The Ecologist[1]

Thursday, September 8, 2011

Does Kenya need GM crops as it battles famine in the Horn of Africa?

By BRIAN M. CARNEY

In the midst of a dire need to feed millions of people facing hunger because of drought, Kenya's newly passed Biosafety Act allows for the importation of GM crops — but at what cost?

As the most severe drought crisis in 60 years continues in East Africa, a contentious issue simmers under the surface, one that potentially puts the environmentalist agenda at stark odds with the dire need to save human lives.

Facing a growing number of people in need of food aid, the Kenyan government gazetted existing legislation in August that allows for the importation of genetically modified (GM) crops as well as for the cultivation of GM food crops within Kenya.

Passage of the act makes Kenya the fourth African nation, after South Africa, Egypt and Burkino Faso, to legalise GM crops. While some view the decision as a direct response to the famine, the title of the legislation — the Kenya Biosafety Act of 2009 — indicates that Kenya had GM aspirations for quite some time.

The government's decision was met with opposition by environmental groups, high—ranking Kenyan parliamentarians, and small—scale subsistence farmers, all of whom fear that the importation of GM seeds could contaminate existing seed stocks and decrease food security.

Teresa Anderson, of the Gaia foundation, which partners with the African biodiversity network to prevent the industrial commoditisation of the continent's agriculture, says Kenyan farmers' opposition to the new legislation is a testament to how devastating GM could be for their farming practises.

'There is a strong resistance from African farmers in particular who are concerned about the impacts', Anderson says. '80 per cent of small scale farmers save their seed; this practise is crucial for African farmers' livelihoods.'

If a GM seed contaminates a nearby farmer's non—GM seed (say by accidental wind cross—pollination), the farmer would no longer be able to save his seed for the next planting season, as he would be in possession of a patented product.

In addition to GMO's potential effects on small farmers, Anderson said that Kenya's new allowance of GM represents a sea change in the East Africa region as a whole.

'There has been a really long—term, ongoing push by Monsanto and USAID to get GM approved in Kenya because it's seen as the gateway to Africa', Anderson says. 'It's more developed and it's connected to the East Africa regional block. Once you have one country with a certain set of biosafety rules they [will try and] push for harmonisation in the region'.

The genetically modified seeds currently produced by agribusiness giants such as Monsanto are ones resistant to a certain pesticide or modified so that they produce a poison that kills predators. Hopes for a GM drought—resistant crop for regions like central Africa have not yet been achieved.

The necessity of GM

Many question if it's even necessary for Kenya to import GM products to meet the massive food need and whether the nation possesses the regulatory prowess to effectively deal with GM crops once they've arrived.

Aid agencies and agricultural officials have reported that farmers in other parts of Kenya do in fact have surplus crops, much of which have been exported to Southern Sudan and elsewhere; agricultural officials claim they are unable to direct where farmers sell their harvest.

'Even within Kenya, there is actually non—GM maize available', Anderson says. 'They've either just sold it to other markets or there are no distribution channels in place. If there's aid going in it should actually be used to develop those channels'.

Parliamentarian Gideon Konchellah was quoted in the Kenyan press echoing Anderson's claim. 'There is no need for the government to import maize yet we have the capacity to produce enough maize'.

Oxfam international maintains that while in severe situations, externally derived food aid 'can be a crucial lifelineâĂę in—kind food aid should be limited to situations of acute local food shortage and/or non—functioning local food markets'.

Despite the controversial legislation passed in August, it appears that roadblocks have prevented the GM product from reaching the mouths of hungry people.

A biosafety researcher based in Nairobi, who wished to remain anonymous, told the Ecologist that August's announcement — intended to pave an easy road for GM in the country — has seemingly done the opposite.

'This [legislation] could have backfired considering the tension that consumption of GMOs has created in the minds of the public', the researcher said. 'After the approval, the media exposed the reality of the situation on the ground making the Kenyans aware that in the same country, there have been incidences of food surplus with farmers feeding the cows with the surplus'.

Among other problems the source highlighted were a lack of clearly defined regulations for labelling practices; questions over special interests of public figures who advocate for GM importation for less—than—humanitarian reasons; and doubts over whether newly—formed National Biosafety Authority (NBA) has the man—power to effectively regulate. The chair of the NBA declined to comment on this story.

'The controversy around GMOs in Kenya may not be coming to an end anytime soon', the source told the Ecologist. 'This is confounded by complex social and political dynamics'.

But how to feed the hungry?

Whether it is with GM food or not, feeding the millions of hungry people in the region is of paramount concern. In addition to the Kenyan government's response, many NGOs are currently working in the region, with the UN World Food Programme (WFP) reaching the largest number of people — 1.86 million in Kenya alone.

Emilia Casella, global media coordinator for the UN WFP, explained how the agency usually responds to GM—related issues in the face of hunger crises.

'WFP has responsibility to mobilise as much safe and healthy food as possible for the world's hungry', says Casella. 'Governments are free to choose whether or not they accept GM foods. When a country indicates it doesn't want to use GM foods then we try to identify alternatives. But we can't guarantee we'll have those alternatives available on hand as quickly'.

Despite recent reports that the WFP had been allowed to 'import emergency food from the US without being tested', Casella says that the agency has never imported any GM whole grains into Kenya, which unlike milled products can contaminate other crops.

However, she explains that the high nutrition 'super cereal' corn—soy blend that WFP does distribute comes from a variety of sources, some of which are GM. Casella says this practise was legal in Kenya even before the new legislation and has not changed. The only change the WFP has seen as a result of the Biosafety Act is a shift in the regulatory agency to which it must apply for permits.

Olivia Langhof of Greenpeace Africa, based in Johannesburg, echoes the concerns of other critics in saying that even in the face of a dire need to feed human beings, GM is not an adequate answer. She says in addition to being unnecessary, it doesn't address the underlying causes of the devastating humanitarian crisis.

'What completely falls in the gap in the current discussion — because so many people are dying — is how we stop this [kind of drought] from happening again', Langhof says. 'No government in Africa should fall into the trap into the agri—busniess industry because that is really selling out their food security and farmers'.

What's more, argues Tom MacMillan from the Food Ethics Council, responding to food shortages with technology—based solutions is ends up undermining small farmers.

'GM maize hasn't been developed to meet the needs of those farming on the breadline in Kenya', he says. 'Importing GM maize is expected to lower food prices short—term, perhaps pleasing restless city folk and reassuring politicians, but may further erode the resilience of rural communities.'

Mr. Carney is editorial page editor of The Wall Street Journal Europe and coauthor of "Freedom, Inc.," (Crown Business, 2009).

Notes

[1] http://www.theecologist.org/News/news_analysis/1044089/does_kenya_need_gm_crops_as_it_battles_famine_in_the_horn_of_africa.html