

False Claims and Flawed Conclusions Being Used to Push GM Crops into India

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Writing in India's Deccan Herald newspaper on 26 January 2016, [Kalyan Ray](#) places great store in a flawed year-old British Parliament document to promote a pro-GM agenda. According to Ray, the document '[Advanced Genetic Techniques for Crop Improvement: Regulation, risks and precaution](#)' from the House of Commons' Science and Technology Committee reflects several arguments in favour of GM crops that certain Indian scientists have been voicing for years.

He asserts that the weight of peer-reviewed scientific evidence has shown the EU-adopted 'precautionary principle' towards GM to be misguided. In his view, where genetically modified crops have been shown to pose a risk, this has invariably been a result of the trait displayed — for example, herbicide tolerance — rather than the technology itself. Ray adds that no inherent risks have so far been identified to human or animal health from this consumption or to the environment from their cultivation.

Rays seems to concur with the report's conclusion that Europe's precautionary GMO regulation is preventing the adoption of GM crops in the UK, Europe and the developing world.

He says:

"Worldwide, over 175 million hectares are dedicated to GM crop, accounting for 12 per cent of arable land. No inherent risks have so far been identified to human or animal health from this consumption or to the environment from their cultivation."

Implicit in this claim is a common tactic: the industry does not have to prove safety (in its view), but now GM has been fraudulently (see [Steven Druker's book](#)) released onto the market, the onus is placed on everyone else to prove it is unsafe – regardless of the fact that clear, serious safety issues were downplayed or silenced back in the 1990s when GM was being forced onto the US public (again, see Druker).

Moreover, the implication of the above quote is that farmers are freely choosing to plant GM. This is based more on free-market ideology than actual fact. Aside from employing [coercive tactics](#) to try to get GM into countries, the closing off of alternatives plays a major role in influencing adoption of certain technology (see [this](#) for how the Gates Foundation is supporting agro dealer networks to push chemical intensive agriculture in Africa, [this](#) on Bt cotton in India and [this](#) on Monsanto's game plan in Ukraine).

Ray's claim about GM technology not posing unique risks to health or the environment is not only wrong (for example, see [this](#) and [this](#)), but any implications derived from this claim that GM is no different from conventional breeding techniques is also incorrect and needs to be [challenged](#). Furthermore, it is conventional breeding techniques that are delivering on the promises that GM has thus far failed to deliver on (see page 8 of [this document](#)) and which the GM industry often [attempts to pass off](#) as its own successes.

However, Ray's biggest mistake is relying on a seriously flawed report to try to make a case for GM.

“Shocking ignorance” being use to promote GM

Dr Rupert Read, reader in philosophy at the University of East Anglia, condemned the report's “shocking ignorance of scientific logic and the nature of risk” and said it confused “inconclusive evidence of harm from GMOs with conclusive evidence of safety.” The prominent risk expert Nassim Nicholas Taleb called the report “an insult to science.”

The Select Committee report claims that scientific evidence supporting the safety of genetically modified crops is very strong. But, as [Claire Robinson](#) from GMWatch says, the evidence cited is the EU Commission report, ‘A decade of EU-funded GMO research’. Although this EU report did conclude that GMOs were “not, per se, more risky than... conventional plant breeding technologies,” she argues it is a baseless conclusion because it presents no data that could provide evidence to support that conclusion – for example, from long-term feeding studies in animals.

Robinson notes that of the small handful of animal feeding studies carried out under the project, none tested a commercialised GM food; none tested the GM food for long-term effects; all found worrying differences in the GM-fed animals, including alterations in blood biochemistry and immune responses; and none were able to conclude on the safety of the GM food tested, let alone on the safety of GM foods in general. Indeed, the purpose of the EU report was not to test any GMO food for safety but to focus on developing safety assessment “approaches.”

The resulting report provides only a few references to published papers, which are listed randomly on some pages, with no clue provided as to which of the report's claims they are supposed to support.

What's more, the Select Committee displays an uncritical reliance on a published meta-analysis by Klümper and Qaim, which claims that GM crops have “reduced chemical pesticide use by 37%, increased crop yields by 22%, and increased farmer profits by 68%.”

This meta-analysis is being widely cited by lobbyists who want to push Europe down the GMO path, according to Robinson. But it relies on outdated data from the early 2000s – before herbicide-resistant superweeds and Bt resistant pests made GM herbicide-tolerant and Bt insecticidal traits less effective and caused higher costs and inconvenience to farmers. Charles Benbrook's analysis is based on more up-to-date USDA data and shows that GM crops in North America have increased overall pesticide use by 7%.

Robinson further notes that Klümper and Qaim's meta-analysis also ignores the fact that Bt crops are in themselves pesticides, with the total pesticide content in the plants' cells often being many times greater than the volume of chemical spray pesticides that are supposed

to be replaced. Also, the Bt toxins in GM crops are not the same as the natural Bt long used as an insecticide spray by organic and conventional farmers – they are structurally different and have a different mode of action, which could explain why they have been found to be toxic to non-target insects and mammals in some studies.

Regarding yields, Klümper and Qaim’s meta-analysis uses suspect data collected from Monsanto field trials. The real picture on GMO yields comes from a study published in 2013 by Jack Heinemann and his team. It looked at 50 years’ worth of data from the US and Europe, before and after GM was introduced in the US. It found that yields for staple crops in the US – which are largely GM – have declined since GM has been adopted, and are lagging behind those of Europe, where production is mostly non-GM. Europe also uses less pesticides.

GM traits do not confer higher yields but tolerance to herbicides or an insecticidal toxin trait. A high-yielding GM crop is a crop with high-yielding background genetics achieved by conventional breeding, into which GM traits for herbicide tolerance or insecticidal proteins have been inserted.

In conclusion, Robinson states that the Select Committee relies on outdated and discredited data to paint a fantasy picture of the success of GM crops, while ignoring more up-to-date and relevant data that threaten that picture.

GM unwanted and not needed in India

According to Kalyan Ray, good risk management requires the potential benefits of an action to be thoroughly considered alongside the risks. It also requires a consideration of the risk of failing to act. He implies that hold-ups in allowing GM crops into India is preventing Indian agriculture from progressing.

In what way is India’s agriculture not progressing one might wonder. Indian farmers already produce bumper harvests (despite [policies](#) that make it difficult to operate and cause them economic distress), have achieved [self-sufficiency](#) in a number of food staples and use traditional, indigenous varieties of crops that seem to be more resilient in the face of [pest management](#) or [climate change](#).

Ray quotes the UK Select Committee report that says:

“We are convinced by the evidence provided to us that this suite of technologies is a potentially important tool, particularly in the developing world, which should not be rejected unless there are solid scientific evidence those technologies may cause harm.”

Of course, the report’s opinion is in sharp contrast to [report after report](#) recommending support for conventional agriculture, agroecology and local economies, especially in the global south. Critics of GM therefore want to know where is the advantage in India adopting GM and why the government is experimenting given all the attendant risks.

To make the case for non-GM agriculture, campaigner Aruna Rodrigues cites the World Bank-funded International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge and Science for Development Report, which India signed in 2008. That report is the work of over 400 scientists, took four years to complete and was twice peer reviewed. The report states we

must look to small-holder, traditional farming (not GMOs) to deliver food security in the global south through agri-ecological systems which are sustainable.

Despite this, based on a flawed UK select committee report, Ray advocates regulatory reforms to smooth the entry of GM to India are essential.

There is a credible body of evidence that GMOs were placed on the US market due to fraud and the bypassing of scientific procedures and ignoring evidence pertaining to risk, as described in Steven Druker's book 'Altered Genes, Twisted Truth'. It thus might appear strange that someone would rely on a seriously questionable report to try to make a case for GM, especially when a series of official reports in India have come out against the introduction of GM to India: the 'Jairam Ramesh Report' of February 2010, imposing an indefinite moratorium on Bt Brinjal, overturning the apex Regulator's approval to commercialise it; the Sopory Committee Report (August 2012); the Parliamentary Standing Committee (PSC) Report on GM crops (August 2012) and the TEC Final Report (June-July 2013).

What supporters of GM technology like to ignore is that it is an extension of the overhyped 'green revolution', which has arguably been a disaster for India (see Bhaskar Save's [views](#) and Raj Patel's [analysis](#)). They also like to overlook the fact there is [no scientific consensus](#) on the safety or efficacy GM (contrary to the much-publicised pro-GM public relations machine that claims otherwise).

But while side-lining these concerns, they like to promote GM as the answer to hunger. But, as [Viva Kermani](#) says:

“When our people go hungry, or suffer from malnutrition, it is because their right to safe and nutritious food that is culturally connected is blocked. That is why it is not a technological fix problem and GM has no place in it.”

Too often, supporters of GM promote the technology as a proxy for deep-seated [social, political and economic factors](#) that are responsible for poverty and hunger.

What they also choose to sideline is false claims concerning yields pertaining to GM mustard (any improvement in yield is [due to hybridisation](#), not GM technology), which could soon be the first food crop to be officially sanctioned in India. They also put forward fallacious justifications for embracing GM mustard (to reduce over-reliance on imports) that conveniently ignore the [impact of trade policies](#) that seriously undermined the indigenous mustard industry and India's inability to attain self-sufficiency in this foodstuff.

If we want science and objectivity to guide us where GM is concerned, surely it would be best to adhere to proper procedures that are open and transparent rather than engage in “[unremitting fraud](#)” and secrecy in order to force GM onto the commercial market in India. And surely it would be better to root out and call to account the [conflicts of interest](#) that are fuelling the pro-GM agenda in India.

When so much faith is placed in a patently flawed report to make a case for smoothing the progress of GM in India, are we to conclude that what we are reading is just an example of poorly researched journalism?

Or should we conclude what we see is a case of more pro-GM spin?

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