Zimbabwe, Zambia stance on GMO food hailed

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Winning against genetic engineering [1]

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INTERNATIONAL scientists, including those from the United States, have praised Zimbabwe and Zambia for rejecting genetically-modified food donations from the West to feed scores of their rural folk facing drought-induced food shortages.

By standing firm against GMOs, said the scientists, the two governments avoided manipulation and deception, which could have resulted in their vulnerable poor being used as guinea pigs.

Regional and international scientists, government representatives, and other stakeholders attending an international conference on Genetic Engineering and Sustainable Agriculture in Lusaka last week, hailed the two neighbouring states' principled stance to mill some of the donated food to minimise their negative impact on people's health.

The scientists said crops in North America have been an economic disaster which has caused some farmers to call for a moratorium on all altered crops yet donor governments and organisations were shipping large consignments of Genetically Modified Organisms (GMO/GE) food aid to developing countries.

Although some scientists said the advent of such crops could be the answer to world hunger, the majority believed that claims of increased yields by the West have not been realised, except for a small increase in some maize fields.

In an interview, Programme Against Malnutrition executive director Dr Drinah Nyirenda said there was need to have strategic technologies that optimised food production and utilisation systems.

"Any technology that raises concerns that would negatively impact on the food resource in its production and utilisation will not assure food for all and will tamper with peoples' livelihoods and lead to a perpetuation of poverty and hunger.

"In the literature, GMO/GM technology does not qualify because it does not satisfy the issues raised on food availability, safety, environment and bio-diversity sustainability upon which the vulnerable small-scale farmer depends," Dr Nyirenda said.

Mr Gorden Simango of Christian Care (Zimbabwe) said farmers had not achieved the higher profits promised by the biotech companies as markets for GMO foods collapse, citing GMO contamination at all levels of the food farming industry as the source.
Mr Simango said large amounts of money used to genetically modify crops would be better spent on helping farmers maximise their traditional knowledge in sustainable agriculture.

The executive director of the US-based Institute of Responsible Technology, Mr Jeffrey Smith, said the reality about GMO crops made it difficult to promote them.

Mr Smith said the promoters of the GMO/GE technology have no perceived consumer benefit, and could irreversibly damage the environment.

"There is mounting evidence of dangerous health effects. As a result, the industry and its supporters in the US government has resorted to tactics used all too often by beleaguered companies and politicians: deception and manipulation.

"Biotech companies have spent billions of dollars to project a one-sided project, often false account of benefits. Several governments and international bodies also propagate industry myths," Mr Smith added.

Dr Mae-Wan Ho, an international researcher and head of the British-based Independent Science Panel -- a global coalition of independent scientists, said there was no need for the West to foist the technology on Africa, especially when it disadvantaged its populations.

"Farmers and governments in Africa should be very careful about the trickery of selling their national heritage in the form of seeds so that companies can control the food supply of the entire world and hold the rest of humanity hostage with their scheme to genetically modify seeds and crops," she said.

Scientists have confirmed failures of BT crops yet the GMO industry has exaggerated statistics of BT crops performances globally, Dr Ho said, adding the exaggerations were based on economic politics that benefit the West.

However, Dr Luke Mumba, the chairman of the Bio-safety Council of Zambia and renowned researcher at the University of Zambia, said GMO/GE technology has been cast as a proposition with high stakes.

"Extreme views have tended to confuse many African policymakers and the public because of lack of reliable information and guidance available to the groups. Within the context of sustainable development Africa needs to focus on the development of agriculture, alleviation of poverty, protection of environment. . . to which biotechnology in general plays a role," he said.

Dr Mumba said while scientists praised Zambia and Zimbabwe's position on GMOs donated food aid, there was need to adopt safe biotechnological = advances.

He questioned whether organic and conservation agriculture could spur farmers to produce on a commercial scale and be able to build enough food stocks for their countries.

"GMO technology is not a panacea to poverty/sustainable agriculture but can make a contribution to the complex problems of alleviating poverty and malnutrition."
Zimbabwe has a longstanding policy against GMO food on the grounds of human safety and the potential threat that GMO crop contamination could pose for the local environment.

But, poor food availability because of the shortage of rains and macroeconomic problems were undermining food security hence more than 2,2 million people will not be able to meet their food requirements between now and next February.

Food insecurity could also worsen in Zambia with poor humanitarian and policy responses, including a 15 percent maize duty, while high maize prices and drought have also undermined household food security in Mozambique.

Malawi, Uganda, Swaziland and Lesotho will also need food imports to supplement their maize stocks.

Agriculture Minister Dr Joseph Made, in a recent interview, reiterated that Zimbabwe would not accept GMO/GE food aid, adding that all food imports would be inspected to ensure the imported grain was fit for human consumption.

Although the regional workshop presented a forum for scientists and governments to present their thoughts about the impact of GE and cloning of farm animals, many countries facing starvation are experiencing a difficult ethical dilemma as a result of the widespread use of GMO crops.

Zambian Minister of Science and Technology Mrs Judith Kapijimpanga said her country had taken a bold stance to reject GMO foods and conditions attached to them, much to the annoyance of some donors.

She said the problem of food insecurity in Africa was a result of complex issues that required an integrated approach for sustainability.

These issues included droughts, floods, poor rural infrastructures, unreliable input distributions, subsidies, farmers' attitudes and agricultural policies among others.

The local small-scale farmers who have reproduced their seeds using indigenous knowledge systems treat the GMO debate with suspicion.

A Mr Mulenga, a farmer from Chongwe near Lusaka, said GMO seeds would kill traditional agriculture.

Public was wary of gene-altered crops after a string of food safety scares in Europe, including the mad cow disease.

Already, four crops called BT maize, BT cotton, soya and oil seed rape vegetables were now being commercially produced by some multilateral firms.

The crops have been genetically altered to produce the bacillus thuringiensis (BT) bacteria, a toxin which kills insects.

Traditionally, BT was sprayed on crops like a pesticide. But when BT gene is put inside the plant, it continues to produce the toxin itself.

BT maize has long been used in the US while South Africa introduced it in 1998 but this also does not mean that it is safe for Africa.
grows BT cotton, BT maize (white and yellow) and soya.

At least 70 percent of the GM food has been donated by the US where it is not separated from other crops.

The main challenge was that the GMOs were also protected under Article 27 Section (3b) of Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) of the multilateral trading agency -- the World Trade Organisation.

The world body advocates for market liberalisation so that products from the rich North countries find their markets in the poor South countries, in particular Africa, but not vice-versa due to high tariffs and non-tariff barriers.

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