AFSA
ALLIANCE FOR FOOD SOVEREIGNTY IN AFRICA

Statement by the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa

Seeds of Neo-Colonialism – Why the GMO promoters get it so wrong about Africa

The GMO lobby is showing signs of desperation. Once again they are on the offensive with a major public relations push targeting East Africa, particularly Uganda, in an attempt to subvert African policy development towards their own narrow ends. Their immediate goal is to weaken national biosafety laws, thereby removing any barriers to their access to African markets for their contentious high-risk products. Specifically, they want to remove the 'strict liability' clauses and thereby avoid any responsibility; avoid having to pay compensation for any damage that they do; avoid labelling so that African people are prohibited from knowing if their food is genetically modified; and avoid any punishment that African laws can impose.

White male European so-called experts are channelling the message of the biotech industry, heavily controlled by US-European seed and chemical giants Monsanto/Bayer, Syngenta and DuPont Pioneer. The message once again is that failure of African farmers to adopt GMO technology is the root cause of hunger and poverty on the continent. It is ironic that GMO foods are banned by law as unsafe in the European home countries of those giving the advice. Meanwhile the African biotech scientists seem more concerned that the strict liability measures will chase away donor funding and investment for their costly and "prestigious" research.

They blame the anti-GMO activists, rather than their own technological failure, for the impasse. They claim that if only the activists would shut up and go away, the industry backed researchers could fix the food insecurity problem once and for all! Once again Africa is being compelled to adopt others' views, others' technologies, others' interests. Have we not seen this before?

They claim to have 'sound science' on their side but what kind of science resolutely ignores the evidence? What has actually happened in those African countries where GMOs have been rolled out? Let's take a look at the facts.

GMOs failed to improve food security in South Africa

So far only three African nations have allowed the cultivation of genetically modified (GM) crops commercially – Burkina Faso, Sudan and South Africa. Only South Africa grows a GM food crop, whereas Burkina Faso has phased out the growing of GM cotton after a monumental disaster for farmers and seed companies.

South Africa is the only country in the world where its main staple crop – maize – is primarily GM, making up around 80% of the maize meal consumed in the country. Considering that one of the key selling points of GM foods is that they will alleviate the perennial problems of hunger and food insecurity in Africa by increasing yields, what has been South Africa's experience, and what lessons can the rest of the continent learn?

Despite more than a decade of GM maize use, food insecurity is rife with over 46% of South African households experiencing hunger. One in five children in South Africa are stunted, and over 50% of South African women are now overweight or obese. There is growing consensus in the public health sector in SA that the country needs to shift away from focusing on a few industrial crops with high calorie content (e.g. GMO maize) to a diverse range of foods that are nutritious, affordable, and produced in ecologically sustainable and culturally appropriate ways.

Bt cotton abandoned in Burkina Faso

African countries can also learn from the disastrous Bt cotton experience in Burkina Faso. Monsanto's GM insect-resistant Bt cotton was introduced commercially in Burkina Faso in 2008 and planted on 100,000 hectares of land. But, after just a few years of commercialization, news began to filter into the international community that the project was a disaster. The GM cotton produced shorter fibre lengths and lower cotton fibre efficiency than conventional varieties. Burkina cotton companies began to lose international markets due to the poor quality, while farmers lost their incomes. As a result, in 2015, some seven years after Bt cotton was first introduced, a national decision was taken to abandon GM cotton and return to conventional cotton. No more GM cotton would be grown in Burkina Faso from 2016. Many expect this signals the end of Bt cotton in West Africa, although Nigerian authorities are still stubbornly pushing the same failed technology.

What is clear is that the collaboration between Monsanto and Burkina Faso resulted in a product with undesirable characteristics that has harmed the cotton sector in the country, with damaging effects on the livelihoods of up to 2 million cotton farmers. Burkinabé cotton companies lost millions of dollars and mounted a legal battle to claim compensation from Monsanto. An important lesson is about the farmers' lack of choice; the Bt cotton experiment was imposed on them by the dominant national cotton company SOFITEX. In the end, the whole saga has left small-scale farmers poorer, more vulnerable and disempowered.

False promises, misrepresentation and alternative facts

The GMO industry public relations strategy is simple but effective. Just repeat the following mantra: *There is a scientific consensus that GMOs are safe. People who resist GMOs are anti-science ideologues.*

In his book, 'Seeds of Science – Why we got it so wrong about GMOs', biotech ambassador and professional turncoat Mark Lynas attempts to sanitise the biotech spin by mixing it up with climate science. He writes: "*I couldn't deny the scientific consensus on GMOs, while insisting on strict adherence to the one on climate change, and still call myself a science writer."*

Yet the industry myth of scientific consensus on GMO safety has been thoroughly debunked in a statement signed by over 300 scientists, academics and legal experts. The statement concludes "that the scarcity and contradictory nature of the scientific evidence published to date prevents conclusive claims of safety, or of lack of safety, of GMOs. Decisions on the future of our food and agriculture should not be based on misleading and misrepresentative claims by an internal circle of likeminded stakeholders that a 'scientific consensus' exists on GMO safety."

Laughably, Lynas claims that African anti-GMO campaigners are well funded *'driving posh cars'* whereas they are clearly massively outgunned in a David vs Goliath battle by biotech corporations with stock market values bigger than the GDPs of their target African countries.

The fly-in pundit's contempt for African people, custom and tradition is unmistakeable. The patronising Mr Lynas showed no interest in Africa until he joined the multi-million dollar funded Alliance for Science biotech PR machine where he is now a communications and policy lead.

In South Africa and Burkina Faso the insistence on GMOs has ignored the wider African context, and failed to deliver benefits of food security or economic gain. Despite countless millions of dollars and decades of research, the GMO industry has failed to produce crops that increase yields, resist drought or disease, or effectively add nutrients. Conventional breeding with African farmers on board has generated many hardy, reliable and nutritious food crops, but these are neglected as they do not fit the industry business model. But the wind of change is once again blowing through this continent. Now hosting six of the world's ten fastest growing economies, Africa is demanding its right to self-determination - to choose its own destiny.

The credible alternative

The UN Food & Agriculture Organisation's 2018 Scaling Up Agroecology Initiative notes:

"High-input, resource-intensive farming systems, which have caused massive deforestation, water scarcities, soil depletion and high levels of greenhouse gas emissions, cannot deliver sustainable food and agricultural production. Needed are Innovative systems that protect and enhance the natural resource base while increasing productivity. Needed is a transformative process towards 'holistic' approaches such as agroecology."

GMOs are the sharp end of the push for corporate control of African food systems, but the evidence is clear. Industrial farming is a dead end. GMOs do not work!

Agroecology is the future of farming. It's diverse – like nature. It's productive – doubling yields in just a few years. It's resilient to climate change, and puts carbon back in the ground. It's efficient: less inputs, less waste. It's culturally appropriate: local innovations and solutions.

It's time we saw the pundits' words for what they really are – biotech industry propaganda. It's time to say NO to their failed solutions. It's time for Africa to shake off the neo-colonial influence and shape her own healthy, resilient and culturally appropriate farming and food systems.

AFSA is a broad alliance of civil society actors who are part of the struggle for food sovereignty and agroecology in Africa. It is a network of networks, currently with 35 members active in 50 African countries. These include African food producer networks, African NGO networks, indigenous people's organizations, faith based organizations, women and youth groups, consumer movements, and international organizations that support the stance of the alliance. **www.afsafrica.org**