

For Your Own Good! Embedding Transnational Agribusiness and GMOs into African Agriculture Under the Veil of Philanthropy

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The African Centre for Biodiversity (ACB) has just released the report [For your own good!](#), which outlines the GMO industry's expansion across Africa. The report focusses on non-commercial traditional crops, such as cassava, sorghum, sweet potato, pigeon pea, cowpea, banana and rice, which corporations are attempting to genetically modify and roll out under the guise of philanthropy.

The report reveals that a great deal of research and development is currently underway into the genetic modification (GM) of these crops. Most of the on-going trials concentrate on drought and salt tolerance, nitrogen use efficiency, resistance to tropical pests and diseases and nutritional enhancement (biofortification). The key countries that have been targeted include Burkina Faso, Egypt, Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, [Uganda](#) and [Malawi](#).

The genesis of GM research into these crops can be found in royalty-free donations of various patented GM traits by several transnational companies to experimental programmes undertaken by African scientists employed by government ministries. These companies include Monsanto, Dupont and Pioneer Hi-bred.

Mariam Mayet, Director of the ACB, says:

“This indicates that the GM industry, under the veil of technology donations and public financing, is effectively managing to make further inroads into imposing GM on the African continent. By focusing the research on traits meant to ‘benefit’ farmers and malnourished populations, through inter alia, biofortification, the industry is intent on giving a humanitarian face to the real involvement, vested interests and expanding influence of these MNCs in African agriculture”.

The main players involved include the African Agriculture Technology Foundation (AATF), which is on the receiving end of many of the technological property rights donations, the Agricultural Biotechnology Support Program (ABSP) and the Program for Biosafety Systems (PBS). The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) and [USAID](#) fund the latter organisations.

US-based research institutions such as the Donald Danforth Plant Science Center (DDPSC) (for cassava) and universities (notably [Michigan State University](#) and Kansas State University) play a major role in this ‘philanthropic’ research.

The ACB report notes there is a dearth of literature that critically addresses biosafety issues

and socio-economic aspects relating to the biofortification of indigenous crops through GM. According to the authors, this is especially important given the need to move away from an over-emphasis on food fortification strategies towards a permanent solution: diet diversification through locally available foods, which was recognised as early as 1992 by the UN International Conference on Nutrition.

As is the case with the controversial Golden Rice research and development project, the report argues these GM projects are diverting financial and human resources and policies and practices away from implementing the real solutions that can be found within the diversity of natural foods and farming.

Zakiyya Ismail, Consumer Campaigner with the [ACB](#) argues:

“The real solutions to address vitamin and mineral deficiencies can be found in ecological farming systems, and traditional kitchen and home gardens, which can better contribute to healthy and diverse diets and empower people to access and produce their own healthy and varied food.”



ACB stresses that smallholder farmers must be given the right to choose their means of production and survival. It adds even if gene sequences and constructs are donated, the accompanying requisite GM inputs will be expensive for farmers. GM crops are highly likely to increase the costs of production for farmers and lead them into indebtedness and dependency.

The report by ACB follows a [Global Justice Now](#) report that outlines the role of BMGF in spearheading a drive into Africa on behalf of ‘corporate America’ to facilitate a GMO/green revolution.

With assets of \$43.5 billion, BMGF is the largest charitable foundation in the world and distributes more aid for global health than any government. Its strategy is intended to deepen the role of multinational companies, even though these corporations are responsible for much of the poverty and injustice that already plagues the Global South. The foundation’s programmes have a specific ideological strategy that promotes neo-liberal economic policies, corporate globalisation, GMOs and an outdated (colonialist) view of role of aid in ‘helping’ the poor.

Global Justice Now shows that the senior staff of BMGF’s programmes are overwhelmingly drawn from ‘corporate America’. As a result, the question is: whose interests are being promoted – those of corporate America or those of ordinary people who seek social and economic justice rather than charity?

Hardly a dyed-in-the-wool Marxist, Peter Buffet is the son of the billionaire investor Warren Buffet. He recently argued that philanthropy only serves to end up perpetuating systems of oppression.

Writing in the [New York Times](#), Buffett criticised “philanthropic colonialism,” where rich people get involved with issues they understand very little about. In the meantime, the wealthy get to feel good for “solving” the problems that they or the system they benefitted from caused in the first place.

Buffet wrote:

“As more lives and communities are destroyed by the system that creates vast amounts of wealth for the few, the more heroic it sounds to “give back.” It’s what I would call “conscience laundering” — feeling better about accumulating more than any one person could possibly need to live on by sprinkling a little around as an act of charity.”

He went on to say that this just keeps the existing structure of inequality in place:

“Nearly every time someone feels better by doing good, on the other side of the world (or street), someone else is further locked into a system that will not allow the true flourishing of his or her nature or the opportunity to live a joyful and fulfilled life.”

Conscience laundering may be all well and good for individuals, but corporations are legally obliged to maximise profits for their shareholders, and ‘philanthropy’ can be regarded as part of a long-term strategy. Getting GMOs into Africa by any means makes hard-headed business sense.

And as if to underline this, according to ACB, it is highly likely that GM varieties will be subject to plant breeders’ rights and GM certified seed will be sold to farmers by local seed companies who will expect a profit or royalty payments from farmers. This scenario is of vital importance because the traditional crops in question are the common heritage of African farmers and often the last defence against hunger in poor communities.

Mariam Mayet concludes:

“There is no such thing as a free lunch for African farmers. And to add insult to injury, these farmers will be precluded from saving any farm-saved propagating material. In this way, they will be expected to give away their age old farmers’ rights to freely reuse, exchange and sell seed and propagating materials in their farming and seed systems.”

The ‘philanthropy’ currently being dished out in Africa does not empower local farmers but is aimed at getting GMOs (with all of the [associated problems](#)) into agriculture, sucking farmers into the [prevailing power structures](#) of US capitalism and marginalising credible, [alternative approaches](#) based on self-sufficiency, sustainability and sound ecological practices.

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