

## In wake of Owen Paterson rebuke of anti-GMO 'Green Blob', advocates and opponents play tug-of-war over Africa

Africa, where many of the world's most food insecure people live, is the next frontier in the battle over genetically modified crops. The continent faces threats from a growing population and the unpredictability of climate change. What's the best food and farming strategy?

Activists, charities, businesses and politicians from the West offer competing visions, roughly divided into two camps. Traditionalists argue that small scale farms operating independent of a global food system they claim is dominated by multinational corporations, while less efficient, preserve the dignity of local populations and are better caretakers of the environment. Modernists respond that technology, which includes the use of genetically modified crops, is necessary to rescue Africa from its current position as an agricultural backwater.

These two visions are caricatures, of course, opposite poles of a debate that's become deeply ideological. The divide has been on stark display in recent weeks, sparked by a speech by former UK environment secretary Owen Paterson. Speaking in South Africa, Paterson had [strong words](#) for the European Union, which he believes is dominated by green activists and large anti-corporate NGOs, notably Greenpeace. He blamed what he called this "green blob" for "condemning billions to hunger, poverty and underdevelopment" by advocating against farming innovation and GM crops. His position, while stridently presented, aligned with many independent aid and charity organizations, including the Gates Foundation, which encourages both local and high tech farming solutions.

In contrast, advocacy groups, part of a global network led by Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth and other high profile NGOs based in Europe and North America, believe that African farmers risk becoming slaves to multinational corporations and Western-style "industrial" farming if they embrace GE crops.

Paterson's speech has triggered a global debate, marked by series of online letters between [Colin Todhunter](#), a columnist with an alternative news service, and [Tony Trewavas](#), a molecular biologist at the Institute of Molecular Plant Science at the University of Edinburgh. They sparred over what it means to give poor farmers a choice. At the crux is their disagreement over where power really lies: each points to different culprits in the West.

Todhunter took offense at Paterson's rebuke of what he said was a bullying "Green Blob." Paterson used this term throughout his speech—"a reference to a 1950s Sci-Fi movie starring Steve McQueen in which a blob-like alien attacks Earth and swallows everything in its path." According to Paterson, the Green Blob includes "the environmental pressure groups, renewable energy companies and some public officials who keep each other well supplied with lavish funds, scare stories and green tape."

Todhunter [berated](#) Paterson in turn, claiming that the former UK conservative party heavyweight was captive of the pro-GMO lobby, pushing a baseless argument.

Yes, it is a time of great mischief as Paterson says – but not because of what his critics say or do – but because of what he and his backers do by turning their backs on the type of sound science and progress in the way that he falsely accuses GMO critics of doing.

(The pro-GMO lobby) cannot provide a convincing case for GMOs. It therefore resorts to populism, intimidation, character assassination, emotional blackmail, falsehoods, panic mongering and unfounded claims)

Trewavas dismissed Todhunter's response as anti-science. As he noted, the greater [international scientific community has agreed that GMOs are as safe as conventional foods](#). The National Academy of Sciences, the European Commission, the Royal Society of Medicine, and the World Health Organization among dozens of independent science organizations, have all have [issued statements](#) supporting the consensus view:

There is a consensus amongst scientists, at least those that have made themselves aware of all reasonable scientific facts, that GM is both safe for consumption and with appropriate regulations for the environment too... But I have found that those that do object to the consensus on GM crops always fail to provide an acceptable balance of information in their objections. They select out only the very limited data they consider supports their view and neglect everything else that does not.... It's like claiming flying is unsafe because several planes a year crash whilst ignoring the hundreds of thousands every day that haven't.

For Todhunter, the debate over safety is eclipsed by what advocacy groups like to call "food sovereignty." He claimed that Western elites have put Africa in a vise of poverty and hunger. He [blamed](#) food insecurity on the current global food system, which he claims is dominated by industrial agriculture dominated by agribusinesses and held together by an aggressive United States foreign policy synced with the World Trade Organization. This complex, he maintained, is "a major cause of structural hunger, poverty, illness and environmental destruction."

Paterson and his corporate associates believe that the poor must be 'helped' by the West and its powerful corporations and billionaire 'philanthropists'. It harks back to colonialism. When Owen Paterson accuses critics of GMOs of being elitist and regressive, he is merely attempting to shift the focus from his own elitist, regressive ideology. Hasn't the world had enough of the type of Western 'humanitarianism' that Paterson espouses?

Todhunter's comments on food insecurity echo the hard left critique of American capitalism. It appears to draw on the work of economist William Easterly, Easterly's latest book, "The Tyranny of Experts," critiques many aid groups and their programs, arguing they ignore systemic political problems.

In what way do corporations act much differently than Greenpeace or Food and Water Watch? asked Trewavas. He echoed Paterson in [calling out](#) Greenpeace for abuse of power:

It is an unfortunate situation that in our present world many environmentalist groups have become typically authoritarian in attitude. Greenpeace notably decides its opinions must prevail regardless of others, so it arrogates to itself the right to tear up and destroy things it doesn't like.

## **Africa in a vise**

How are Africans perceiving this polarized public discussion? What's the path forward? Todhunter expressed his belief that traditional African farming is on solid ground, He [elaborated](#) on his democratic ideals:

I am not dogmatic about the methods that farmers use since I consider that decision is the province of individual farmers themselves. Whatever their choice is their right in the framework of their country but they must be allowed to make that decision in full knowledge of all the scientific information and advice, not the tiny amount available to support alternative points of view. That is the nature of every democracy that I hope all will finally live under.

According to Todhunter, numerous agroecological analyses have concluded that GMOs are not necessary to feed the world (although he also [wrote](#) in a previous public exchange that agroecological approaches alone aren't the end-all solution but merely shouldn't be "marginalized."

For Trewavas, farmer choice is paramount, which if practiced, he said, would result to the rapid adoption of GE foods. "Do you want to impose your opinions on others without allowing them to make their own minds up and choose how they wish to farm?" he asked. He also slams the growing use of agroecology..

If agroecological approaches can currently match yield that can be attained by using modern farming methods then by all means use it. But if not and my understanding is that currently it cannot, then they should not be the farming method of recommended choice at present.

When Africa has got its population increases under control and producing sufficient to feed everybody then alternatives like agroecology may come to the fore. No-one with any concern for humanity or the welfare of its population should currently consider any other alternative. The groups that campaign for this kind or that kind of farming method and destroy crops to try and bounce others into their point of view have lost that fundamental concern for their own species.

Ultimately, Trewavas and Toddhunter have opposing and perhaps irreconcilable diagnoses.

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**Additional resources:**

- [Friends of the Earth report blames Big Ag for forcing GMOs in Africa](#), SciDev.net
- [Producers of 70% of Africa's food, women farmers shackled by GMO opponents](#), Truth about Trade and Technology
- [Why Africa should embrace crop biotechnology](#), Genetic Literacy Project
- [Kenya's maize famine underscores need for Africa to confront GMO fears](#), Genetic Literacy Project