafety, and the UNEP/GEF Initial Strategy on Biosafety.

Kenya - the Trojan Sweet Potato

In 1990, two Monsanto executives got in touch with Joel Cohen, the Senior Biotechnology Specialist for USAID. Monsanto wanted USAID to help develop a GM crop for Africa that would give GMOs a good name. Cohen, who had come to the agency from the US seed industry, turned to USAID's most trusted research institute in Africa--the Kenyan Agricultural Research Institute (KARI). The three men set up a meeting with KARI and began to put their plan into action.

They decided to work on sweet potato, a crop neglected by seed companies and scientists but for which there were some promising GM applications being developed in the US. KARI had the perfect person for Monsanto to collaborate with - Florence Wambugu, a KARI scientist who had just completed a PhD programme at a UK University on sweet potatoes. Wambugu was immediately hired by Monsanto and spent the next few years at corporate headquarters in St. Louis, Missouri where the research and development for a sweet potato genetically engineered to resist the Sweet Potato Feathery Mottle Virus was carried out.

Fourteen years later, it is pretty clear that Wambugu's sweet potatoes will never make it into the fields of Kenya's farmers. She's stepped away from the project, as has USAID, and the research appears to be going nowhere; in recent field studies the GM crop failed to resist the virus and underperformed the non-GM local varieties. But getting the GM sweet potato out to farmers wasn't the real intention anyway. The overriding

goal was to open doors to GM, and in this it was a great success.

The work on GM potatoes ushered in a framework for the introduction of GM crops and brought KARI and its scientists well down the GM path. Wambugu dismissed reports of the failure of the GM sweet potatoes, saying the project "enabled the country to define its nature of support to the GM technology." She said, "Kenyan scientists have been at the forefront of advocating for a Kenya-specific policy". Wambugu certainly has, but no longer as a scientist. She's abandoned her research pursuits to work full-time on public relations with her firm, Africa Harvest Biotech Foundation, as an African spokesperson for the GM lobby.

There were multiple advantages to working with a specific GM crop like sweet potato. It opened up a long-term, direct collaboration between Monsanto and a Southern public research centre, in this case KARI, in which several KARI scientists would be trained at Monsanto's US headquarters. These scientists would end up forming a vocal domestic lobby with a personal stake in the GM debate. It was also an obvious source of public relations for Monsanto and other GM corporations. Here was a company "donating" its technology to African scientists in order to improve a subsistence crop in which it clearly had no financial interest. USAID couldn't put its money behind Monsanto's more lucrative GM crops anyway, since US law prevents the Agency from supporting any research into crops that compete with US agricultural exports.

But, most importantly, the project served as a vehicle for driving forward a regulatory framework conducive to GM crops. Before you can commercialise GM sweet potatoes, you have to field-test them, and for this you need regulations, or so the argument goes. The project thereby provides a way to side-step the larger question of whether there should be any introductions of GM crops and the critical questions about the merits and risks of the GM crop in question to proceed to the technical matter of how to "manage risk" in field tests. Who cares if the GM sweet potatoes actually work; what matters is that Kenya and other countries become places where Monsanto can sell its GM seeds and have its patents enforced. So, with the GM sweet potato project fading into oblivion, Monsanto now has the green light to start field trials of its Bt cotton in Kenya. KARI is also now working with the Donald Danforth Plant Science Centre to field test imported transgenic cassava.





Egypt - the Trojan Bt Potato

Egypt was the main target of ABSP's work in the 1990s, a result of generous funding for agbiotechnology from the USAID/Cairo office, to the tune of US\$7 million. Its most significant project in the country was the Bt potato project, which used a model that would be repeated again and again in other places. The project brought together a US based university (Michigan State University - MSU), a US seed company (Garst Seeds - now owned by Syngenta), and an Egyptian research centre - the Agricultural Genetic Engineering Research Institute (AGERI). The aim was to genetically modify popular Egyptian potato varieties with Garst's patented Bt gene and release them to Egyptian farmers. The potatoes were transformed in the US and the first three years of field trials were carried out at MSU. In the meantime, ABSP set to work on other matters.

Egyptian scientists were flown to an ABSP biosafety workshop in Jamaica and then to the US for an 8-week internship where they spent time touring the US agencies responsible for biosafety policy and the offices and labs of Monsanto and Syngenta. The pay-off was immediate. According to one ABSP official: *"One of these scientists assisted in drafting Egypt's biosafety regulations and went on to become the first biosafety officer at AGERI. Egypt adopted biosafety guidelines in January 1995 and by Ministerial decree the Egyptian National Biosafety Committee was established in 1995. To date, several biosafety officers at AGERI, the primary institutions charged with biosafety in Egypt, have continued to receive training by ABSP"*.

In 1997, after the construction of a greenhouse at AGERI, supervised and financed by ABSP, MSU sent over a batch of its GM potatoes and AGERI began field-tests. AGERI would continue field tests for another 6 years until the project was shelved, having come up against what should have been a foreseeable barrier: AGERI did not have anywhere near the resources to bring the potatoes through the regulatory system.

Although Bt potatoes may never be grown in Egypt, the GM crop with the best chance of making-it to Egyptian farms is Monsanto's Bt cotton, and, if it does, Monsanto will have ABSP to thank.

Uganda - succumbing to US[tr]AID

Uganda was one of the most important African countries pushing for a strong Biosafety Protocol. At the WTO Ministerial Conference in Seattle in

1999, it helped defeat a US and Canadian effort to pre-empt the Protocol through the creation of a 'Working Party on Biotechnology'. In November 2001, it became one of the first countries to ratify the Protocol and it is one of eight countries currently participating in the UNEP/GEF Project on the Implementation of National Biosafety Frameworks that began in December 2002. This active international presence on GMO issues and the imminent establishment of a national biosafety framework, combined with USAID's established presence in the country, makes Uganda an important target for the US agricultural biotech push.

The main US strategy for influencing Ugandan GM policy is to flood the country with money and expert advice. USAID is the main purveyor of both. It has put forward at least US\$200,000 for a Rockefeller Foundation-supported biotechnology lab for bananas, which USAID describes as a "high-visibility" project popular with Ugandan scientists. It's also recently started funding the National Biosafety Committee Secretariat at the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST) - the country's major decision-making body on GM policy. While the Council was once a blockage point for the entry of GM crops, refusing to authorise Monsanto's application for field tests of Bt cotton, USAID feels that it now has a "leadership that has an aggressive agenda for implementing biotechnology in the country" and the agency expects the UNCST *"to approve field-testing [of Bt cotton] in the near future"*.

One of USAID's most trusted tools for *"implementing policy change"* is the workshop and there's been a slew of USAID supported workshops on GMOs and biosafety in Uganda in recent years. The main conduit for the workshops is USAID's local contractor Chemonics, which manages the Agency's Agricultural Productivity Enhancement Program (APEP).

In 2003, Ugandan authorities produced a first set of draft national biosafety regulations that drew heavily from the African Model Law - a clear setback for GM proponents. USAID's team was immediately on the scene to redress the situation. PBS and GM industry people, such as Pat Traynor of IFPRI, Thomas Carrato of Monsanto and Greg Jaffe of the Center for Science in the Public Interest, came in, some through the UNEP/GEF process, as *"international experts"* to comment on the draft and make recommendations. Their efforts were backed by high-level diplomatic actions. President Bush brought up GM crops during his visit with

President Museveni in 2003, as did the US State Department's Special Negotiator for Biotechnology. The Minister of Agriculture, Kisamba Mugerwa was flown to Sacramento in 2003 for the USDA/USAID Ministerial conference on biotechnology. Soon after, Mugerwa left the ministry for a directorship with IFPRI - the lead institute of the PBS program.

According to Mariam Mayet of the African Centre for Biosafety, at an October 2003 national workshop convened to consider the draft regulations and the comments received by the "international experts", the draft was "completely torn apart" and responsibility for a new draft was put in the hands of ACODE - an NGO connected to USAID and Rockefeller Foundation programmes. Shortly thereafter, the Uganda National Council for Sciences and Technology announced the completion of a new draft biotechnology regulatory framework. This time, as Mayet points out, "most of the previous drafting based on the African Model Law appears to have been lost". It now looks like PBS could reach its objective to have field trials of Monsanto's Bt cotton underway in Uganda in 2005.

Grassroots resistance

We have shown only a few examples of the pressure and finances coming from the US, and shown only a fragment of what has become a complex web of organisations and individuals involved in the promotion of GM crops. It's not easy for poor countries to resist this pressure from the world's

superpower. Few governments have the stomach to stand up directly to the US and those that do are always at risk of caving in under the constant pressure. At the grassroots, however, once people understand what is happening and what's at stake, there is a much greater will to resist. In Mali, for example, one of the world's poorest countries, the US has put a significant amount of money on the table, which the country risks jeopardising if it does not open the door to GM crops. It's also made it more or less clear that if Mali wants the US to act on its subsidies to its cotton producers, it better think carefully about its upcoming decisions on field-tests for Bt cotton. Yet, even as scientists and policy-makers take the bait, there is a rising-tide of Malian farmers calling on their political leaders to stand firm against US pressure and to reject GMOs.

Ultimately, Governments end up going against the desires of their populations in order to appease the US, or worse, to get their share of the crumbs that the US hands out. In this corrupt game of give-and-take among elites, the livelihoods of millions of farmers are at stake. But so too is the very system that assures US global dominance. For growing numbers of people around the world, the biotech industry's aggressive push of GM crops and their government's acquiescence, strain the limits of what can be tolerated. In its haste to force-feed the world with its GM crops, the US government may be seriously miscalculating the explosive force of the social movements that its policies are helping to unleash.

This article is a modified extract from the fully referenced GRAIN briefing, "USAID: Making countries hungry for GM crops", available on the GRAIN website at <http://grain.org/go/usaaid>. The briefing provides many more details about USAID's work around the world, including some examples of its practices in Asia.

