

## Misconceptions about GMOs in Ghana due to weak education, study reveals

Knowledge about genetically modified (GM) food and biotechnology is low among the Ghanaian public due to low levels of education and awareness on the topic, a new study reveals.

Over 600 respondents answered a questionnaire that tested the extent of their knowledge on GM foods and its safety, their willingness to pay for more GM foods, how much importance they attach to labelling and whether they care if the food they eat is GM. This was done over a period of four months and compiled into a [study](#) co-authored by the CSIR-Science and Technology Policy Research Institute and the Food and Drugs Authority (FDA).

The majority (32 percent) of those surveyed said they had very little knowledge, while 21.4 percent stated they knew nothing at all. Another 21.4 percent said they had some amount of knowledge while 21 percent claimed they had fair amount of knowledge on the issue.

However, when asked whether they cared if the food they eat contains GM ingredients, 30 percent answered that they do care about the source of ingredients in their food, 50 percent stated they did not care and the remaining 20 percent were indifferent.

The intensity of the ongoing debate about GM technology in the country is not matched by the public's understanding of the issue. The majority of consumers rely on the Internet and media sources for GMO related information.

If GM crops are commercialized in Ghana, a majority (71.4 percent) of respondents suggested they should be labeled, though very few of them actually take time to read labels on food products.

Dr. Richard Ampadu-Ameyaw, one of the CSIR authors, said that though labeling is being called for, Ghanaians rarely check on any information on products they buy at the market. "The culture of reading labels doesn't seem to be a part of us, so it is not surprising," he noted. "Even among those of us who are educated, how many of us read labels? We buy items all the time and use them without bothering to find out the manufacture and expiry dates."

It was also established that labeling discussions were based on consumers' opinions rather than scientists' reports. While concerns about transparency in food ingredients are legitimate, a section of the public in the GMO debate argues that food approved by the FDA is certainly wholesome and safe to consume and any form of labeling will result in food discrimination.

The findings also suggest that a large number of the respondents are either ignorant of GM products or have low knowledge of the technology and the foods that include them. Their perception of whether a product is genetically modified or not depends on whether the product is mainly imported or locally produced. This accounted for the high “yes” votes from those who believe imported apples, rice and chicken are GM-sourced foods on the Ghanaian market, while most thought locally produced while maize, pawpaw and cooking oil are not GM. Currently, there is no GM chicken or rice on the market.

“I am surprised at the low level of knowledge out there, because my thinking was that by now, with all ongoing discussions, people would by now be at home with the technology,” Ampadu-Ameyaw opined. “GMOs didn’t start today.”

However, many respondents expressed their dissatisfaction with their current knowledge and awareness of the technology, claiming the government and media are not conducting enough education on the subject. They blamed the two entities for focusing extensively on politics instead of on science, technology and the food they eat to survive. Depending on the news outlet, the information the public receives regarding GMOs and biotechnology can be inaccurate, incomplete or misleading.

Kofi Konadu, programs manager for the University of Cape Coast-based ATL FM radio station, agrees that a huge section of the media focuses more on programs that will draw them more listeners or viewers than programs that go to the heart of educating the ordinary Ghanaian.

“Most focus on content that will sell, and in Ghana, it is all about politics or who is saying what,” he said. “It’s mostly about maintaining their audiences than producing evidence-based programs in science, health, education or the agricultural sector. Irrespective of the topic, politicians are always the ones invited to speak on these platforms.”

The station, well known for its expert-driven programs on developmental issues across all relevant sectors has experienced its own challenges for taking that stance. “We hardly get willing sponsors for our brand of programs because it is not politics,” Konadu said. “But we believe the impact we’re making out there is enormous, and the media should set the agenda, not the politicians.”

The low level of knowledge about GM technology isn’t surprising, as it has been established that education about it is weak. Misperceptions by the public are also a result of misinformation about the technology in Ghanaian society.

The authors recommend that extensive education through effective communication methods for different stakeholders and the general public is key to changing negative perceptions about the technology and achieving better understanding.

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