Why GMO acceptance in Ethiopia could lead Africa to embrace biotech crops

A coalition of Ethiopian Civil Society Organizations and their global allies have launched a campaign against the cultivation of Genetically Modified Organisms in Ethiopia.

[Editor's note: While this article contains some factually inaccurate claims about the economic and environmental impacts of GMO insect-resistant Bt crops, it documents a potentially significant shift in how African countries view biotechnology, which the public should be aware of. Please read our FAQ Do GMO Bt (insect-resistant) crops pose a threat to human health or the environment? to learn more.]

The public outcry started when United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Foreign Agricultural Service published a report that revealed that the government had approved commercial cultivation of genetically modified (GM) insect-resistant cotton (Bt-cotton) and confined trial of GM enset and maize in Ethiopia.

In 2015, the Ethiopian parliament opened up the country to genetically modified organisms (GMOs) by loosening the safeguards built into a 2009 biosafety law. Three years later, the government approved commercial cultivation of a strain of cotton.

Despite this, there has been limited public debate or media coverage. Yet, the moves broke with decades of Ethiopian public policy and have major implications for Africa as a whole.

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Pleased with the government's deeds, the [USDA] report went on to state that the country's "adoption of Bt-cotton not only has [high] economic importance but [is] also expected to have [a] positive influence on the acceptance of this technology in the region."

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The USDA's appreciation of Ethiopia's policy change may well be driven by a strategic interest for the U.S. and its multinationals to use Ethiopia as a springboard to expand GMO cultivation in Africa.

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As the home of the African Union diplomatic community, Ethiopia is a particularly strategic country to promote GMO expansion on the continent.

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