

Seed Aid is Big Business

Stop the “Flood” of Corporate Seeds in the Agricultural Reconstruction of Pakistan

By [Grain](#)

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GRAIN Press Release

The flooding that submerged nearly a fifth of Pakistan starting in July this year displaced about 20 million people and killed nearly 2,000. This number of people whose property and livelihoods were destroyed surpassed the number of combined victims of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, 2005 Kashmir earthquake and the Haiti earthquake earlier this year. Without a doubt, it was one of Pakistan’s worst floods ever.

“The destruction isn’t over yet. A big threat looms in the way the government is rebuilding agriculture, in partnership with big agribusiness companies, in the flood-stricken areas of Pakistan,” says Azra Sayeed of Roots for Equity, a Karachi-based grassroots NGO that works with small and landless peasants in the flooded areas. “A torrent of corporate hybrid seeds, and possibly GM seeds as some suspect, packaged with fertilisers, farm implements and production credit is streaming into the affected provinces in the name of agricultural reconstruction.”

Free seeds?

In October, a consignment of 2,000 bags of wheat seeds was dispatched to flood-hit farmers by the Mir Khalil-ur-Rahman Foundation (MKRF) and the Imran Khan Flood Relief Fund (IKRF). A scheme was launched to provide wheat seeds to farmers owning 25 acres of land in every flood-hit province without discrimination. Under the scheme, certified and good quality seeds were provided to farmers covering 150,000 acres of land. [1] Also since early November, the United States government has provided about US\$ 62 million to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) to expand an agriculture recovery program to the Province of Balochistan. The program includes provision of seed and fertilizer to flood-affected farmers, to help salvage the winter planting seasons and restore livelihoods for farmers in flood-affected areas. [2]

Sindh Chief Minister, Syed Qaim Ali Shah, has said last month that the government’s attention is focused on the rehabilitation of more than seven million flood-affected people and efforts are being made to give Rs100,000 (US\$ 1,165) as well as seeds and fertilisers to each survivor family free of cost. [3] There are reports, however, that not all of this is free, as the seeds are being tied to micro-finance packages where fertilisers and services are only provided to small farmers through loans.

The threat of contamination

What the seeds are and where they come from are of deep concern. Currently they are being distributed in small white plastic bags with the monogram of UN World Food Programme. Unfortunately, there's very little public information available. And without an independent body monitoring the inflow of seeds to Pakistan, it's hard to rule out if some of the seeds and foodstuff being distributed are not GMOs or products of GMOs. With Bayer, BASF, Monsanto, Du Pont, Dow Chemical and Cargill, among the long list of donors to Pakistan's rehabilitation, the suspicion is high that these companies can use the situation to get their GM seeds on the ground and make contamination a done deal.

Cargill is known for receiving huge subsidies from the US government to dump vast amounts of grains in poorer countries. It also processes soybean oil for Monsanto. Bayer Crop Science has a GM canola variety called Invigor, while Monsanto has the herbicide resistant Round-up Ready canola. On the other hand, BASF and Monsanto have a joint undertaking to develop GM wheat. Dow Chemical owns Mycogen which has a range of GM and hybrid seeds - maize, canola, soybeans, sorghum, and sunflower. In the Sindh province, sunflower seeds have been distributed with their source of origin unknown. Some Pakistani farmers are worried that seeds of GM canola may outcross to their local mustard varieties. Canola and mustard, both open-pollinated crops are from the same Brassica family, which also includes cabbage as distant relative. The possibility of GM contamination cannot be ruled out.

"It's not just the seeds that are of concern here. It's the entire drive to transform Pakistan's agriculture into cash crop export production, controlled by a few big seed and agrochemical companies, at the expense of its own food security," says Vlady Rivera of GRAIN, a small international non-profit organisation that works to support small farmers and social movements in their struggles for community-controlled and biodiversity-based food systems. "To take advantage of the post-flood situation to push that corporate agenda is simply perverse. What people normally see as seed aid on the surface is actually big business at the core."

A deal with Monsanto

As part of its rehabilitation program, Pakistan's agriculture ministry entered a deal with Monsanto for a large-scale importation of its Bt Cotton seeds, despite strong opposition from local seed producers and farmers groups. The Seed Association of Pakistan (SAP) has warned the Punjab government to refrain from signing an agreement with Monsanto, believing this will "annihilate national seed companies, besides causing huge financial burden on the national treasury." The group also believes that the importation of Bt cotton seed by the Pakistani government will cost the country millions of dollars in compensatory and royalty payments. [4]

Almost the entire global acreage of about 4.6 million hectares of Bt cotton is sown to Monsanto's Bollgard variety. In Pakistan, farmers have been growing these Bt cotton seeds, smuggled from India, during last four years. The deal with Monsanto will legalise this.

"This deal by the government with Monsanto can cause more harm than good as it poses great potential for the country's biodiversity to be wiped out," says Gilbert Sape of the Pesticide Action Network Asia and the Pacific (PAN AP), a regional network that supports grassroots movement in promoting food sovereignty and biodiversity-based ecological agriculture. "The use of GM crops has been proven to contaminate the soil, making it almost impossible to cultivate other agricultural products. Far from extending long-denied land

rights and food security to small food producers, it will mean handing over peoples' rights and control of Pakistan's food supply to Monsanto."

He proposes: "Pakistan must first ensure the peoples' rights to safe, nutritious and culturally appropriate food in sufficient quantity and quality before taking a step on global food trade. More so, national governments must guarantee the development of its own agricultural sector to ensure the realization of the peoples' right to food sovereignty."

At the annual national meeting of Pakistan Kissan Mazdoor Tehreek (PKMT), an alliance of small and landless farmers, held on December 1-2, 2010, more than 170 delegates from all four provinces of the country strongly rejected the flood of Bt Cotton seeds into the country. Farmers demanded that agricultural reconstruction "be based on ecologically sound, locally developed and managed methods of farming, not corporate agriculture that extracts super profits by promoting farmers' dependence on external inputs that push them further into debt and misery."

The farmers also stressed the urgency for "establishing seed banks of peasant seeds in different agro-climatic zones of the country instead of relying on one-size-fits-all corporate seeds." According to M Azeem, a small farmer from Khairpur and a member of PKMT, "Seed banks would allow farmers to rely on their own local traditional varieties of seeds which are necessary in the face of the other climatic disasters that Pakistan may have to deal with as a result of global warming."

Chance for landgrab?

The post-flood situation makes it easier as well for countries to pursue their landgrab goals. The Saudi government for example has extended their economic co-operation for rebuilding flood hit areas, by committing to provide US\$ 300 million worth of concessionary loans and another \$100 million to enhance export of Pakistani products into the Saudi market. [5] Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States are investing heavily on Basmati rice. The Far East Agricultural Investment Co, an investment vehicle, has already arranged leases in Pakistan (among other countries) to grow aromatic and long grain Basmati rice. [6]

China Premier Wen Jiabao has also pledged assistance in the amount of US\$ 250 million, when Pakistani President, Asif Ali Zardari visited Beijing in November, hoping that the two countries could "cement cooperation in areas like agriculture, irrigation and infrastructure and enhance coordination in international and regional affairs in a bid to safeguard interests of both countries." [6]

One of China's interests is to expand its hybrid rice seed market, thus along with Saudi Arabia, it is actively seeking lands to lease in Pakistan. According to Veena, a member of the PKMT Sindh Chapter, nearly 10,000 acres of land has been given to a Chinese management in Golarchi, Sindh, where the land is being used for hybrid rice seed varieties. Agricultural labor being hired by the Chinese management makes them work for nearly 12 hours a day for a meagerly return of Rs 200 (\$2) per day which does not include their food or travel costs. Farmers do not know what variety of rice seed is being used but they are sure that it is not any variety being used locally.

"It is this kind of business opportunism that makes the rebuilding of Pakistan even worse than the flood itself. A solution that is worse than the problem," concludes Azra Sayeed of Roots for Equity.

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