

People in Africa eat GMO foods. So why do they oppose new crops developed by their own scientists?

It is early morning in Uganda's capital city of Kampala when as I walk into the office of a scientist who has been following the intense debate over the commercialization of genetically modified foods across Africa.

Visiting with George William Byarugaba Bazirake, a professor of food science at Kyambogo University, I have to wonder: Considering the volume of GMO foods found on the shelves of African stores, why is there so much angst over the idea of allowing African farmers to produce similar products using seeds developed by local scientists?

Bazirake suggests that many Africans don't understand what's already found in the foods they are eating. "They don't bother reading the labels to establish the content of GMO in a particular food. What I know is that these foods are safe and they are trending all over in African markets, this therefore calls for people to accept products bred by African countries."

[amaranth flour](#) image and type unknown

A vendor in the outskirts of Kampala. Image:
Lominda Afedraru

He goes on to explain that several African nations are using existing regulations to check entry of GM foods in to the country and in most cases it is done to assess safety and quality.

"Let me assure the people of Uganda and other African countries that there is no publication where it has been proved that GMO foods are harmful, there should be no cause of alarm," he said. "This therefore calls for people to desist from opposing scientific technologies used to develop food for the world."

Global perspective of GM food commercialization

The status of GMO crops in Africa hasn't changed all that much since the [2009 publication](#) of "GMO Trade Regulation and Developing Countries" by Richard B. Stewart, who wrote:

Commercial adoption of genetically modified foods and crops bred using transgenic methods has triggered widespread controversy over the environmental and economic benefits and risks of GMOs as well as a wider range of social, cultural and ethical values across the globe but in particular Africa.

Different assessments of costs and benefits among the nations have led to a patchwork of environmental health and safety regulations regarding GMO foods and crops. These differences have created sharp trade conflicts for some nations, while also opening up export opportunities for others that favor GMO technologies.

Developing countries however have much [more at stake](#) in resolving these conflicts than do developed countries. Some of them are highly dependent on exporting particular primary agricultural products.

African perspective of GM food trade

Indeed, GM foods are sold in supermarkets throughout Africa, said Sunday Akile Igu from the Uganda office of the [African Biosafety Network of Expertise](#). These products include cooking oil processed from GMO canola, cotton seed and soybean; cornflakes processed from GM maize; soaps and lotions; and animal feed processed from GMO maize.

“You cannot deny countries rights to trade in GMO foods because the World Trade Organization has treaties which guarantee this to member states and all African Countries are parties to these treaties,” Igu said.

In Africa, there have been concerns raised by those who question the credibility of safety data submitted by the scientists and companies that developed the new products. But Igu discounted those objections, noting that it is standard process for anyone seeking to introduce new products in Africa.

According to Igu, countries are aware that GMO products are in the market. They can be found in many forms, including processed flour, oil and children’s food. Some of the foods come in form of food aid. Notably, during times of war, African countries receive food aid in form of processed corn flour which is distributed to affected communities.

Those which are in super markets are clearly labeled including details of the percentage of GM content in a particular product. Those who read may not understand and simply go ahead to purchase.

Igu offered the example of South Africa where 95 percent of [maize](#) grown and processed is GMO. The country processes products such as maize flour and animal feed, which are consumed domestically or exported across the continent.

Trade in GMO foods across Africa is hardly new, said Dr. Jeremy Ouedrago, head of the West Africa office of the New Partnership for Africa’s Development. He recalled a trip to a supermarket in Mali, where he found a bottle of cooking oil, clearly labeled that it contained 75 percent GMO. He quizzed one of the employees, who revealed that she had no idea that it contained GMOs.

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With stories like that in mind, Ouedrago would like to see more Africans get over their fear of the new GMO seeds being bred by scientists in Uganda and elsewhere. In Uganda alone, breeders are working on a [GMO banana](#), maize, Irish potato and cassava. Said Ouedrago:

If people are getting concerned about GMO food trade, then what will happen in the medical world where the current malarial vaccine scientists have developed for children aged 8 years below. Are people aware that this vaccine is made from a GMO product? Are people going to reject it yet it is meant to solve the challenge of Malaria?

Labeling of GMO and non-GMO food in Africa

Herbert Oloka, who works with the Program for Biosafety Systems, notes that mandatory labeling is proposed for Uganda, Kenya, South Africa and Tanzania.

For the case of Uganda, the issues is covered in a new [biosafety bill](#) passed by parliament, but still awaits a signature from the country's president. According to the bill: "A person involved in research, development, general release, importation, exportation, transit or trade of GMO shall conspicuously label the product with the words it 'Contains Genetically Engineered Material' and indicate the characteristics and origin of the GMO product."

"We must develop labeling laws and rules that work for us because some imported ideas may need modification; others may work and others may not," Oloka said. "Labeling should be to provide consumer choice not safety of products to human health and environment. Rules should also support potential exports to trading partners."

Labeling thresholds are set in the law to deal with unavoidable contamination of non GMO seeds during cultivation, harvest or transport. In the EU, Russia and China that level is set at 0.9 percent. Kenya's threshold is 1 percent, while South Africa and the US set the number at 5 percent.

Oloka said the number was set higher by those countries because they practice mechanized agriculture where the same harvesters and other related equipment are used for processing GMO and non-GMO foods – creating greater opportunity for mixtures.

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