



**FoE Africa
Briefing Paper**

WEST AFRICA & THE BIOTECH PUSH

**ECOWAS Ministerial Conference on Biotechnology
Accra, Ghana**

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Accra 2007: another Ministerial to promote GM crops?

March 2007 is a very important date for Western Africa as the ECOWAS Ministerial Conference on Biotechnology holds in Accra, Ghana. This Conference is the follow up to a series of Ministerial Conferences financed and supported by US Government agencies. The Conference is taking place amid a general lack of information and involvement of all the relevant actors dealing with biotechnology issues.

The latest Ministerial Conferences supported by US Government agencies held so far on biotech have been part of a plan to facilitate penetration and acceptance of GM crops in Africa. The Conference taking place in Accra the last week of March seems directed to follow the same fate as her predecessors. FoE Africa condemns this biotech push in the region and calls on the ECOWAS Ministerial Conference to act in the interests of African people, and to stop following a non transparent path.

1. U.S. funded Ministerial Conferences to promote GM crops in Africa

In 2005 the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) hosted an ECOWAS Ministerial Conference on Biotechnology in Bamako, Mali, with financial and technical support from USAID. This Conference was viewed as a follow up to two previous conferences held in 2003 in Sacramento and Ouagadougou, Burkina Fasso in 2004 that had also a direct involvement of US Government agencies.¹

The Mali Conference underlined the need to allocate funds to promote biotechnology, calling for a greater contribution from the national agriculture budgets into biotechnology. The final conclusions of the Conference called for the implementation of a regional Strategic plan on Biosafety to grant more access to biotechnology in West Africa.²

Rather than promoting sustainable agriculture production, the series of Ministerial Conferences held so far on biotech are merely a disguise to a plan to facilitate penetration and acceptance of GM crops in Africa.

Another Ministerial was supposed to take place in 2006, but it did not happen. The strategic plan on biotechnology for the region has not yet seen the light; however some press reports indicate that it may see the light at the Accra Ministerial. Professor Alhassan an outspoken proponent of GM crops in West Africa already announced in February this year at a news conference in Accra, that the Ministerial, which will be held in March in Accra will discuss and endorse the ECOWAS sub-regional action plan on biotechnology and safety.³ Professor Walter Alhassan is West African Coordinator, for

¹ USAID. <http://www.usaid.gov/missions/westafrica/newsletter/fsecurity/index.htm>

² Ministerial Conference of ECOWAS states on Biotechnology. Hotel de l'Amitie, Bamako, Mali, June 24, 2005. Main conclusions and recommendations.

³ Ghana to host ECOWAS summit. Ghana Broadcasting Corporation. 1 February 2007. http://www.gbcghana.com/pages/news_detail.php?s=12&newsid=2380

the USAID funded programmes Agricultural Biotechnology Support Project II (ABSP II) and the Program on Biosafety Systems (PBS).⁴

It must be noted that if such a Strategic Plan is endorsed at the Ministerial it would have occurred without any regional public, transparent and participatory process, and with no involvement of the relevant civil society sectors in the region. It is also a matter of serious concern that a GMO advocate was the one to announce publicly the proposed endorsement of such Strategy by the Ministers at a press Conference one month in advance to the Ministerial.

2. The benefits of gm crops: what is real and what is hype?

Before looking into the question of GM crops for Africa, and to examine what lies at the heart of the issue the African Ministers will be discussing, first of all it is crucial to look at the experience with the commercialization of GM crops. Since 2005, Friends of the Earth groups together with our allies around the world have engaged in a thorough global evaluation of the performance and the impacts of GM crop releases around the world since 1996. The objective has been to provide a more accurate picture of the global reality of these crops, and to separate the hype from reality. The reports titled: "**Who Benefits from GM Crops?**" helps answer two crucial questions: What benefits have GM crops brought to the world? And for whom?

Since the introduction of genetically modified crops about a decade ago, the biotech industry has fought tooth and nail to ensure the spread of these crops around the world. This effort has not yielded the expected results because of stiff resistance to the experimental crops and because the crops have not provided the benefits touted by the biotech industry.

GM crops are planted only in a few countries. Around 70% of all GM crops are cultivated in just two countries: US and Argentina, and the remaining are in Brazil, China and Canada. By far the largest grower of GM crops in the world today is the United States of America. But even in the USA only a few traits and a few crops have widely planted even though the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) had approved 71 distinct biotech 'events' for commercial use as of December 2006. These 71 varieties are combinations of 14 different crops and 10 different traits or trait combinations. Despite this seeming diversity, only four crops - maize, cotton, soy and canola - with only two traits - herbicide tolerance and insect resistance - have been grown to any significant extent.

The main conclusion of Friends of the Earth analysis is that GM crops commercialized on a large scale in a few countries since 1996 have not addressed the main agricultural problems and challenges facing farmers in most countries of the world and have not proven to be superior to conventional crops. In addition the great majority of GM crops cultivated are used as high-priced animal feed to supply rich nations with meats. More than four out of every five hectares of GM crops are engineered to withstand the application of proprietary herbicides sold by the same company that markets the GM seed, and have little if any relevance to farmers in developing countries who often

⁴ ABSP II is a USAID-funded consortium of public and private sector institutions that supports agricultural biotechnology. <http://www.absp2.cornell.edu/aboutabsp2/>

cannot afford to buy these chemicals. Clearly GM crops today have not benefited small scale farmers, which constitute the farming majority in Africa.⁵

3. Targeting Africa

Having successfully magnified the picture of Africa as a poverty stricken and malnourished continent, the biotech industry now wants to be seen to be the champion rising to eradicate hunger, malnutrition and other diseases like diarrhea or malaria from the continent.

The dispute over hunger, malnutrition and GMOs has been made on many fronts in the past. The clearest case of resistance was recorded in 2002 when Zambia refused GM maize as food aid through the World Food Programme (WFP). Zambia firmly rejected GM maize and did eventually overcome the food crises without succumbing to the pressures of donors who insisted that a hungry man had no choice. Zambia raised the banner of dignity and sovereignty on behalf of our continent. Later on, in 2004 both Angola and Sudan came under intense pressure to accept GM maize when they faced food shortages. These nations insisted that if they were to accept GM maize they had to be milled and not whole grains. The obvious reason was that whole grains would inevitably be planted and would contaminate the environment.

In recent months the biotech industry seems to be stepping up their public relations campaigns with TV documentaries and newspaper reports claiming that Genetic engineering can bring solutions to some of the most severe diseases affecting our continent, like to treat diarrhea, or to tackle malaria.⁶ Now it is being proposed that GM rice and GM mosquito can be a cure for such illnesses. It is important to note that diarrhea is a disease with well-known causes, as well as solutions. If deaths from a preventable disease such as diarrhea are to be stopped, more efforts should be undertaken to tackle its causes and greater investments should be made in improving basic water and sanitation conditions in our continent, rather than investing and marketing genetically modified rice.⁷

4. The Illegal Contamination Route reaches Africa

An apparent strategy of the biotech industry is to ensure contamination of environments and food chains as a sure way of gaining approval. In other words, whenever there are cases of contamination approval would inevitably follow. Why is this so? The answer is simple. Whenever a GM living organism is released into the environment it is almost impossible to recall such an organism. In other words, once any act of contamination is allowed to take place, a total surrender to the new organism is more or less guaranteed.

⁵ Friends of the Earth International. Who benefits from gm crops? 2007: An analysis of the global performance of genetically modified (GM) crops 1996-2006' is available at http://www.foei.org/publications/pdfs/gmcrops200_7full.pdf. The executive summary of the report is available at http://www.foei.org/publications/pdfs/gmcrops200_7execsummary.Pdf

⁶ BBC. 19 march. GM Mosquitos could fight malaria. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/6468381.stm>

⁷ FoE Africa. 2007. Does Africa need genetically modified solutions to diahrrrea. <http://www.eration.org>

Experiences in other parts of the world prove the seriousness of contamination. Monitoring of food aid in Latin America by Friends of the Earth revealed contamination by StarLink, a GM maize variety, not approved for human consumption in food aid and commercial imports into that region in 2002, 2005 and 2006.

What about Africa? 2006 marked the first time independent monitoring and testing was undertaken at the regional level by African civil society groups, which confirmed contamination of the food chain by GMOs in Africa. This was in the case of the unapproved Liberty Link Rice 601. A round of monitoring activities was undertaken in Nigeria, Cameroon, Ghana and Sierra Leone by local chapters of Friends of the Earth Africa, after the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) revealed on August 18, 2006 that a GM rice unapproved for human consumption had contaminated commercial rice seed. The samples obtained in Africa were sent to an independent laboratory in the United States and tests confirmed the presence of the illegal GM rice in nine samples.⁸

Abroad, other countries have taken action. More than 15 countries in Europe have identified the experimental GMO in their rice supplies, and Europe is testing all imports to prevent further contamination. Mexico, Japan and several other countries around the world took similar measures.

The dust raised in Africa by the revelation of the contamination of the food chain by an illegal rice variety, LibertyLink Rice601 (LLRice 601), had barely settled when news arrived of new contamination episodes in other parts of the world. On the 5 March 2007, the USDA announced that it was prohibiting the planting of another type of long-grain rice after confirmation of a new case of contamination. The genetically modified contaminant detected in a long-grain rice variety known as Clearfield CL131 was not authorised for commercialisation. Therefore, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) decided to prevent its planting and distribution.⁹

5. Africa Does Not need GMOs

Profesor Alhassan advocated at the Ministerial of Mali in 2005 that African governments need to move forward with biotech solutions to improve food security in Africa.¹⁰ But, does Africa need GM crops to tackle food security? It is already well-known that Africa food security challenges don't lie in a technological fix like GMOs. Even the FAO stated at the Mali Ministerial that "around 80% of food crises are related in some way to water, especially to drought" and therefore GMOs "are not a priority for reducing the number of hungry people".¹¹

A clear-cut example in Africa is the case of Bt cotton in the Makhatini Flats in South Africa, which was heralded by the biotech industry as the perfect example of a GM crop that has improving the livelihoods of small scale farmers. However the reality after

⁸ FoE Africa. 2006. Briefing on US Rice contaminaton.

http://www.eration.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=24&Itemid=23

⁹ FoE Africa. 2007. Ibidem

¹⁰ Ghana News Agency / Ghanaweb. 20 Jun 2005

<http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/artikel.php?ID=84028>

¹¹ FAO Statement delivered by Mr. Oloche A. Edache, Assistan Director-General Regional representative for Africa at the Ecowas Ministerial Conference on Biotechnology, Bamako, Mali, 21-24 June 2005.

several years of planting is that the number of farmers in the Makhathini Flats in Kwazulu Natal went down and cotton production also fell down enormously since the introduction of GM cotton.¹²

Low international prices and high subsidies in countries such as the U.S. lie at the heart of the difficult conditions of many cotton farmers in West Africa. Bt cotton will not solve that, and West Africa has nothing to gain but everything to lose if the Bt cotton path is chosen.

Despite this reality, the biotech industry is getting more desperate and seeks to conquer the minds of African people by announcing the modification of major food crops for our continent. Experiments on sweet potatoes, cassava and sorghum have taken place and/or have been planned for Africa. However, some of them have already failed, like for example sweet potato in Kenya and another on cassava in Nigeria also recorded a failure. The GM cassava “created” at the Donald Danforth Center in St. Louis, and sent to Nigeria for experimentation at the International Institute for Tropical Agriculture (IITA) was withdrawn by the IITA due to its failure to achieve resistance to cassava mosaic disease.¹³ Moreover, it is pertinent to note that there are other non-GM varieties of cassava that have resistance to the said cassava mosaic disease.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

Africa does not need GMOs, and it is not in the interest of African nations and its people to grant access to existing GM products. Africa’s Government budgets must be wisely used and certainly investing in the development of GM crops, taking into account the experience with the commercialization of GM crops abroad and our particular context, will not be a wise decision. Accepting GM crops in our region will be a disaster for our agriculture systems. We call on African governments to be conscious of the fact that the future is assured only by sustainable agricultural practices. Such will not be found in the laboratories of profit-driven biotech industry.

GM crop proponents are urging “Ghana and other West African countries to accelerate the development of their bio-safety laws” to allow the introduction of GM products in our region.¹⁴ African Ministers must not be misled by such statements. Biosafety laws are made to regulate GMOs, and to assess comprehensively the environmental, health, socioeconomic, and cultural impacts of the introduction of GMOs before making any release or acceptance of an imported GM product.¹⁵ The result of such rules includes the right to say no and to ban and restrict GMOs. Africa needs strict Biosafety laws and we urge African governments, in this sense, to evolve strict biosafety laws that take the African Model Law as the minimum standard.

¹² FoEI. 2007. Who benefits from gm crops.

¹³ The Punch Newspaper, 2007: “Food Security: How Gm Crops Failed Nigeria, others” January 19, page 3

¹⁴ Ghana to host ECOWAS summit. Ghana Broadcasting Corporation. 1 February 2007.

http://www.gbcghana.com/pages/news_detail.php?s=12&newsid=2380

¹⁵ -Thisday Newspaper. 2006. “Nigeria: Biosafety-Legislation to the Rescue December 05. thisdayonline.com/nview

We are presenting this brief as a means of encouraging our ministers and governments to take a critical look at what is being offered as positive gains that would come when agricultural biotechnology is allowed free reign on our sub-region and/or continent. We call on our governments not to allow Africa to become a laboratory for the testing of technologies without recourse to the ***precautionary principle***.

We must take note of where the rain started to beat us and not allow ourselves to be overtaken by untested ideas/products from laboratories. A case in point is the GM rice engineered to fight diarrhea and having as target vulnerable people in our continent and other less developed countries. We all know that there are affordable and effective remedies for diarrhea and that the world does not need GM rice or any other pharma crop for that matter.

For the sake of posterity, and for the sake of humanity, we must work together to curb the spread of GMOs in Africa.

See FoE Africa Briefings on Genetic Engineering at <http://www.eraction.org/>

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