

The A – Z of anti-GM activists in Africa

The developed world — especially Western Europe and North America — have embraced genetic engineering in the medical field, mainly because the benefits can be seen directly. However, when it comes to agriculture, the benefits of genetic engineering are not immediately and directly noticeable; thus, public's support of genetic engineering in agriculture is low, particularly in Europe.

Some of the most renowned anti-GM organizations with well-oiled machinery in [funding](#) and information propagation are domiciled in western countries. These organizations, which also come with ties to political parties and forces, have disseminated a range of misleading and outright false claims of the potential harms of genetically modified crops and food.

Expectedly, a [growing number](#) of Africans across sub-regions of the continent have contributed to the expansion of these [mendacious](#) claims towards genetic engineering technologies, pesticides and crops, notwithstanding their [benefits](#) to Africans. Just like in other parts of the world, [these people](#) take their campaigns against GM crops and associated technologies to lawmakers, farmers and schools and propagate their views to the unsuspecting public. Thus, we have the case of wealthy, well-fed westerners dictating to Africans what to eat and not eat, thereby exacerbating malnutrition across sub-Saharan Africa.

Regrettably, anti-GM activists across Africa have been excessively feral in their [campaigns and awareness](#) programs in recent years. Over the last 10 years, they have networked with allies in other parts of the globe, most notably in North America and Western Europe, with the aim of derailing years of progress genetic engineering techniques have attained on the continent through the efforts of [home-grown](#) scientists and governments. Increasingly, they have amassed considerable political influence as a result of their consistent but harmful campaigns. These [campaigns](#) have hindered the legalisation of GM crops across the continent which further contributes to economic losses leading to malnutrition and increasing child mortality rates. As of 2017, a [study](#) calculated the losses Nigeria suffered in her delay to legalise the use of GM pod borer-resistant cowpea to be between \$33 million and \$48 million (four years later, Nigeria [legalised](#) its use).

In this article, we chronicle seven prominent anti-GM activists and organizations across sub-Saharan Africa who have been at the forefront of dissuading the adoption of the technology to solve decades-[old problems](#).

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Zachary Makanya — PELUM

For more than two decades, [Zachary Makanya](#) has been at the forefront of disseminating anti-GM tirades across the sub-continent. Based in Nairobi, Kenya, he has worked in opposing the legalisation and

commercialisation of GM crops across East Africa, notably Kenya and Uganda. He is an outgoing Country Co-ordinator and CEO of the “pro-environment” group – PELUM (Participatory Ecological Land Use Management) – which has branches across East, Central and Southern Africa. He has steered the [group](#) to (what he terms) “promote ecological land use and management practices across East, Central and Southern Africa” as well as build the capacity of members and partners to respond to community needs. Makanya rose to fame via his infamous [2004 article about the “negatives” of GM crops](#).



Zachary Makanya. Credit: Biovision Africa Trust

“Africa is in danger of becoming the dumping ground for the struggling GM industry and the laboratory for frustrated scientists. The proponents of GM technology sell a sweet message of GM crops bringing the second green revolution and the answer to African hunger, but a closer look makes it clear that GM crops

have no place in African agriculture.”

As the CEO, he led PELUM [to get funded](#) by the Swedish Society for Nature and Conservation (SSNC) to continue its opposition to GM crops and associated technologies.

Nnimmo Bassey

In Nigeria, [Nnimmo Bassey](#) has been a vocal environmentalist who championed causes relating to oil spills in the Niger Delta Region. However, he also has participated in anti-GM technology campaigns. He was a [one-time](#) member of the Friends of the Earth annual meetings, a group which also funds most of his initiatives. His paper about GM crops with criticism of BT cotton project and seed colonialism has been disputed [here](#) and [here](#). His claim about industrial agricultural companies and multinational seeds firms controlling food supply has been [refuted](#) countless times. He is based in Nigeria where he promotes anti-GMO interviews; in 2019, he said Nigeria was not ready for GM crops. Instead, regulators saw the benefits of GM crops and [legalised](#) its usage.



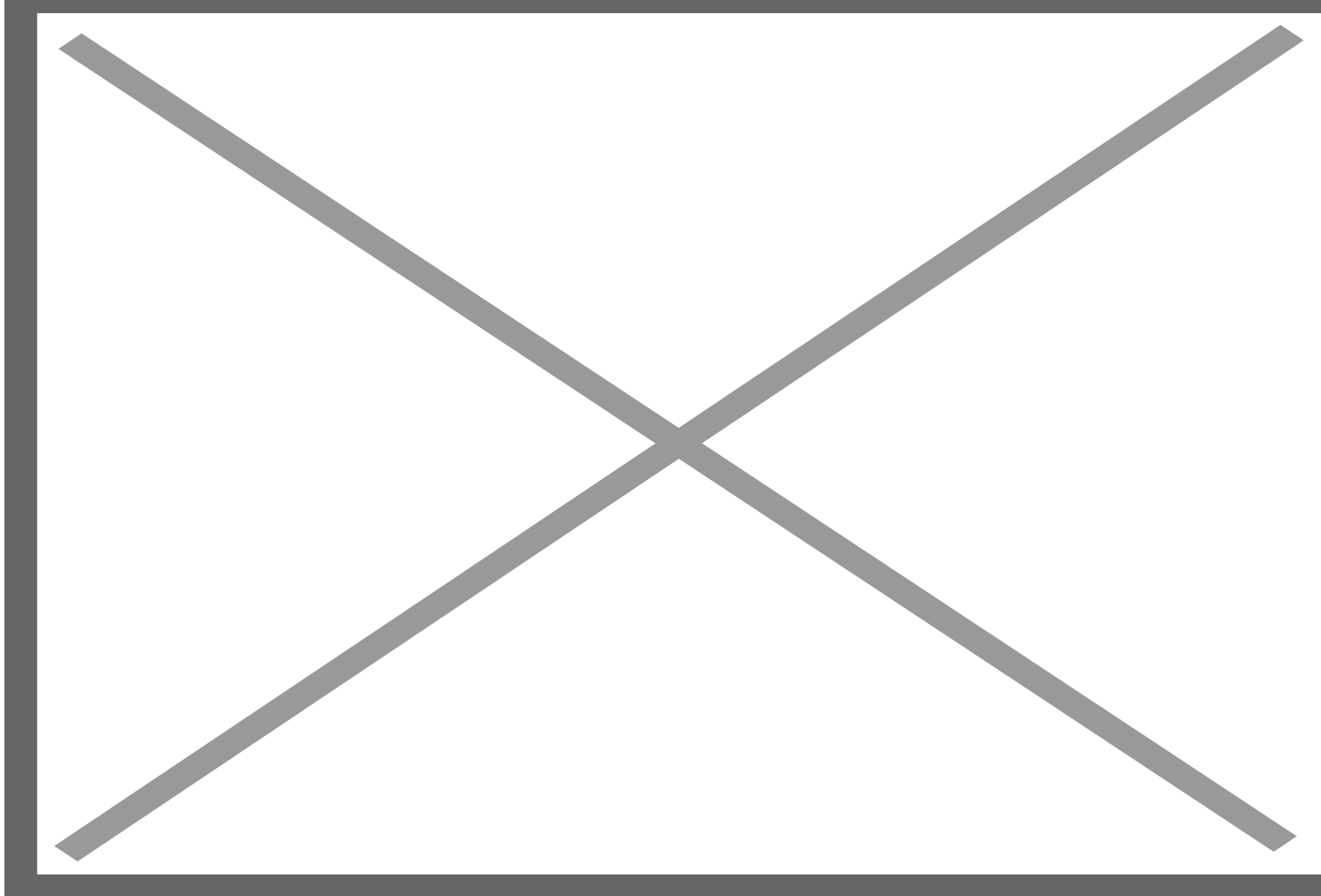
Nnimmo Bassey. Credit: International Union for Conservation of Nature

African Biodiversity Network

Founded 25 years ago, The African Biodiversity Network (ABN) is a [regional body](#) of individuals and

organizations seeking African solutions to ecological problems bedevilling the continent. With 36 partners originating from 12 African countries, the ABN is one of the continent's largest anti-GM organizations, with a focus on Eastern and Southern Africa. It is headed by Sulemana Abdullai, a member of the Board of Trustees for 12 years, and former Chairman of the Board. The ABN's main international partner is [GAIA](#), the UK-based organisation which says it is passionate about "regenerating cultural and biological diversity, and restoring a respectful relationship with the Earth". In 2018, the group [got](#) £25,000 as an award from the Lush Spring Foundation to support its efforts in "lobbying and regulation of thoughts in the public space".

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Dr. Sulemana Abdullai. Credit: NDA

By working with [international bodies](#), the ABN is able to promote its version of genetic technology, which is unrealistic considering Africa's ballooning population and the deleterious effects of climate change. Abdullai also grants interviews where he derides GM technology. In one such interview, with [DW](#), he is quoted "...there isn't much evidence to suggest that genetically modified crops are doing better in terms of food security or income security".

But this claim has been disputed in [South Africa](#). Additionally, the group [espoused](#) the "March Against

Monsanto” [campaign](#) which reverberated for a few years across most parts of the world. Part of the campaign’s animosity towards the ag-science company (now part of Bayer) was on the basis of Monsanto being a sole-monopoliser of superior seeds, which is a [false](#) claim. The ABN in its press statement lampooned scientific research findings that GM crops can reduce hunger amongst Africans. However, by campaigning against the legalisation of GM crops in many African countries, the number of countries which have legalised GM crops remains static ([13 where](#) GM crops have legal status versus 54 countries on the continent), thus, leading to low adoption of this life-saving technology.

The Regional Advisory and Network Systems (RAINS)

The Regional Advisory and Network System (RAINS), an NGO based in Ghana which aims to “promote the rights of the marginalised in society.” Its executive director [Hardi Tijani](#) sees GM crop cultivation as a suppression of cultural practices in developing countries’ agricultural sectors. Also, he makes the unverifiable [claim](#) that “cultivation of GM crops detract the identity of the people”. RAINS, formed in 1993, aims to “improve the lives of deprived communities and sections of the society”. However, Tijani’s statements go contrary to those lofty aims. His claims have been [refuted](#), as there is no evidence that cultivation of GM crops removes the “identity of a group”. To promote her anti-GMOs rhetoric, RAINS [partners](#) with various international organisations to advocate her objectives, namely: Canadian Feed the Children, Brot fuer die welt, Hope for Children Foundation, etc.

African Centre for Biodiversity

An advocacy group founded 23 years ago, the [African Centre for Biodiversity’s](#) initial goals was against the introduction of GM corn, soya and cotton by the South African government. Later on, it aimed at scuttling the [widespread adoption](#) of GM crops and associated products in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Through it and sister organisations across Africa, the ACB has [pushed](#) against acceptance of second-generation GM technologies on the continent, an act which jeopardises food security on a continent whose population is [projected](#) to more than double by 2100. One such push was the [opposition](#) to the Water Efficient Maize for Africa (WEMA) project (now [TELA](#)). ACB executive director [Mariam Mayet](#) lampooned the project by stating “...it will reach only a select subsidized layer of small-scale farmers”. However, that was a disingenuous tale as the project is actually [aimed](#) at small-scale farmers.



Mariam Mayet. Credit: Alex Garland

Additionally, at a [debate](#) at the University of San Francisco, “The fight for the future of food in Africa,” Mayet stated “...the New Green Revolution marks neo-colonial, corporate occupation.” However, it is not surprising that a GM sceptic [claimed](#) deceitfully that the sponsors of the New Green Revolution for Africa – Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Rockefeller Foundation – are depopulating the continent, a claim which was [refuted](#). Moreover, the belief that westerners, and not Africans, are behind the scientific and [field work efforts](#) of GM crops adoption in Africa is highly misplaced and props up the disingenuous notion that Africans cannot develop scientific products by themselves. On the contrary, it is actually Africans ([Uganda](#), [Ghana](#), Nigeria, [Sudan](#) etc.) who are at the forefront of ensuring GM crops are developed and cultivated on the continent. In South Africa where Ms Mayet is based, the country [saw](#) an increase in biotech crops – soybean, maize, cotton – rise by 2.6% to 2.73 million hectares – the highest in Africa. The ACB partners with a number of organisations to further [retard](#) the speed of legalisation of GM crops and second generation GM technologies across [the continent](#).

Food Sovereignty Ghana (FSG)

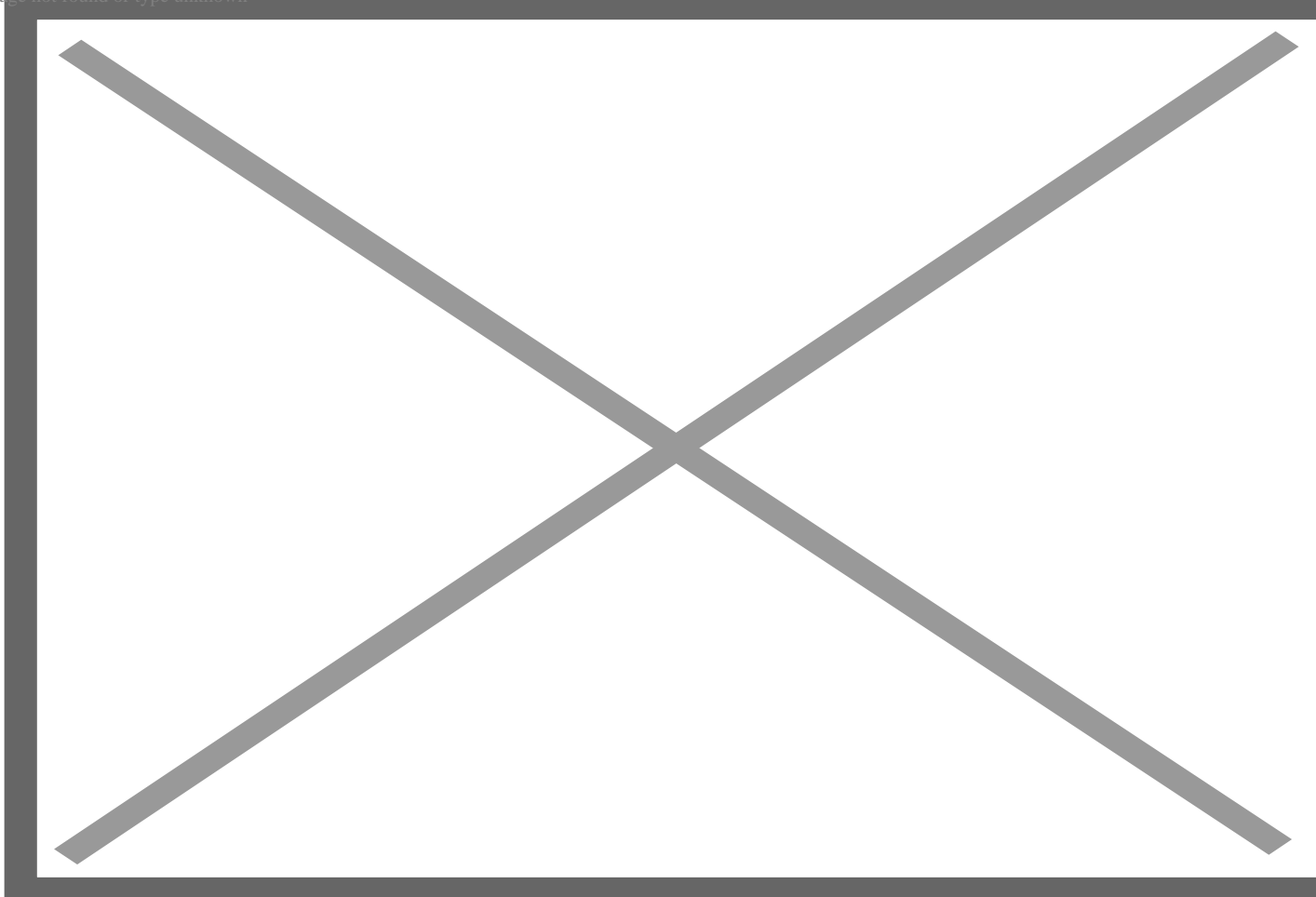
Founded in 2013, [Food Sovereignty Ghana](#) focuses on “promoting food sovereignty in Ghana.” Its deputy

director [Kweku Dadzie](#) 'cautioned' Ghanaians on the ills of introducing GM crops into Ghana. Kweku [claims](#) the Ghanaian government will import all seeds from Monsanto instead of from local seed growers. However, this is false as it is [Ghanaians](#) and not foreigners who are the forefront of adopting the technology. Furthermore, the group [claims](#) that GMOs will bring severe hardship to Ghanaian farmers, that GM crops are associated with heart disease, diabetes, cancers and finally that "...there has not been any documented evidence that there will be improved yield". Unsurprisingly, these claims all have been shown to be false. More than 20 years of [exhaustive studies](#) into the consumption and effects of GM crops showed no adverse effect whatsoever and that such crops are safe and nutritious just as their non-GM counterparts.

Melaku Worede

A renowned Ethiopian plant geneticist — [Melaku Worede](#) — who throughout his career was able to preserve local Ethiopian seeds erroneously [stated](#) that GMOs are risky because their involvement leads to extinction of local seeds and genetic diversity. An advisor to [GAIA](#) and the ABN on local communities' resistance to GM crops, he once [stated](#), "it is too risky to rely on seeds that have no local adaptation and built-in genetic diversity."

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Melaku Worede. Credit: Right Livelihood

An often-cited paper was a [study](#) conducted by the Rural Advancement Foundation International which looked at seed choices far back as 1903 and 80 years later. The results hinted a decline of more than 90% of seed options. However, this was [refuted](#) by researchers at University of Illinois and Georgia where the authors argued that many of the purportedly lost seeds were simply the same variety marketed under different names.

Uchechi Moses is an aspiring plant scientist based in Akwa Ibom State in Nigeria. He holds a BSc in genetics and biotechnology and writes about how capitalism and science can provide food security and prosperity for the next generation of Africans. Follow him on Twitter [@Uchechi59](#)