

Feeding the Bank Balance or Feeding the World: GMOs, Development and the Politics of Unhappiness

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Theme: [Biotechnology and GMO](#), [Global Economy](#), [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

Modern state-corporate capitalism is stripping the environment bare through unsustainable levels of consumption. It is legitimised by a deceitful ideology that attempts to justify and sell a system which by its very nature is designed to benefit a minority at the expense of the majority.

This model thrives on the exploitation of peoples and the environment by powerful transnational corporations. Look no further to see how [intellectual property rights](#) and [agricultural subsidies](#) and the WTO serves the interests of these corporations, for instance, or the roles that 'free trade' [agreements](#), '[structural adjustment](#)' and the [undermining](#) of non-compliant governments play. Moreover, economic neoliberalism strides the world hand in glove with militarism. The outcome is a programme of endless destabilisations, conflicts and wars over finite resources to [enrich elite interests](#).

In the area of food and agriculture, there has been a [programmed eradication](#) of indigenous, productive farming across the planet. This dovetails with an urban-centric model of 'development' underpinned by 'free trade' and the appropriation of wealth by a select number of individuals and powerful private corporations, on the one hand, and increasing hardship, austerity and poverty for the rest of the population on the other. These corporations, with the full backing of the state (we are not talking about some notional [form of 'free market' capitalism](#)), seek to mould the very essence of existence, from cradle to grave and from patented genetically modified seed to plate.

All this is sold to the masses as the part of the ongoing quest to achieve human well-being, measured in terms of endless GDP growth. It's based on an ideology that conveniently associates such growth with corporate profit, boosted by stock buy-backs, financial speculation and bubbles, massive arms deals, colonialism [masquerading as philanthropy](#), [manipulated and rigged](#) markets, [corrupt and secretive](#) trade deals, outsourced jobs, job automation and a resource-grabbing militarism. That such a parasitical system could ever bring about a 'happy' human condition for the majority is unfathomable. Yet state-corporate capitalism's great con-trick is to fool people that it can.

Happiness and well-being

It is interesting to note that 10 years ago, the first ever 'Happy Planet Index' (HPI) measured happiness across 178 countries. The small south Pacific island of Vanuatu was the happiest nation. Germany ranked 81st, Japan 95th and the US 150th. The index was based on consumption levels, life expectancy and reported happiness. Although Vanuatu was top, it only ranked 207th out of 233 economies when measured against Gross Domestic Product (GDP). In 2009, Costa Rica topped the list of the World Happy Planet Index.

This is not to imply that material wealth does not impact well-being or feelings of happiness. Many other surveys indicate it does. However, less wealthy countries often do well in these types of surveys because in these societies (and certain surveys) cultural priority is placed on family and friends, on social capital rather than financial capital and on social equity rather than corporate power. This might explain why nations such as the US and UK, which are highly unequal and are the drivers of neoliberalism, don't always fare too well in such surveys when compared to other rich nations.

According to the UN World Happiness Reports of both 2013 and 2014, Denmark was the planet's happiest country. Denmark is not just wealthy, but its people feel safe because emphasis is placed on social equality and robust welfare policies. Indeed, Scandinavian countries usually come out near the top of quality of life and well-being surveys.

Over the last 60 years, material living standards in the West have improved, but how wealth is distributed is what really matters. For example, take the case of the UK. Much of manufacturing has been outsourced to cheap labour economies; welfare, unions and livelihoods have been attacked; massive levels of tax evasion/avoidance persist; neoliberal policies have resulted in privatisation, deregulation and national and personal debt spiralling; the cost of living has increased as public assets have been sold off to profiteering cartels; taxpayers' money has been turned into corporate welfare for the banks; and the richest 1,000 families in the UK have seen their net worth [more than double](#) since 2009, in the worst recession since the Great Depression, to £547bn, while 'austerity' is imposed on everyone else.

Wealthy Western elites use up vast quantities of the world's scarce resources and become richer, but many citizens who live in Western nations [live in misery](#). And this is not even accounting for the tens of millions elsewhere who in places like Libya, Syria or Iraq whose countries were thrown into conflict and chaos by the designs of a US-Anglo elite for the sake of [pipelines, resources or geopolitical motives](#).

Self-interest or public good?

It is clear whose happiness and well-being matters most and whose does not matter at all. Consider the following extract from an article by [Andrew Gavin Marshall](#):

"At the top of the list of those who run the world, we have the major international banking houses, which control the global central banking system. From there, these dynastic banking families created an international network of think tanks, which socialised the ruling elites of each nation and the international community as a whole, into a cohesive transnational elite class. The foundations they established helped shape civil society both nationally and internationally, playing a major part in the funding - and thus coordinating and co-opting - of major social-political movements."

While mouthing clichés about 'democracy', 'growth' and individual 'freedom', just who actually controls the world (and for what purpose) is not an issue the mainstream media and mainstream politicians like to raise. In 2008, David Rothkopf published his book 'Superclass: The Global Power Elite and the World They Are Making':

"The superclass constitutes approximately 0.0001 percent of the world's population. They are the Davos-attending, Gulfstream/private jet-flying,

money-incrusted, megacorporation-interlocked, policy-building elites of the world, people at the absolute peak of the global power pyramid... They are from the highest levels of finance capital, transnational corporations, the government, the military, the academy, nongovernmental organizations, spiritual leaders and other shadow elites." [Project Censored](#) ('Exposing the transnational ruling class')

These are the people setting the agendas at the Trilateral Commission, Bilderberg Group, G-7, G-20, NATO, the World Bank and the World Trade Organization. They decide which wars are to be fought and why and formulate global economic policy.

In India, in a headlong rush to urbanise (under the advice of the [World Bank](#)), its cities are increasingly defined by their traffic-jammed flyovers cutting through fume choked neighbourhoods that are denied access to clean drinking water and a decent infrastructure. Privatisation and crony capitalism are the order of the day.

For all the talk of India's high GDP growth in recent years, India has [slipped down](#) the World Happiness Index from 111th in 2014 to 117th in 2015. Again, the Nordic countries were at the top but with Switzerland having displaced Denmark for first place. The index takes into account not just economic measures, but also social and cultural capital, including positive social relations, characterized by values such as trust, benevolence and shared social identities that contribute positively to economic outcomes as well as delivering happiness directly.

Away from the cities, the influence of transnational agribusiness and state-corporate grabs for land are leading to violent upheaval, conflict and ecological destruction, all to fuel a model of development which effectively such the lifeblood from rural communities and drive an unsustainable 'nine-day wonder' (how Gandhi described it) model of 'development'.

The links between the Monsanto-Syngenta-Walmart-backed Knowledge Initiative on Agriculture and the associated US sanctioning and backing of the opening up of India's nuclear sector to foreign interests have shown what the models of 'development' being pushed onto people really entails, not least in terms of the powerful corporate interests that really benefit and the ordinary people that lose out [see [this](#) and [this](#)].

But we are told that this is 'development' and 'good' for 'the country'. It depends on just 'who' the country is meant to be and therefore whom all this turmoil (development) happens to be good for. Aside from transnational corporations, we know who it is good for: the [combined wealth](#) of India's richest 296 individuals is \$478 billion, some 22% of India's GDP. This is larger than the GDPs of the UAE, which stood at \$402 billion, South Africa (\$350 billion) and Singapore (\$308 billion).

The model of neoliberal state-capitalist development being imposed on the world (under the benign title 'globalisation') serves the vested interests of an increasingly globalised and integrated elite.

Could GMO help?

There is much rhetoric about a brave new world of crops engineered to eradicate disease, boost yields, fight pests and adapt to climatic conditions (etc), but the reality is hundreds of thousands of farmers in India have killed themselves as a result of economic distress. Many

of these suicides are [directly linked](#) to GM, while many are also [associated with wider issues](#), such as the growing of cash crops for export and the exposure to international markets and trade rules which serve the interests of global agribusiness.

The reality of GM is also [‘ecocide’ and ‘genocide’](#) in South America. The reality is a [flawed](#) technology that might appear to work in some respects within the controls and confines of a laboratory but which is pushed by an industry and powerful think tanks that drive a global GMO agenda (both commercial and geopolitical) by [infiltrating](#) research institutes, trade deals and public bodies, [corrupting practices](#) and [manipulating](#) data and by employing rhetoric about ‘feeding the world’, which disregards the [actual evidence](#) pertaining to the root causes of poverty and hunger.

This technology is integral to a model of food and agriculture controlled from laboratory to plate by a group of major transnational seed, pesticide, food processing and food commodity trading companies and giant retailers. This group is tied to and fuels a system of export-oriented, urban-focussed agriculture, underpinned by trade rules, deals and agreements that major members of this cartel [help draw up](#).

And science is pressed into serving this agenda. Many molecular biologists make an excellent living on the back of lavish career-building funding by touting the supposed virtues of GM. And they too often like to promote the technology on the basis of [uninformed personal opinion](#). Like the companies themselves, these figures also have a vested interest in expanding the use of this technology.

We constantly hear about how GM and the company and scientists behind it are serving the public good, as if science and GM exist in a political and economic vacuum. But any talk about funding, power relations and the ownership and control of this technology is to be dismissed with shouts of ‘conspiracy theory’ or some tirade of smear-ridden abuse.

Could GM (or even synthetic biology for that matter) ever be a viable addition to the food and agriculture? Possibly, if it were ever to be shown that it had no adverse environmental, ecological and health impacts and could perform better than non-GM; and only if it were not to be used as a strategy to sideline the need to tackle poverty, hunger, inequality and the undermining of food security by eradicating a globalised system of food and agriculture controlled by large corporations that fuel and benefits from that system.

GMO and the bottom line

Unfortunately, GM is being used to reinforce the status quo. As it currently stands, it is a political and ideological device: a bogus techno quick-fix being promoted by vested interests that neatly diverts attention from the need to address the structural factors that drive inequality, poverty and food insecurity and which those interests profit from and helped to create.

And the aim is not just to reinforce the status quo but to extend it further: to bring nations under the control of a few corporations by getting countries to rely on their patented seeds and chemical inputs: for instance, read [this](#) on Monsanto in Ukraine, [this](#) about US aid and El Salvador and [this](#) about Zimbabwe.

Insert a gene into an already high-yielding conventionally bred seed and patent it and get a country to plant it and rely on it, and you insert a (financially lucrative) mechanism of

political leverage over that country. Because what is the purpose other than that, given GM currently provides no discernible, sustainable benefits when compared to non-GM options?

The GM project and the model of 'development' it is tied to a mindset that regards other (non-westernised) social systems as deficient because they do not comply with Western notions of what life is and how it is to be lived – or, more specifically in this case, what food is and how it should be grown. Highly productive smallholder farming, organic agriculture, agroecology and a locally grown nutritious, diverse range of food crops are to be cast aside in favour of a 'superior' system based on petrochemical-intensive industrial farms and agribusiness supplied and processed junk food. Throughout the world, 'corporate America/Europe' is conveniently on hand to destroy the former and impose the latter all under the banner of 'progress' with devastating effects.

As with much of this 'development' strategy, GM is not being done for the public good, despite what its supporters say. The development of agribusiness is not the same as developing agriculture, despite what [Bill Gates](#) or the industry might like to think.

Consider that Monsanto CEO Hugh Grant brought in just under [\\$12m](#) in 2015, and Vice-President Rob Fraley brought in just under [\\$3.4m](#). That's some income for two individuals who are not even the main shareholders. In January 2015, Monsanto reported a profit of [\\$243m](#) (down from \$368m the previous year).

Consider too the following quote from [this piece](#) on the Bloomberg website in 2014:

"Chairman and Chief Executive Officer Hugh Grant is focused on selling more genetically modified seeds in Latin America to drive earnings growth outside the core U.S. market. Sales of soybean seeds and genetic licenses climbed 16 percent, and revenue in the unit that makes glyphosate weed killer, sold as Roundup, rose 24 percent."

In the same piece, "Glyphosate really crushed it," Chris Shaw, a New York-based analyst at Monness Crespi Hardt & Co stated: meaning the sales of glyphosate were a major boost.

The bottom line is sales and profit maximisation – and the unflinching defence of glyphosate, no matter how carcinogenic to humans it is and, more to the point, how much [Monsanto knows it is](#) and has known it for years.

[Noam Chomsky](#) underlines the commercial imperative:

"... the CEO of a corporation has actually a legal obligation to maximize profit and market share. Beyond that legal obligation, if the CEO doesn't do it, and, let's say, decides to do something that will, say, benefit the population and not increase profit, he or she is not going to be CEO much longer — they'll be replaced by somebody who does do it."

Technology in itself is neither good nor bad. What determines its impact depends on how it is used, who controls that use and the economic system within which it operates.

"American foreign policy has almost always been based on agricultural exports, not on industrial exports as people might think. It's by agriculture and

control of the food supply that American diplomacy has been able to control most of the Third World. The World Bank's geopolitical lending strategy has been to turn countries into food deficit areas by convincing them to grow cash crops – plantation export crops – not to feed themselves with their own food crops." [Professor Michael Hudson](#)

Despite the promise of the green revolution, [hundreds of millions](#) still go to bed hungry, food has become [denutritified](#), functioning rural economies have been [destroyed](#), diseases have [spiked](#) in correlation with the increase in use of pesticides and GMOs, soil has been [eroded or degraded](#), diets are [less diverse](#), global food security has been [undermined](#) and access to food is [determined by](#) manipulated international markets and speculation – not supply and demand.

Food and agriculture has become wedded to power structures that have restructured indigenous agriculture across the world and tied it to an international system of trade based on export-oriented mono-cropping, commodity production for a manipulated and volatile international market and indebtedness to international financial institutions.

In itself, technology is neutral. But to understand how technology is used in the real world we must appreciate who owns and controls technology, whose interests it ultimately serves and how it is forced onto the market and functions in an economic system driven by profit and geopolitics and the compulsion to capture and control markets, while all the time hiding behind an ideology of 'free choice' and 'democracy'.

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