

Guest Editorial

Another look at food aid in Africa

Muffy KOCH

Golden Genomics cc, Box 30923. Kyalami 1684, South Africa
E-mail: muffykoch@telkomsa.net

Having followed the GM debate in Africa for five years and attended the food aid scientific meeting called by the Zambian government in July 2002, I feel that the real issue about accepting genetically modified (GM) food aid is based on politics and not safety.

A huge UN program is currently equipping developing countries with the capacity to assess the safety of genetically modified organisms, including GM grain imports. Developed countries, including the USA, are making their biosafety data available on international websites. Exporters of GM commodities have been asked to allow importing governments a chance to review safety and give approval before the first shipment is sent. All of these measures will help address safety issues, but their real benefit will only be evident when developing country biosafety frameworks are actively seeking safety information to support decisions.

On the other hand, it appears that little is being done to address political, social and economic concerns. Dialogue and trust between exporting and importing countries appears to be lacking. In-depth economic assessments on the impact of GM commodity imports are not available, including assessments on the socioeconomics of not accepting these foods. Some countries have initiated public awareness programs, but these are often derailed by other agendas, such as anti-globalization, objection to multinational companies and aggressive promotion of organic agriculture focused largely on a rejection of conventional farming. Confusingly, on the same platform European input is tolerated, while American input is rejected as interference.

The quality of the information delivered on GM determines the level of awareness and this affects the public's ability to make informed decisions. For instance, it comes as a surprise to African delegates to learn that the EU is a major importer of GM grain and a major producer of GM microbial food processing aids. Scientific biosafety information is not easily accessible to

interested lay people. Activist information frequently results in confusion, fear and rejection, while pro-bio-technology information results in interest and a willingness to test the products. In a situation like this it is not the truth that prevails, but whoever can reach the most people and the most *influential* people.

Decisions on accepting GM food are sovereign – each government must make a decision in the interests of its people. Most of the affected countries in Africa are routine importers of food grain, much of which is GM and none of which is considered a problem by regulators, consumers or activists. However, when an international agency offers GM food aid, there appears to be concern that accepting this gift will later affect a government's right to reject commercial GM grain imports. Countries retain the right to reject GM food based on safety issues, but if they are publicly seen to accept GM grain as food aid, what chance will they have of rejecting conventional imports at a later stage based on safety concerns?

Accepting whole grain verse milled grain is the only biosafety issue muddled into the food aid debate and featured in political decision making. There is a chance that whole grain will be planted, not eaten by the recipients. If the grain is GM, the chance for gene flow is high in maize and low in soya. Gene flow is not necessarily the demon. The unanswered safety question is whether the genes will have a significant negative impact on biodiversity. This seems unlikely for the existing approved modifications, but can only be determined by a thorough, case-by-case risk assessment in the local environment. In the absence of this risk assessment, a risk management option is to mill the grain, turning it from a living GMO into a non-living product with no threat to local biodiversity. From a food quality point of view, shipping and transporting milled grain is a food spoilage nightmare. Are the risks of microbial contamination greater than the risks of environmental impact of new genes in landraces? I would think so.

Even the Zambian government, who a few weeks before their 2002 meeting had trained over 30 scientists in risk assessment of GM crop safety, did not carry out a risk assessment to support the claim of 'poisonous' food. Instead the meeting was used to gather scientific support for the official position. The scientists who questioned the government's assessment and the humanitarian wisdom of the position were ostracized then and even now. This suggests that the decision was a political one, not based on safety as we were led to believe. Four African Biotechnology associations have recently called on African and political leaders "to provide strong leadership and direction" with regard to GM food aid until such time as pan-Africa organizations such as the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and the Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa (FARA) can implement long-term strategies for food security. They are particularly concerned about decisions that lead to unnecessary suffering and loss of life.

With the anti-US sentiment in Africa and the fact that much GM food comes from America, the link between GM food and US interference is being actively cultivated by opponents to modern biotechnology. There is a prevailing feeling in African circles that those who "control the food supply will control the world" and an implication that those who develop GM crops aspire to this domination. These linkages provide useful tools to influence society and governments and to stall acceptance of GM products. We will have to rely on history to tell us the true source of and reason for this activism. My guess is that anti-GM activism is lucrative

for the activist industry, that biotechnology is a graphic example for global economic activism and that the stalling tactics used by activists abet the needs of those economically threatened by GM products and by more sustainable agriculture.

The major difference between GM approval processes in most developed and developing countries is that the latter take into consideration a much broader set of issues. In most developed countries human and environmental safety are the focus of approval processes. In the Third World and more recently the EU, issues of safety are considered together with social and economic impact and public input is actively sought and reviewed. Safety issues can be investigated, understood and managed. Social, economic and political impact are rarely investigated or understood, but the perceptions loom large in decision making.

So is there a solution? It is generally accepted by proponents that, as GM becomes more and more a part of our environmental, food, industrial and medical tool box, the concerns will address themselves and the fears will fade from memory.

If the response to GM food aid is politically motivated, then a more proactive solution, I believe, is to address the political concerns of the governments needing food aid. If we put as much effort into studying and understanding the social, economic and political concerns of recipient countries as we do into the biosafety of the GM crops then we may move the debate forward. It can be done, but is there the funding or even the inclination to address these issues?