

African farmer: Europe vote blocks GMOs and modern farming, dooming us to food subsistence

[The recent decision by the European parliament](#) to oppose the promotion of large-scale, intensive farming and the use of GM seeds in Africa has stirred a swift and negative reaction among African scientists and food security experts. The measure was adopted by the European Parliament [with 577 MEPs rejecting support for the](#) New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition (NAFSN) program, launched in 2012 to address global food security. NAFSN's aim is to bring 50 million people out of poverty by 2050 by enabling investment in agricultural sectors in several African countries.

The European Parliament vote that calls on the G7 countries not to support the use of genetically modified (GMO) seeds in Africa could not have been based on a genuine understanding of the food security and poverty levels on the continent and the on-going efforts to deal with these challenges.

The report presented by Mara Heubuch, the German Green MEP, unfairly criticized the New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition (NAFSN) for promoting large-scale farming and what it referred to as land-grabbing and marginalization of small-scale farmers. Sadly the European Parliament rushed to adopt the report with a large majority as if it actually intends to keep Africa perpetually poor, food insecure, and dependent on Europe's patronage. The decision can be best described as another neo-colonialist measure.

More than ever before, Africa's food production today has fallen behind its growing population which is projected to increase from 1.2 billion to ca. 2.4 billion by 2050, with most of that population increase occurring in sub-Saharan countries where up to now farmers use the hand hoe as their main tool. The region's warm climate makes it prone to pests, which together with the onset of global warming, have made crop production a lot harder. The continent has seen the arrival of crop diseases which cannot be combatted by any known pesticides and appear set to drastically reduce production of such major food and cash crops as bananas, sorghum, millet, sweet potatoes, rice, maize, and cassava among others.

In Uganda, two of the staple crops, bananas and cassava can only be vegetatively propagated, and are grown by more than 75 percent of farmers for food and income. These crops are increasingly under attack by a range of bacterial and viral diseases. Banana Bacterial Wilt disease (BBW) currently leads to losses of US\$953 million worth of bananas annually. Cassava is the third major food crop in Africa, after corn and rice, and is being devastated by the Cassava Brown Streak Disease (CBSD), which is a virus spread by whitefly and has wiped out about 80 percent of the crop in some parts of the country.

Through GM technology, Ugandan researchers have been able to create BBW resistant bananas, and CBSD resistant cassava plants which will soon be passed on to farmers for planting. GM research is ongoing with such crops as maize to provide stem borer resistance and increase drought tolerance; Irish potatoes to combat Potato Late Blight; and sweet potato for resistance to Sweet Potato Blight. According to the Uganda Biosciences Information Centre (UBIC), Uganda stands to save US\$25.4 million annually

by adopting drought tolerant and insect resistant maize.

This is a country of some 36 million people, where every woman gives birth to 6.2 children, and whose population is projected to be 55.4 million by 2025 (www.prb.org). By choosing not to support and evaluate the potential benefits of GMO technology for African countries, the EU parliament cannot be seen by Africa as a supporter in its struggle to feed its people.

A recent report from the U.S. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine which evaluated 20 years of research into the environmental effects of plants modified with genes that enable them to repel pests and withstand herbicides—and what happens when those crops are made into food for people or processed into feed for poultry and livestock—found the technology entirely safe. Neither the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) nor the World Health Organization (WHO) has raised any safety concerns about GM technology. One therefore further wonders why the EU should not support the use of the technology as one of the ways to improve food security and to reduce poverty in Africa.

Large-scale farming and use of machines such as tractors and combine harvesters are what have made agriculture in the G7 countries so successful. According to the World Bank there are around five tractors for every 1,000 farmers in Africa as compared to almost 1,600 tractors for every 1,000 farmers in the U.S.

Richard Jones has written in an essay for the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA):

“Tanzania has over 44 million hectares of arable land of which less than a quarter is currently under cultivation. This means over 34 million hectares of land, almost the size of Germany, suitable for food production is not being utilized. You cannot farm an area the size of Germany with a hand hoe.”

Where in Europe today do you find a man and a woman cultivating their farm with a simple hand-hoe to sustain their family as is so common in Africa?

In most EU countries less than 5 percent of the population are farmers, yet in most sub-Saharan countries as many as 80 percent are small-scale farmers, the majority of which are women. If small-scale farming is the best option for Africa, why is the continent looking to the EU for support?

“Low rates of mechanization in Africa not only reduce the welfare and quality of life for farmers but also limit farm productivity,” Jones has said.

It was with this in mind that in 2014, through the Malabo Declaration, the African Union (AU) recognized the importance of resorting to mechanization to accelerate agricultural growth in Africa. It was the reason that Rhoda Peace Tumusiime, commissioner for Rural Economy and Agriculture with the AU, recommended the hand hoe to be banished from the continent.

For African farmers to use heavy machines it will require farmers with large farms and that is why as much as possible in countries like Uganda smallholder farmers (‘bibanja tenants’) who feel they don’t earn enough from farming and have capacity to venture into other activities are encouraged to sell their land to

their landlords in what some people like Mara Heubuch have erroneously referred to as land-grabbing and marginalization of smallholder farmers.

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