

# GMO Agriculture and the Narrative of Choice

By [Colin Todhunter](#)

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Theme: [Biotechnology and GMO](#), [Media Disinformation](#)

*The pro-GMO lobby claim critics of the technology 'deny farmers choice'. They say that farmers should have access to a range of tools and technologies. It is all about maximising choice and options. Taken at face value, who would want to deny choice?*

At the same time, however, we do not want to end up offering a false choice (rolling out technologies that have little value and only serve to benefit those who control the technology), to unleash an innovation that has an adverse impact on those who do not use it or to manipulate a situation whereby only one option is available because other options have been deliberately made unavailable or less attractive. And we would certainly not wish to roll out a technology that traps farmers on a treadmill that they find difficult to get off.

When discussing choice, it is can be very convenient to focus on end processes (choices made available - or denied - to farmers at the farm level), while ignoring the procedures and decisions that were made in corporate boardrooms, by government agencies and by regulatory bodies which result in the shaping and roll-out of options.

Where GMOs are concerned, [Steven Druker](#) argues that the decision to commercialise GM seeds and food in the US was based on regulatory delinquency. Druker indicates that if the US Food and Drug Administration had heeded its own experts' advice and publicly acknowledged their warnings about risk, the GM venture would have imploded and would have never gained traction.

It is fine to talk about choice while ignoring what amounts to a subversion of democratic processes, which could result in (and arguably is resulting in) changing the genetic core of the world's food. Whose 'choice' was it to do this? Was the choice given to the US public, the consumers of GM food? Did ordinary people choose for GM food to appear on their supermarket shelves?

No, that choice was denied. The decision was carried out above their heads, ultimately to benefit [Monsanto's bottom line](#) and to gain strategic leverage over global agriculture. And, now that GM food is on the market, can they choose whether to buy it? Again, the answer is no. The massive [lobbying firepower](#) of GMO agritech and food corporations have ensured this food is unlabelled and the public has been denied the right to choose.

Of course, let's not also forget that the GMO venture, like the original Green Revolution, often works with bio-pirated germplasm: little more than theft from the Global South to be tweaked and sold back as hybrid or patented GM seeds to the Global South (read [The Great Seed Piracy](#)).

But any serious discussion about the corporate capture of agriculture, seed patenting, the role of the WTO or World Bank, or issues concerning dependency, development and

ensuring genuine food security by addressing the dynamics of neoliberal capitalism (globalisation), are often shouted down by pro-GMO scientists and their supporters with accusations of ‘conspiracy theory’. Based on my own personal experience, this even occurs when referring to the work of respected academics who are sneered at as non-scientists and whose PhDs and the peer-reviewed journals their work appear in are somehow unworthy of recognition.

Yet, aside from the issues mentioned above which need to be addressed if we are to achieve equitable global food security (issues the pro-GMO lobby and its prominent scientists in academia seem to not want to discuss – for them, the ‘conspiracy’ slur will suffice), the fact is that the industry has placed GM on the market fraudulently, is complicit in seed piracy and has fought hard to deny consumer choice by using its political and financial clout along the way to undermine democratic processes. Issues that are highly relevant to any discussion about ‘choice’.

(For the sake of brevity, Monsanto’s subversion of science and issues emerging from the ‘Monsanto Papers’ will be put to one side, as this has been presented on numerous occasions [elsewhere](#).)

What are critics denying?

So, just what is it that critics are said to be denying farmers when it comes to the right to choose?

Pro-GMO activists say that GM crops can increase yields, reduce the use of agrochemicals and are required if we are to feed the world. To date, however, the track record of GMOs is unimpressive.

Image on the right: Bt cotton



In [India](#) and [Burkina Faso](#), for example, Bt cotton has hardly been a success. And although critics are blamed for Golden Rice not being on the market, this is a convenient smokescreen that attempts to hide the reality that after two decades [problems remain](#) with the technology.

Moreover, a largely non-GMO Europe [tends to outperform](#) the US, which largely relies on GM crops. In general, “GM crops have not consistently increased yields or farmer incomes, or reduced pesticide use in North America or in the Global South (Benbrook, 2012; Gurian-Sherman, 2009)” (from the report ‘Persistent narratives, persistent failure’).

GM agriculture is not ‘[feeding the world](#)’, nor has it been designed to do so: the companies

that push GM are located firmly within the paradigm of industrial agriculture and associated power relations that shape a '[stuffed and starved](#)' strategy resulting in strategic surpluses and scarcities across the globe. The choice for farmers between a technology that is so often based on [broken promises](#) and non-GMO agriculture offers little more than a false choice.

"Currently available GM crops would not lead to major yield gains in Europe," [says Matin Qaim](#), a researcher at Georg-August-University of Göttingen, Germany.

Consider too that once the genetic genie is out of the bottle, there may be no way of going back. For instance, Roger Levett, specialist in sustainable development, argues ('Choice: Less can be more, in Food Ethics, Vol. 3, No. 3, Autumn 2008):

"If some people are allowed to choose to grow, sell and consume GMO foods, soon nobody will be able to choose food, or a biosphere, free of GMOs. It's a one-way choice... once it's made, it can't be reversed."

There is [much evidence](#) showing that GM and non-GM crops cannot co-exist. Indeed, contamination seems to be part of a cynical industry strategy. For instance, GM food crops are already [illegally growing](#) in India.

And if we turn our attention to India, recent reports indicate that herbicide tolerant (HT) cotton seeds are [now available](#) in certain states. Bt cotton (designed to be pest resistant) is the only legally sanctioned GM crop in India. HT crops are not only illegal in India but have led to [serious problems](#) in countries where they are used. The Supreme Court-appointed TEC Committee said that such crops are [wholly inappropriate](#) for India.

It seems that, however, according to [reports](#), many farmers are 'choosing' to buy these seeds. And this is where the pro-GMO activists jump in and yell their mantra about offering choice to farmers.

Regardless of the laws of the country being violated, things are not that simple.

Manufacturing 'choice'

Professor Glenn Stone has conducted extensive field research concerning India's cotton farmers. By employing the concept of technology treadmills as well as environmental, social and didactic learning, he can help us understand the 'choices' that farmers make.

Stone has noted where Bt cotton has been concerned, any decision by farmers to plant GM seeds was not necessarily based on objective decision-making. There was no experimentation or the testing of seeds within agroecological contexts by farmers as has been the case traditionally.

On the back of a national media campaign about the miracle wonder seeds and a push by Monsanto to get Bt cotton into India in the 1990s, farmers eventually found themselves at the mercy of seed vendors who sold whatever seed they had in stock, regardless of what the farmers wanted. Without agricultural support services from trusted non-governmental organisations, farmers had to depend on local shopkeepers. They believed they were buying

the latest and best seeds and created a rush on whatever supplies were available.

The upshot is that traditional knowledge, testing and evaluations by farmers in the field was undermined or broke down and, in many respects, gave way to an unregulated industry-orchestrated free for all. 'Environmental learning' gave way to 'social learning' (farmers merely emulated one another).

However, in agriculture, environmental learning [has gone on for thousands of years](#). Farmers experimented with different plant and animal specimens acquired through migration, trading networks, gift exchanges or accidental diffusion. By learning and doing, trial and error, new knowledge was blended with older, traditional knowledge systems.

Farmers took measures to manage drought, grow cereals with long stalks that can be used as fodder, engage in cropping practices that promote biodiversity, ethno-engineer soil and water conservation, use self-provisioning systems on farm recycling and use collective sharing systems such as managing common resource properties. In short, farmers knew their micro-environment.

To get farmers onto a corporate technology treadmill, environmental learning pathways have to be broken, and Stone [offers good insight](#) into how this occurred with Bt cotton and is now happening with HT cotton. He describes how traditional 'double-lining' ox ploughing is breaking down due to 'didactic learning' under the promise of increased productivity. After having adopted 'single-lining' ploughing (as advocated by didactic 'teachers'), this promise does not seem to have materialised. However, the farmer is now faced with more weeds.

So, who could blame the farmer for being attracted towards HT cotton and the purchasing of herbicides as a perceived easy fix when faced with an increase in weeds and government policies that have inadvertently increased farm labour costs?

The breaking with traditional practices (or pathways) to implement fresh approaches (which fail deliver much benefit) can be regarded as part of the process of nudging farmers towards seeking out alternative options to deal with the new problems that arise (the beginning of the treadmill).

It is highly convenient that illegal HT seeds now seem widely available. It dovetails with Monsanto's stated plan to boost herbicide sales in India (which it regards as a potentially massive growth market). And if farmers demand these seeds, (farmers are a huge vote bank for politicians), Monsanto (now Bayer) might eventually achieve what it has been pushing for all along: India embracing GM agriculture.

In effect, Stone (with his colleague Andrew Flachs) helps us to understand how 'didactic learning' (which Monsanto has been undertaking with Indian farmers since the 1990s) can result in driving farmers towards the very option and very choice Monsanto wants them to make. Stone and Flachs also make it clear that once farmers are on an agrochemical/agritech treadmill, it is very difficult for them to get off, even when they are aware it is failing.

A question of power

When the pro-GMO lobby uses 'choice' as a stick to hit critics with, it fails to acknowledge these processes, which powerful agritech players are cynically manipulating for their own ends. In other words, 'choices' or options must be understood within the broader context of

power.

Choice is also about the options that could be made available, but which have been closed off or are not even considered. Take [the case](#) of Andhra Pradesh in India. The state government is committed to scaling up zero budget natural farming to six million farmers by 2024. In [Ethiopia](#), agroecology has been scaled up across the entire Tigray region. These types of initiatives are succeeding because of enlightened political leaders and the commitment of key institutions.

However, in places where global agribusiness/agritech corporations have levered themselves into strategic positions, their interests prevail. From the overall narrative that industrial agriculture is necessary to feed the world to providing lavish research grants and the capture of important policy-making institutions, these firms have secured a perceived thick legitimacy within policymakers' mindsets and mainstream discourse. As a result, agroecological approaches are marginalised and receive scant attention and support.

This perceived legitimacy allows these corporations to devise and implement policies on national and international levels. For example, it was Monsanto that had a leading role in drafting the WTO Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights to create seed monopolies. The global food processing industry wrote the WTO Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures. Whether it involves [Codex](#) or the [Knowledge Initiative on Agriculture](#) aimed at restructuring Indian agriculture, the powerful agribusiness/food lobby has secured privileged access to policy makers.

So how can the pro-GMO lobby assert with any degree of credibility that it is a bunch of activists curtailing or defining choice when it has been powerless to prevent any of this, either at 'field level' in places like India or within governments and international bodies?

As Stone and Flachs describe, it is Monsanto – a Fortune 500 company with all its influence and wealth (not 'anti-GMO activists') – that has taken its brand of corporate activism (imperialism) to farmers to expand its influence and boost its bottom line:

“Beginning with 500 farmer programs in 2007, Monsanto India targeted a range of farmers through an herbicide research program... They also conducted more than 10,000 farm demonstrations directed at small and large farmers in 2012 to raise awareness of Roundup® and discourage knockoff products... These efforts build on Monsanto's didactic activities since the late 1990s. For instance, in Andhra Pradesh the Meekosam Project placed Monsanto employees in villages to demonstrate products and promote hybrid seeds and chemical inputs...”

From the World Bank's '[enabling the business of agriculture](#)' to the [Gates Foundation's role](#) in opening up African agriculture to the global food and agribusiness oligopolies, democratic procedures at sovereign state levels are being bypassed to impose seed monopolies and proprietary inputs on farmers and to incorporate them into a global supply chain dominated by powerful corporations.

Whether it involves the [destruction of](#) indigenous agriculture in Africa or the ongoing dismantling of Indian agriculture at the behest of transnational agribusiness, where is the democratic 'choice'?

Ukraine's agriculture sector is being [opened up](#) to Monsanto. Iraq's seed laws [were changed](#) to facilitate the entry of Monsanto. India's edible oils sector [was undermined](#) to facilitate the entry of Cargill. And [Bayer's hand](#) is possibly behind the ongoing strategy behind GM mustard in India. Through secretive trade deals, strings-attached loans and outright duplicity, the global food and agribusiness conglomerates have scant regard for democracy, let alone choice.



As Michel Chossudovsky outlines in his book 'The Globalization of Poverty' (2003), the ongoing aim is to displace localised, indigenous methods of food production and allow transnational companies to take over, thereby [tying farmers and regions](#) into a system of neoliberal globalization. Whether it involves the [undermining or destruction](#) of what were once largely self-sufficient agrarian economies or what we are currently seeing in India, the agenda is clear.

In finishing, one final point should be noted. In their rush to readily promote neoliberal dogma and corporate-inspired PR, many government officials, scientists and journalists take as given that ([corrupt](#)) profit-driven transnational corporations have a legitimate claim to be custodians of natural assets. There is the premise that water, seeds, food, soil and agriculture should be handed over to powerful transnational corporations to milk for profit, under the pretence these entities are somehow serving the needs of humanity.

These natural assets ('the commons') should be under common stewardship and managed in the common interest by local people assisted by public institutions and governments acting on their behalf because that's the bottom line where genuine choice is concerned.

And how can we move towards this? It is already happening: we should take inspiration from the many successful agroecological projects around the world.

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## Seeds of Destruction: Hidden Agenda of Genetic Manipulation

Author Name: F. William Engdahl

ISBN Number: 978-0-937147-2-2

Year: 2007

Pages: 341 pages with complete index

List Price: \$25.95

Special Price: \$18.00

This skilfully researched book focuses on how a small socio-political American elite seeks to establish control over the very basis of human survival: the provision of our daily bread.

“Control the food and you control the people.”

This is no ordinary book about the perils of GMO. Engdahl takes the reader inside the corridors of power, into the backrooms of the science labs, behind closed doors in the corporate boardrooms.

The author cogently reveals a diabolical world of profit-driven political intrigue, government corruption and coercion, where genetic manipulation and the patenting of life forms are used to gain worldwide control over food production. If the book often reads as a crime story, that should come as no surprise. For that is what it is.

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