

Pro-GMO Lobby: Genetically Engineered Golden Rice: Is This the Solution for Disease, Poverty and Malnutrition?

False Promises, Smears

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The pro-GMO lobby often relies on fraud, regulatory delinquency, opaque practices, smear campaigns, dirty tricks, slick PR and the debasement of science. While choosing to sideline the root causes of poverty, hunger, malnutrition and regional food insecurity (and [effective solutions](#)), it promotes a techno quick-fix based on profitable proprietary technology.

At the same time, prominent advocates of GM attempt to deflect attention from their own [self-interest](#) in promoting this technology and their [hypocritical](#) attitudes towards the poor by smearing their critics and offering sound bites about 'feeding the poor and hungry'. And then there are the wealthy agritech corporations which flex their financial and political muscle and effectively hijack democracy for their own ends by slanting, science, politics, policies and regulation (these claims are discussed [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)).

Given this situation, it should not be about whether we are pro-GMO or anti-GMO. It is more the case of whether we are anti-corruption and pro-democratic.

People are demanding transparency, genuine independent testing and genuine independent evaluations of the impacts of GM on farmers' livelihoods, ecology, the environment and on human and animal health. They also require fair and open debate.

Instead, what we too often get are dirty tricks, smears and PR from supporters of GM, which demonstrate a deep ideological commitment to corporate power and profit, rather than an openness and a willingness to address the concerns of those who question the efficacy of GMOs and the practices of the companies, politicians and scientists who are promoting this technology.

It is about what is best for farmers, the public as consumers of food and the environment, not what is best for research funding and career paths, well-paid lobbyists, rich CEOs and wealthy shareholders.

The case of Golden Rice

GMO advocates have long argued that genetically engineered Golden Rice is a practical way to provide poor farmers in remote areas with a subsistence crop capable of adding much-needed vitamin A to local diets. Vitamin A deficiency is a problem in many poor countries in the Global South and leaves millions at high risk for infection, diseases and other maladies, such as blindness.

Some scientists believe that Golden Rice, which has been developed with funding from the Rockefeller Foundation, could help save the lives of around 670,000 children who die each year from Vitamin A deficiency and another 350,000 who go blind.

Meanwhile, critics say there are serious issues with Golden Rice and that alternative approaches to tackling vitamin A deficiency should be implemented. Greenpeace and other environmental groups say the claims being made by the pro-Golden Rice lobby are misleading and are oversimplifying the actual problems in combating vitamin A deficiency. Moreover, they argue that the Golden Rice programme is diverting attention from other more effective solutions.

Many critics regard Golden Rice as an over-hyped Trojan horse that biotechnology corporations and their allies hope will pave the way for the global approval of other more profitable GMO crops. The Rockefeller Foundation might be regarded as a 'charitable' entity but its [track record](#) indicates it has been very much part of an agenda which facilitates commercial and geopolitical interests to the detriment of indigenous agriculture and local and national economies.

The pro-Golden Rice lobby's smears and attacks

As Britain's Environment Secretary in 2013, [Owen Paterson claimed](#) that opponents of GMOs were "casting a dark shadow over attempts to feed the world". Talking about golden rice, he called for the rapid roll-out of vitamin A-enhanced rice to help prevent the cause of up to a third of the world's child deaths:

GMO It's just disgusting that little children are allowed to go blind and die because of a hang-up by a small number of people about this technology. I feel really strongly about it. I think what they do is absolutely wicked.

Paterson claimed:

There are 17 million farmers, farming 170 million hectares which is 12 per cent of the world's arable area, seven times the surface area of the UK [with GM] and no one has ever brought me a single case of a health problem.

When you think that golden rice has been developed by philanthropists and could have a dramatic impact on children who are going blind from Vitamin A deficiency or dying from Vitamin A deficiency it is absolutely wicked that these environmental groups oppose it. There is no other word for it.

[Paul Evans](#), a communications and media consultant who promotes Golden Rice via his Twitter account and the Allow Golden Rice Now website, also engages in rhetoric aimed at critics of Golden Rice by calling them "anti-capitalist", "socialist", "nut jobs", "human hating" ideologues and "anti-science", among all the other various falsehoods and misleading statements he makes (see [this](#) and [this](#)).

Then there is his associate, corporate lobbyist Patrick Moore, who forms part of the pro-GMO lobby's attacks on critics of GM. Whether it is Paterson, Mark Lynas, Moore or other prominent attack-dogs for the biotech industry, their rhetoric [takes the well-worn cynically devised PR line](#) that anti-GMO activists and environmentalists are little more than privileged,

affluent people residing in rich countries and are denying the poor the supposed benefits of GM crops.

As of 2010, according to George Monbiot's piece in [The Guardian](#), Moore himself made "less than the average corporate lawyer" (which is currently \$98,000 in 2016) and had three homes.

Monbiot wrote:

His services have been widely used not only by controversial companies, but also by the media, for which he writes articles and gives interviews attacking environmental groups and their campaigns. While he is invariably billed as a co-founder of Greenpeace, I have come across only two instances in which viewers or readers are told that he works for companies with an interest in the issues he's discussing.

Monbiot says:

At one point in our correspondence he asserted: "I do not attack environmentalists, show me an example." It happened that on the same day he had sent an email to the green group GMWatch, in which he told them: "You are a bunch of murdering bastards." When I pointed this out to him, he told me: "I made an exception for murdering bastards... Besides which it was not against any particular person but rather at the whole lot of the murdering bastards."

Moore's attack on GMWatch was in response to an article from May 2009 criticising the way Golden Rice has been abused for PR purposes. People can read all about that [here](#), where Moore says "Your piece on Golden Rice is enough to make one puke." And in further correspondence states "The beta-carotene level is well above required amounts and it is perfectly safe and you are a bunch of murdering bastards." Moore continued:

... I can see right through you and your anti-human, murderous agenda. If you know of some better way to save millions of people from suffering and death why don't you do something about it you low-life, profiteering on ignorance, murdering creeps?

After 24 years, Golden Rice does not work and opponents are not to blame

So what of golden rice? Are the critics right to raise doubts about its efficacy, safety and the motives of those who are pushing for it? Will it prevent millions of children from going blind or save their lives?

And what about the emotional blackmail employed by supporters of Golden Rice and the abuse directed towards opponents?

In a recent article in the journal [Agriculture & Human Values](#), despite the claims of Paterson, Moore Evans and others, Glenn Stone and Dominic Glover find little evidence that anti-GMO activists are to blame for Golden Rice's unfulfilled promises. Golden rice is still years away from field introduction and even then, may fall short of lofty health benefits claimed by its

supporters.

Professor Glenn Stone from Washington University in St. Louis [stated that](#):

Golden Rice is still not ready for the market, but we find little support for the common claim that environmental activists are responsible for stalling its introduction. GMO opponents have not been the problem.

Stone adds:

The rice simply has not been successful in test plots of the rice breeding institutes in the Philippines, where the leading research is being done. It has not even been submitted for approval to the regulatory agency, the Philippine Bureau of Plant Industry (BPI).

While activists did destroy one Golden Rice test plot in a 2013 protest, it is unlikely that this action had any significant impact on the approval of Golden Rice.

Stone says:

Destroying test plots is a dubious way to express opposition, but this was only one small plot out of many plots in multiple locations over many years. Moreover, they have been calling Golden Rice critics 'murderers' for over a decade.

Believing that Golden Rice was originally a promising idea backed by good intentions, Stone argued that it deserved a chance to succeed. But, on the back of his research, he argues:

But if we are actually interested in the welfare of poor children – instead of just fighting over GMOs – then we have to make unbiased assessments of possible solutions. The simple fact is that after 24 years of research and breeding, Golden Rice is still years away from being ready for release.

Since 2013, Stone has directed a major Templeton Foundation-funded research project on rice in the Philippines. His research compares Golden Rice to other types of rice developed and cultivated in the Philippines. As part of the Golden Rice initiative, researchers introduce genes into existing rice strains to coax these GMO plants into producing the micronutrient beta carotene in the edible part of the grain.

As Stone and Glover note in the article, researchers continue to have problems developing beta carotene-enriched strains that yield as well as non-GMO strains already being grown by farmers. The two authors point out that it is still unknown if the beta carotene in Golden Rice can even be converted to vitamin A in the bodies of badly undernourished children. There also has been little research on how well the beta carotene in Golden Rice will hold up when stored for long periods between harvest seasons, or when cooked using traditional methods common in remote rural locations.

Stones says that, as the development of Golden Rice creeps along, the Philippines has managed to slash the incidence of Vitamin A deficiency by non-GMO methods.

Golden Rice: in whose interest?

The evidence presented here might lead us to question why supporters of Golden Rice continue to smear critics and engage in abuse and emotional blackmail when they are not to blame for the failure of Golden Rice to reach the commercial market. It begs the question of whether they are capable of carrying out the “unbiased assessments” that Stone mentions.

Whose interests are they really serving in pushing so hard for this technology?

In 2011, Marcia Ishii-Eiteman, a senior scientist with a background in insect ecology and pest management [asked a similar question](#):

“Who oversees this ambitious project, which its advocates claim will end the suffering of millions?”

She answered her question by stating:

An elite, so-called “[Humanitarian Board](#)” where [Syngenta sits](#) – along with the inventors of Golden Rice, Rockefeller Foundation, USAID and public relations and marketing experts, among a handful of others. Not a single farmer, indigenous person or even an ecologist, or sociologist to assess the huge political, social, and ecological implications of this massive experiment. And the leader of IRRI’s Golden Rice project is none other than [Gerald Barry](#), previously [Director of Research](#) at Monsanto.

What we should be doing is finding out what would be best for malnourished children rather than pushing a failing technology on behalf of transnational agritech companies that has thus far been 24 years in the making.

While highlighting the reasons why Golden Rice would be an economic and ecological disaster for Asia, [Sarojeni V. Rengam](#), Executive Director of Pesticide Action Network Asia and the Pacific, also called on the donors and scientists involved to wake up and do the right thing:

Golden Rice is really a ‘Trojan horse’; a public relations stunt pulled by the agri-business corporations to garner acceptance of GE crops and food. The whole idea of GE seeds is to make money... we want to send out a strong message to all those supporting the promotion of Golden Rice, especially donor organizations, that their money and efforts would be better spent on restoring natural and agricultural biodiversity rather than destroying it by promoting monoculture plantations and genetically engineered (GE) food crops.

In 2013, the Soil Association [highlighted](#) short-term measures that have been successful in reducing vitamin A deficiency, while indicating what could be done in the long-term to eradicate it.

It concluded by saying:

... there are already effective cures for vitamin A deficiency, both short-term and long-term, we know that these work, and we know that the long-term solutions solve not just the problem of vitamin A deficiency, which does not occur in isolation, but the wider problem of multiple vitamin deficiency.

If all the resources poured into Golden Rice had been diverted to facilitating these solutions, perhaps even greater progress would have now been achieved in tackling vitamin A deficiency and addressing the broader issues of poverty.

However, one obstacle has been the Philippine government's cooptation to the agenda of transnational corporations and the WTO and the revolving door that exists between government, academia and corporations (as Belinda Espiritu outlines [here](#)).

In order to tackle disease, malnutrition and poverty, you have to first understand the underlying causes - or indeed *want* to understand them. [Walden Bello notes](#) that the complex of policies that pushed the Philippines into an economic quagmire over the past 30 years is due to 'structural adjustment', involving prioritizing debt repayment, conservative macroeconomic management, huge cutbacks in government spending, trade and financial liberalization, privatization and deregulation, the restructuring of agriculture and export-oriented production.

Whether it concerns The Philipinnes, [Ethiopia](#), [Somalia](#) or [Africa](#) as a whole, the effects of IMF/World Bank 'structural adjustments' have devastated agrarian economies and made them dependent on Western agribusiness, manipulated markets and trade.

And GMOs are now offered as the 'cure' to 'boost productivity' or to tackle poverty-related diseases.

These are the huge issues that the pro-GMO agritech lobby does not like to discuss, though, not least because it advocates such policies and benefits from them, as Espiritu demonstrates in her piece. But any discussion of these issues brings up the predictable abuse of it all being just "[anti-capitalist twaddle](#)".

But that's the whole point isn't it? Anything to close down open debate.

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