



SURPLUS
PEOPLE
PROJECT

SURPLUS PEOPLE PROJECT AND BIOWATCH MEDIA STATEMENT

GMOs ARE POISON ON THE PLATTER!

Did you ever:

- read or hear a full explanation of Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs)
- complain to food retailers that they do not label food that contains GMOs
- demand of government that they ban GMOs in food or at least force companies to label food that contains them
- take part, either as producer or consumer, in food production that does not use GMOs and dangerous chemicals?

If not, was it because you think genetically engineered food is good and healthy? Or was it because multi-national corporations make millions in profit by imposing GMOs in food without your knowledge and consent?

These are the issues Biowatch and the Surplus People Project want to bring before the media and public through our parliamentary dialogue and screenings of 'Poison on the Platter' this week. The South African government has identified biotechnology as a key growth area for the economy and the use of genetically modified seed has grown rapidly. The Africa Centre for Biosafety (ACB) points out that the country was ranked the eighth largest in terms of hectares under GM crops in 2008. However all these technologies are imported that are licensed for use in South Africa.

In South Africa, Monsanto occupies second position of the commercial seed market (primarily through acquisition) and had 50% share in the important maize market in 2009. Between the largest commercial seed companies, Monsanto, Pannar and Pioneer had an estimated 90% of market share of agronomic seeds (maize, wheat and sorghum) in 2002. These three companies also hold the rights/licences for most GM traits.

South Africa is also one of the first places in the world where (Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) have been introduced into smallholder farming. The case of the Makhathini farmers in South Africa has been promoted as a success story worldwide. The farmers on Makhathini flats had some initial successes but they ended up in debt and in even deeper poverty than before the introduction of GMOs. In essence both the industry and the government try to claim that GM technology is going to support smallholders despite being developed for industrial agriculture.

The introduction of GMOs into South Africa happened rather swiftly without much public participation and awareness. While surveys have been conducted on the acceptability of GM food crops, South African consumers and the public remain largely ignorant on the nature of GM crops.

The new administration in its current Medium Term Strategic Framework (MSTF) and Comprehensive Rural Development Programme (CRDP) government has set priorities and interventions to improve rural livelihoods and enhance food security. The MSTF states “As a consequence of this intervention, rural households should be able to satisfy 60% of their food requirements from own production over the MSTF period...” Government has invited the public to engage in the CRDP and it is vital that government reconsiders the role of GM crop in agriculture and food production as it may undermine its goals to improve rural livelihoods and enhance food security.

Governments and policy- makers need to be aware that patented gene technology will not help small- farmers survive climate change, but they will concentrate corporate power, drive up costs, inhibit public research and further undermine the rights of farmers to save and exchange seeds and most importantly people’s right to food. These trends threaten people’s autonomous food security and food sovereignty, i.e. the right of communities and countries to control what, how and where they produce as well as the policies and programmes under which they produce their food.