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# [Viewpoint] Profits at the expense of the hungry

**Genetically modified foods do not address the real problem of world hunger. Our response will dictate the fate of food democracy.**

March 19, 2010

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Genetically modified organisms are an important topic in the continuing debate about how to address the immediate issues of hunger and starvation and, more importantly, human control over our essential needs.

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The debate reached fervent levels when, early in the past decade, the issue became large enough to be addressed by President George W. Bush, who spoke out against activists protesting GMOs being given to African countries. A State Department official referring to the same case said, "Beggars can't be choosers."

But it wasn't just American activists: The African countries involved were protesting on their own. They said the neoliberal policies that controlled their agriculture through patents and DNA technology amounted to recolonization.

It's a formidable argument.

Science has a duty to observe precautionary principles in order to minimize risk. DNA technology can be compared to nuclear technology, or other new technologies that have been shown to have both great power and great potential for abuse of power. For these technologies, even a minuscule error can be amplified to result in significant fallout.

Few new technologies so warrant the strict observation of precautionary principles as GMOs, which were in fact the reason for the Asilomar Conference. And few societies are so obligated to meet those standards as technologically advanced ones. This is the prime moral imperative of science. Our survival may even depend on it.

Proponents who would integrate politics and science say GMOs are immediately necessary because there is a global food shortage. But to the contrary, world food production data shows there is approximately twice the amount needed to feed the entire human population. The problem is not a shortage that calls for a solution in the relatively new form of GMOs, but one of distribution. Therefore, the more valid perspective of the hunger crisis is that it is not an accidental, unfortunate condition, but a crime.

The crisis is more critical than the Great Recession; the conditions of hunger are an inconvenient truth. The faulty distribution, for the most part, is due to

a system that is focused upon the extreme expansion of monetary mechanisms rather than the social mechanisms that address the needs of human beings.

The most egregious example is the United States, the most powerful proponent of GMOs. More GMOs are produced in the United States than in any other country, yet 50 million Americans had insufficient access to food in 2008 - not an insignificant or marginal number.

The subordination of family farms to transnational corporations is a serious economic concern, both in developed countries and in the developing world. Korean economist Yoon Byeong-seon and many global activists have continued to point out that outside control over community, village and tribe has increased due to biopiracy - the patenting by agribusiness of agricultural products developed through ages of indigenous science.

Intellectual property rights organizations have given investor rights precedence over natural rights or the rights of indigenous people to their own cultural knowledge.

Further, a recent study conducted by more than 400 scientists on the production of GMOs showed that the technology to date has failed to show significant improvement in yields. These results paint a bleak picture not only for the hungry but also for the farmers and the market.

Much of the enthusiasm brought to the debate by proponents of GMOs is infused with exaggeration. GMOs' performance has proved unhelpful, at best. At worst, GMOs are a hindrance in the current debate over national sovereignty, agriculture and neoliberal trade policies, especially when GMOs are forced upon consumers.

In other words, if DNA can be owned, then a dangerous concentration of power can arise. In fact, it already has.

The perpetuation by leaders in industry, government and even science of the idea that GMOs have only positive potential, without an open public dialogue on the points of serious critique or an independent assessment of their benefits and risks, is a matter outside the scope of this essay.

But simply said, the arguments in their favor are put forward with critical omissions. The public has been largely willing to accept the new technology, but much of that acceptance is based in ignorance, and has been wrought by presenting the technology out of context.

The public debate on GMOs might fairly criticize the attitudes within the industry, governmental agencies and other social institutions. They have certainly left themselves open to criticism.

An executive at the agribusiness giant Monsanto said, "Monsanto should not have to vouchsafe the safety of biotech foods ... our interest is in selling as much of it as possible. Assuring safety is the Food and Drug Administration's job. "

On another occasion when the executive was asked about a Monsanto advertising campaign in the United Kingdom that had actually increased public opposition to GMOs, he stated, "Maybe we weren't aggressive enough ... When you fight a forest fire, sometimes you have to light another fire."

In a third instance, a vice president of influential biotech consulting company Promar told the Toronto Star, "The hope of the industry is that over time the market is so flooded that there's nothing [citizens] can do about it. [Citizens] just sort of surrender."

It's an instructive tone for those interested in democracy.

The causes of the global food crisis are clearly known, but rather than try fresh solutions, there is a continued commitment to factory farming, World Trade Organization and International Monetary Fund policies, fossil fuels and GMOs.

Dr. Marcia Ishii-Eiteman of the Pesticide Action Network says point-blank that current practices must give way to the right kind of agro-ecological farming that history and science tell us is the "most robust way forward."

The future is promising due to the exponential acceleration of science and technology, and these may even prove GMOs useful - but only if they are subject to the full consideration of the precautionary principle and to the economic and social conditions of each country in which they are consumed. At the moment, massive proliferation continues to be an illogical and unnecessary risk.

Overall, the direction of our foodways that will be taken in the near future will be a matter of choice for civil society.

Will there be food democracy or not?

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by Layne Hartsell

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