

Would GMO Trigger Famine in India? Smears, Misinformation and Depoliticising the Political

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Sir Richard John Roberts [pictured left] is a biochemist and molecular biologist and currently works at New England Biolabs in the US. He is also a Fellow of the Royal Society in the UK and has recently been in India promoting GM crops and food.

[While in Mysore](#), he delivered a talk on 'A Crime Against Humanity' organised by the University of Mysore. He said that when people were hungry, they needed food but rich European countries are opposing introduction of GM crops because they have sufficient food.

Roberts went on to say that their propaganda against GM crops is affecting hungry people in the developing nations. He added that to help people in need, we need "more science in politics and less politics in science" and also asked why should not the denial of food to people in developing nations by developed nations be considered a crime against humanity.

According to Roberts, plants have been modified gradually to meet the needs of the people ever since the inception of agriculture and could do wonders to the food supply chain. He argued that the present engineering of GM crops is precise, is little different from what conventional breeding has done over the years and the results are evident. He also claimed that since the introduction of GM cotton to India, pesticide use had decreased for cotton crops.

During a [talk in Hyderabad](#) he stated:

"Environmental organisations such as Greenpeace oppose GMO for political ends. There is no truth in their claim as there is no scientific proof that GM crops are harmful."

He said that "millions of people in the third world" would die of starvation unless GM crops were introduced and added that Greenpeace is in the business of scaring people when it comes to GM crops.

The Royal Society

As a Fellow of the Royal Society (RS), Roberts should be aware of the Society's failure to acknowledge and correct the misleading and exaggerated statements that it has used to actively promote GMOs since the mid-1990s and in effect convey false impressions. Roberts himself appears to be reading from a similar script.

In an [open letter](#) to the RS, author of the well-researched and fully-referenced book '[Altered Genes, Twisted Truth](#)' Steven Druker argued that the prestigious scientific institution has misrepresented the case for GMOs and has effectively engaged in a campaign of disinformation and the smearing of credible research that showed firm evidence pointing to health dangers of GM. He notes that the RS has been a partisan defender of GM foods and embraced a proactive policy on their behalf. Druker argues that several individuals holding prominent positions within the RS – and even the Society itself – have issued misleading statements in regard to GM foods that have created significant confusion and illegitimately downplayed their risks.

During his visit to India, Roberts tried to convey the impression that there was an overwhelming consensus on the efficacy and safety of GMOs. Druker has however called on the RS to acknowledge that there is not now nor never has been a consensus within the scientific community that GM foods are safe, that many well-credentialed experts do not regard their safety as having been established and that a substantial number think that there is sufficient research that casts their safety in doubt. In addition to Druker's evidence, Food & Water Watch has produced [this](#) informative, fully-referenced brief on the general lack of consensus within science on GM.

Druker has also called on the RS to acknowledge that the process of creating new varieties of food crops via genetic engineering is not more precise and predictable than conventional breeding in regard to food safety and instead entails a greater likelihood of unintended effects that could directly impact consumer health. Aside from the case stated by Druker in his book, readers may wish to consult some of the articles that are in agreement, not least [this](#) by geneticist Mae-Wan Ho, which addresses the “central dogma” of molecular biology, which provides a “simplistic picture” of the precision involved in GM.

According to Druker, it is time the RS confronted the facts about GM foods and set the record straight.

There appears to have been no (public) response from The Royal Society.

The myths and the truths about GM

Roberts asserts that there should be more science in politics and less politics in science. And that is a laudable aim. He is however implying that Greenpeace and critics of GM are driven by political ideology; an ideology of affluent, scare-mongering people in Western countries who are denying the poor and hungry access to much-needed food and are thus guilty of crimes against humanity.

It is unfortunate that Roberts, a distinguished scientist, has to resort to emotional blackmail and the well-worn public relations script so often churned out by the pro-GMO lobby in an attempt to smear critics and devalue their concerns. I have outlined this approach [here](#).

If people really do want to address hunger, they should bear in mind what Viva Kermani (see [here](#) – supported by data) says when talking about the situation in India:

“... the statements that they [supporters of GMOs] use such as “thousands die of hunger daily in India” are irresponsible and baseless scare-mongering with a view to projecting GM as the only answer. When our people go hungry, or suffer from malnutrition, it is not for lack of food, it is because their right to safe and nutritious food that is culturally connected has been blocked. That is

why it is not a technological fix problem and GM has no place in it.”

The Canadian Biotechnology Action Network (CBAN) last year released a fully referenced report that concluded hunger is caused by poverty and inequality. Current global food production provides enough to feed over ten billion people.

Despite the rhetoric about GM ‘feeding the world’, the report also noted that the GM crops that are on the market today are not designed to address hunger. Four GM crops account for almost 100 percent of worldwide GM crop acreage, and all four have been developed for large-scale industrial farming systems and are used as cash crops for export, to produce fuel or for processed food and animal feed.

The report also stated that GM crops have not necessarily increased yields and do not increase farmers’ incomes. Despite Roberts’ claims, GM crops as a whole have led to an [increase in pesticide use](#). As far as his specific claim about pesticide reduction regarding Bt cotton in India, overall pesticide use has not decreased in any state that grows Bt cotton, with the exception of Andhra Pradesh: read about this and the other issues outlined here in the [full CBAN report](#) that contains over 100 references in support of its conclusions.

It should at this point also be noted that GM cotton in India is not the resounding success that supporters of the technology try to portray: see [this](#) by Glenn Stone and [this report](#) highlighting the futility of GM cotton, which again challenges the claim by Roberts that it has led to a decrease in pesticide use.

The Open Earth Source report [GMOs Myths and Truths](#) provides evidence (and credible references) to indicate that GM crops do not increase yield, nor are there any GM crops that are better than non-GM crops at tolerating poor soils or challenging climate conditions. As in the CBAN report, a similar case is put forward that the major GM crops, such as soy and maize, mostly go into animal feed for intensive livestock operations, biofuels to power cars, and processed human food: products for wealthy nations that have nothing to do with meeting the basic food needs of the poor and hungry.

Numerous official reports have argued that to feed the hungry in poorer regions we need to support diverse, sustainable agro-ecological methods of farming (not GM) and strengthen local food economies: for example, see [this](#) UN report, [this](#) report by the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food and [this](#) report by 400 experts which was twice peer reviewed. See also see [this](#) report that indicates GMOs are not necessary to feed the world.

In fact, small farms and peasant farmers (not using GM) are the backbone of global food production. These farms actually produce most of the world’s food and are especially vital for food production within the Global South itself (see [this](#) report by GRAIN). The experience with GM crops shows that the application of GM technology is more likely to actually undermine food security and entrench the social, economic and environmental problems created by industrial agriculture and corporate control (see [this](#) second report by GRAIN).

More science in politics, less politics in science

The GM issue conveniently diverts attention away from the real political agenda that Roberts tries to turn on its head: it is not the politics of a bunch of green-oriented elitist ideologues that is contributing to world hunger but the power, influence and ambitions of a

very wealthy and politically well-connected cartel of agribusiness concerns ([fully backed](#) by the US State Department) that is promoting a highly profitable GM technology and exploiting the situation of the hungry.

Roberts says that GM does not have to be the prevail of big agribusiness concerns, but the reality is that it is, whether in the US or, as is increasingly the case, India. Indeed. Monsanto is so deeply entrenched in India that has been described as the [modern-day EastIndia Company](#).

If people really are concerned about feeding the world, they should follow the advice of the IAASTD report and the others linked to earlier and lobby for governments to invest in agroecology instead of prioritising and facilitating chemical-intensive, corporate-controlled agriculture. It is for good reason that the Oakland Institute recently reported on the “[tremendous success](#)” of agroecology Africa and that [this article](#) describes the positive impact of the model in India, after farmers and local people had for many years experienced the deleterious impacts of green revolution agriculture. Unfortunately, many seek to marginalise agroecological approaches and prefer to focus on external input-intensive ‘solutions’ and proprietary technologies and seeds, such as GMOs.

Agroecology prioritises local communities, smallholder farmers, local economies and markets. It is much more than just a credible model of agriculture; it’s also a social movement that challenges the politics and the very fabric of corporate-controlled farming.

“Agroecology is more than just a science, it’s also a social movement for justice that recognises and respects the right of communities of farmers to decide what they grow and how they grow it.” [Mindi Schneider](#), assistant professor of Agrarian, Food and Environmental Studies at the Institute of Social Studies (ISS) in The Hague.

And it’s a system that the Rockefeller-backed green revolution is at odds with. The green revolution and the GM model now being promoted is in crisis and is causing massive damage to the environment and to farmers’ livelihoods to the point where [ecocide and genocide](#) is occurring and the [cynical destruction](#) of agrarian economies has taken place.

In India, the impacts of depleted soils, water-guzzling cash crops and loss of food diversity and biodiversity due to green revolution thought and practices have been described by campaigner and farmer [Bhaskar Save](#) and by botanist [Stuart Newton](#). The fact that, according to Newton, mineral-depleted soils lead to undernourishment speaks volumes. This is an unsustainable model that is not going to feed people with nutritious, healthy food; if anything, it is [making people ill](#).

Furthermore, subjecting India and its farmers to the vagaries of international markets [bucked by huge subsidies](#) given to Western agriculture has had a major negative impact on agriculture and farmers who still manage to produce bumper harvests without GM, despite a concerted effort to run down the agriculture sector and [replace it with a model](#) controlled by global food and agribusiness concerns.

GM crops represent an extension of green revolution thinking with a reliance on herbicide tolerant crops, corporate-controlled external inputs and a global system of food and agriculture dominated by US interests and those of its agribusiness corporations.

It may appear ironic to many that scientists (see this also in response to Anthony Trewavas) resort to populism, emotional blackmail and unfounded claims. But any talk about 'sound science' and dispassionate reason informing the debate on GMOs contradicts how many supporters of GM, including scientists, and the industry act in reality (see [this](#) description of how science has been pressed into the service of corporate interests).

From the issue of labelling GM food to 'substantial equivalence', as Steven Druker has shown and as also described in this piece in the last link, science has been distorted, debased and bypassed to serve commercial interests. The result is that not a single long-term epidemiological study has been conducted with GMOs.

The current issue surrounding GM mustard in India and the petition to issue a [contempt of court case](#) against the Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee, gives rise for further concern that proper scientific procedure has been ditched in a rush to get GM food crops onto the commercial market.

Yes, it would be a very good idea to get more science into politics and the politics out of science. Unfortunately, by focussing on and smearing green activists and critics of GM, Roberts and people like him are in fact ignoring and thus attempting to depoliticise and disguise the genuine underlying power structures that are determining the GM agenda and global agriculture per se. In effect, they serve as [apologists for a neoliberal agenda](#) and attempt to give the impression that they alone have some kind of [monopoly on compassion](#) for humanity.

Despite what Roberts likes to imply about having more science in politics, the GM industry often sidelines science in favour of the dirtiest of politics, not least by tightening its grip on countries on the back of coups and conflict (see [this](#) to understand how big agritech concerns benefit from and fuel the situation in Ukraine).

Powerful interests in the West (mainly in the US), acting through bodies such as the WTO, IMF and World Bank, have enslaved nations with debt and have used agriculture and the green revolution to create food deficit areas, dependence and subservience (see [here](#)). The neoliberal 'globalisation' agenda of 'free' trade, privatisation and deregulation has further fuelled hunger, inequality and poverty (see [this](#) analysis of food commodity speculation, [this](#) description of the global food system and [this](#) report on the appropriation of agricultural land, which have all conspired to uproot the very bedrock of global food production, the smallholder - see [this](#)).

The current global system of chemical-industrial agriculture and World Trade Organisation rules that agritech companies helped draw up for their benefit to force their products into countries (see [here](#)) are a major cause of structural hunger, poverty, illness and environmental destruction (see [this analysis](#) of the situation in Ethiopia by Michel Chossudovsky). By its very design, the system is meant to exploit people, nations and the planet for profit and control (see [here](#)). Blaming critics of this system for the problems of the system is highly convenient. And forwarding some bogus technical quick-fix will not put things right. It represents more of the same.

In India, agritech corporations are being allowed to shape government policy by being granted a strategic role in trade negotiations, not least the Knowledge Initiative on Agriculture (see [this](#)). They are increasingly setting the [policy framework](#) by capturing strategic decision-making bodies and are being allowed to fund and determine the nature of

research carried out in public universities and institutes (see [this](#)). This is where the real politics lie.

The implication of Roberts' stance is that critics of GM are denying choice to farmers and consumers. The debasement of choice, democracy and freedom does not lie with critics of the technology that Roberts advocates; as [William Engdahl](#) has shown and as discussed throughout this article, it lies with powerful agribusiness interests which have captured international institutions, governments and regulatory agencies to force through a politically and commercially motivated agenda.

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