

# ***Our Food. Our Future. Our Fight.***

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Clamor Magazine Issue 36 Spring 2006

*May 2002. The Zambian president, Levy Mwanawasa, appears on flickering television sets glowing brightly in shanty town shacks, balanced on boxes at market stalls, and sitting sleekly in expensive houses across his southern African country. He announces a national disaster: the food supply is running out. Within a week the United Nation's World Food Programme delivers emergency relief, and it looks like the story may end there. Then the Zambian government finds out the food is genetically modified (GM) and stops distribution while they investigate the implications. Controversy erupts around the world. Millions of people face hunger.*

Mariam Mayet is well educated, polite, and deadly with a briefing document, report, or presentation on biotechnology. She cut her teeth as a young lawyer in the anti-apartheid struggle, fighting for equality for all as one of the million South Africans of Indian descent. Now she works from a small, busy office in Johannesburg, the African Centre for Biosafety. She was there when Zambia grounded aid distribution to a halt. She believes it was the right decision.

The Zambian government argued there is not enough evidence that GM food is safe to eat, a hotly debated topic around the globe. Mike Huggins, spokesperson for the World Food Programme in South Africa, answers his phone in a jovial, relaxed voice. Then eating GM food comes up, and mild exasperation creeps in, "There's certainly no evidence to suggest that GM food is harmful... You can basically say that 99.9 percent of everyone who lives in the West is eating GM food on a daily basis, whether they realise it or not."

The debate rages on: Friends of the Earth argues that changing the chemical composition of a food can cause it to become toxic, and that food can cause allergic reactions for those with an allergy to the inserted gene. The British Media Association says that GM food could increase our resistance to antibiotics. European consumers have overwhelmingly rejected GM food. Americans eat it all the time. Few dispute that too much of the "evidence" on the safety of particular GM foods comes directly from the companies profiting from the food. This lack of reliable evidence was exactly the Zambian government's point.

## **A Genetically Modified Trojan Horse**

In her office in Johannesburg, Mayet finds one of many papers she's co-written and fires it to me across cyberspace. It quotes World Food Programme director James Morris in August 2002, "There is no way that the WFP can provide the resources to save these starving people without using food that has some biotech content."

In 2002 drought and hunger were sweeping across most of southern Africa. Squeezed between a raging GM debate and a hungry population, Malawi, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique decided they had to accept GM aid. Health risks mean less when you face malnutrition. But they insisted that the grain donated be milled so it could only be eaten and not planted as seed. Lesotho and Swaziland accepted non-milled GM food, but warned their citizens not to plant it.

The U.S. government's aid agency, USAID, pointed out the extra cost of milling, but the African nations stuck to their guns. They argued that planting can create a whole range of problems, the most obvious being that genetically engineered traits can jump to neighbouring species. This risks damaging wild species and non-GM crops alike, which could damage ecosystems and, perhaps more importantly, export markets to Europe, something Africa can afford even less than it can afford to refuse aid.

But economics aside, GM opponents in Zambia were worried that GM food aid could lead to a much greater change. African farmers have been working the land for millennia, each year collecting seeds to replant the next season. Ancient traditions and seed varieties now risk being lost to dependence on GM seeds, which come with contracts forcing farmers to buy new seeds every season or end up in court. Much of the GM seed market is controlled by Monsanto, and Monsanto's history of good will is not as shiny as its advertising. In the '40s they were involved in producing DDT (now banned in many countries), during the Vietnam War they profited from Agent Orange, and in the '90s they were involved in a growth hormone for cows that is now banned in Europe and Canada.

Nigerian non-government organization Environmental Rights Action sees seed saving as not just a tradition but also a right. "Monsanto is radically changing the way agriculture practices are done," they wrote in a 2005 report, "and is suing and harassing farmers for doing what they have been doing for centuries." The organization's director, Nnimmo Bassey, argues that buying seeds is "contrary to the culture," and that many farmers "can't afford it." With small scale farms being swallowed by large farms all over the world,

increased costs could force impoverished farmers off the land and into city slums or underpaid work as landless peasants.

From the point of view of agribusiness, seed contracts are marketing genius – they attract less bad PR than their sterile “terminator” seed forerunners but allow companies to profit from poor farmers, again and again. From the point of view of impoverished farmers, something which belonged to their community is coming under the control of large corporations and along the way farmers are not only losing their land but also a way of living. What was once about food is now about profits.

“I think we have an alternative vision of the world,” says Mayet, her voice tired, quiet, determined. “And we definitely don’t believe our future should be in the hands of multinational corporations”.

## **The Value of Looking a Gift Horse in the Mouth**

While the GM aid sat waiting in storehouses across Zambia, international pressure to shut up and accept the aid was growing. Rather than give in, the Zambian government organised a national consultation. Community, religious and non-government organisations, scientists, traditional leaders, and political leaders debated the issue.

Besides the potential health risk and environmental problems associated with planting the seeds, participants in the consultation pointed out that the aid would force local farmers to compete with free food, possibly bankrupting them and doing long-term damage to the economy and Zambia’s ability to feed itself. The World Food Programme encourages donor countries to send cash instead of food, as it gets there faster and allows food to be bought from neighbouring areas, supporting local farmers and supplying appropriate food. “The US gives, I have to say, primarily food aid in a commodity form,” says Mike Huggins, “whereas the EU in general gives cash.” In a 2003 press release the European Union stated, “[S]ome WTO members have used food aid donations more as a production and commercial tool to dispose of surpluses and promote sales in foreign markets than as a development tool tailored to the needs of the recipient countries.”

For these many reasons Zambia’s consultation ended up rejecting the aid, and the issue almost looked as if it were resolved. But the uproar continued and in a soup of conflicting information, the Zambian government decided to send six senior scientists and a senior economist on a fact-finding mission to South Africa, Europe, and the U.S. to talk with experts on both sides of the GM

debate. They came to the same conclusion: Agriculture minister Mundia Sikatana announced that Zambia was firm in its decision to not accept GM aid, and that they would be seeking non-GM aid to solve the crisis.

In December of that year the World Food Programme and USAID finally complied with Zambia's GM restrictions. "We appealed to the international community for other kinds of food assistance, primarily of course non-GM," explains Mike Huggins, "and that was forthcoming. So we averted a humanitarian disaster." Despite refusing even milled GM food, Zambia survived the crisis. In 2003 they had a bumper harvest.

## **Using Starvation to Break Into New Markets**

Several years after the initial crisis, Mayet answers my question about aid and poverty with words that are cautiously chosen but firmly believed. "Food," she says, "has for a very long period of time been used as a political weapon." Mayet doesn't think that USAID or the World Food Programme, which relies heavily on U.S. donations, were acting out of good will, and she believes that food aid is used to buy allegiances, subsidise first world corporations, and in this case, deliberately get GM into Africa. She argues that most of the benefit from aid goes to the donor, and USAID seems to agree. Until a few years ago their website read: "The principal beneficiary of American foreign assistance programs has always been the United States. Close to 80% of the USAID contracts and grants go directly to American firms. Foreign assistance programs have helped create major markets for agricultural goods."

The story of biotechnology in Africa is far from over. "Africa has consistently taken extremely good positions," Mayet says. This explains why many saw it as no coincidence when Africa's chief negotiator during the UN's Biosafety Protocol negotiations, Ethiopian Dr. Tewolde Berhan Gebre Egziabher, was initially denied a visa to the meeting in Canada last June. Meanwhile, USAID has been helping African countries draft and implement biosafety policies. Ironic, Mayet points out, as the U.S. government has been pushing for minimal control of GM and won't join the Biosafety Protocol itself. "The battleground at this point in time is over how stringent or how weak biosafety laws will be," says Mayet, and the African Centre for Biosafety, the Zambian government, and USAID are in the thick of it.

Between UN negotiations there is also more subtle pressure. "USAID or the biotech industry will pump a lot of money into public research institutions to conduct research in agricultural biotechnology," says Mayet, "and very little [government] funds at the national level go towards research in Africa. So

once you utilise the scientific institutions they become very active promoters of the technology." Money is also pouring into scholarships in the U.S. for African scientists, and into pro-GM lobby groups and organisations. The African Agricultural Technology Foundation, for example, is supported by USAID, along with such upstanding corporate citizens as Monsanto, Dow Chemicals, DuPont, and Syngenta. "The primary role of the AATF," wrote Mayet in a briefing paper, "is to use poverty and the urgent need for food security strategies in Africa to push for the opening of markets... This initiative is aimed at ensuring the firm control of African research institutions by enabling corporate monopoly of agricultural research in Africa."

## Planting Seeds

The resistance continues through what Nnimmo Bassey describes a "groundswell" of activities against GM in Africa. He is involved in organising national workshops in Kenya, South Africa, Nigeria, Cameroon, Ghana, and Togo. He is also bringing out international speakers and conducting case studies on Monsanto, to be released internationally in English, French, and Spanish. In November 2004 Environmental Rights Action brought together scientists, government agencies, farmers, academics, non-government organisations, lawyers, and students for grassroots input into Nigeria's proposed biosafety law. "We're doing all we can," Bassey says, "to make sure we have very strict laws."

A few months earlier, in May 2004, Angola and Sudan themselves put restrictions on GM food aid, and when the World Food Programme criticised the decision, 60 organisations from 15 African countries got together to write an open letter in protest. In July 2005 farmers and activists in Mali bound together to voice their objection to GM cotton. It is the type of work that has occurred for years. When Monsanto asked African leaders to endorse a statement titled "Let the Harvest Begin" in 1998, they responded with a statement called "Let Nature's Harvest Continue", asserting that they "strongly object that the image of poor and hungry from our countries is being used by giant multinational corporations to push a technology that is neither safe, environmentally friendly, nor economically beneficial to us... We think it will destroy the diversity, the local knowledge and the sustainable agricultural systems that our farmers have developed for millennia, and that it will thus undermine our capacity to feed ourselves."

As of March 2006, there are still no clear winners in the battle over biotechnology in Africa and who controls the continent's seeds and land. But

for all the first world's portrayal of Africans as passive victims, Africans are leading the way in resisting GM technology.

"Africa is saying no to GMOs," declares Basse, in his deep, resonant voice. "If anyone says Africa is saying yes to GMOs, it must be someone in the corridors of multinational companies."

Mayet, meanwhile, is busy writing another briefing paper and answering another phone call. When I ask her the answer to it all, the solution to hunger in Africa, she doesn't come up with one easy answer. "Look, the politics of hunger and poverty are very, very complicated. You know very well, and so do our politicians, that it's not going to be a simple solution. The solution starts, I think, with the fundamentals. Always. It's always going to be about equity, about equitable access to resources... It's never going to be about production of food, because if people can't access their food, it's just not going to matter how much food you produce in a country."

[Environmental Rights Action](#)  
[Friends of the Earth International](#)

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