

Nigerian Biosafety Law: A Keg of Gun Powder

Welcome words by Nnimmo Bassey, Director Health of Mother Earth Foundation, at the Conference on **The Nigerian Biosafety Act and GMOs - Implications for Nigerians and Africa** held in Abuja 24-25th May 2016

It is an honour to welcome you all to this conference jointly hosted by the Health of Mother Earth Foundation (HOMEF), the Africa Faith & Justice Network (AFJN), Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) and Africa Europe Faith & Justice Network (AEFJN).

The ink with which the Nigerian Biosafety Management Act of 2015 was signed into law had hardly dried when the Nigerian Biosafety Management Agency (NABMA) quickly received applications for genetically modified maize and cotton from Monsanto Agricultural Nigeria Limited and advertised same for public comments. The rush was such that the advertisement of the applications published in Leadership (Thursday, February 25, 2016) had two display duration dates with one saying 29th February to 28th March 2016 and another paragraph stating 22nd February to 15 March 2016. Two conflicting dates in the same advert does raise cause for concern. Also puzzling is the fact that the advertisement was published in February 25, 2016 but the deadline mentioned in the notice took effect from February 22nd. We submitted objections to the two applications and copies of the objections are available for participants in this conference.

We were not surprised by the move of NABMA because even before the law was signed in the dying days of the previous administration, the National Agricultural Biotechnology Development Agency (NABDA) had at a press conference on 17th July 2014 stated that they were working to fast track the adoption of genetically modified organisms in Nigeria. At that time, the agency claimed there were sufficient safeguards to protect Nigerians from the unpredictable consequences of introducing GMOs into our environment. Their acclaimed safeguards included the “a draft Biosafety Bill, biosafety application guidelines, biosafety containment facilities guidelines, and a variety of forms such as those for accreditation, GMO import and shipment form and a host of drafts.”¹

The average Nigerians tend to think that any fruit that is bigger than normal is genetically modified. They also think that genetically modified crops grow rapidly, have high yields and are more nutritious than their normal counterparts. People routinely ask how the growing population would be fed without modern biotechnology.

All these are myths that the industry has quite successfully propagated. People believe these false claims without demanding for evidence beyond the scientific sounding terminologies: genetically, engineered, etc. Very few Nigerians know that genetic engineering is actually a cut and paste technology where genetic materials when inserted often arrives at unintended locations. Moreover, up to 70% of the world’s population is fed by small scale farmers and not from the products of genetic engineering. Indeed, a bulk of genetically engineered crops produced over the past two decades are used mostly as animal feed.²

Some of us are concerned that agricultural modern biotechnology or genetic engineering is already being surreptitiously introduced into Nigeria. In 2006/2007 Friends of the Earth Africa groups detected illegal genetically modified rice on Nigeria's market shelves. The findings were reported to the Federal Ministry of Environment and NAFDAC with no response from either. Finding an illegal GMO rice on Nigeria's market shelf through a very random search suggests to us that we may be sitting on a keg of gun powder.

Africa is a frontier yet to be conquered by the biotech industry. Attempts to introduce the engineered crops to small scale farmers have met spectacular failures- especially with regard to cotton engineered to be pest resistant – as have been exemplified in South Africa and Burkina Faso. Other than cotton, the attempts have been on staple crops that our peoples depend on, including cassava, beans (cowpea) and bananas. The significance of such attempts is that our staples are captured by the biotech industry, then our agriculture and food will inexorably fall into their control.

Genetic engineering is still a young science, even though there already are more extreme versions of biotechnology, notably, synthetic biology. As you will learn from this conference, the drawbacks of agricultural genetic engineering are numerous and work against the grain of African agricultural systems. For one, they are mostly grown as monocultures, depend on agro toxics or agro-chemicals and on artificial fertilizer.

Concerns include negative impact on agro-ecosystems, such as development of resistance in target insect pests, harmful effects on non-target insects, development of herbicide tolerance in weeds, and genetic erosion or loss of traditional crop diversity as a result of genetic contamination through cross-fertilization.³ Scientists have illustrated that GM crops at most have similar yield levels as their natural counterparts. As the research by the Union of Concerned Scientists in the USA showed, yield gains have been due to improved traditional breeding methods and other agricultural practices other than those of genetic engineering.⁴ Moreover, it does not make sense comparing the product of mono-culture with the product of multi-culture.

Hunger is caused by poverty and not by a lack of food. A majority of those who go to bed hungry are actually farmers. They suffer hunger because they have to sell off their produce in order to meet financial obligations related to family needs. In addition, farmers in rural communities with poor infrastructure are simply unable to get their harvests to markets where they could obtain reasonable prices. This dearth of infrastructure and social support opens our farmers to multiple layers of exploitation and deprivation.

We are concerned that rather than focusing on supporting local farmers who are known to hold the key for supply of wholesome food now and in the future, our agencies appear to have thrown caution to the winds, ignore the Precautionary Principle – the very bedrock of biosafety- and are embracing risky technologies and systems that would eventually lead to a colonisation of our agriculture.

As you will hear in this conference, the Nigerian Biosafety Management Act (2015) is a highly defective piece of legislation contrived to open up Nigeria for a literal GMO invasion. HOMEF has examined the law and our publication on its yawning short comings is available online and in

hard copies.. We demand that the law be drastically and transparently reviewed to safeguard our environment, health, food systems and future generations. We also demand that the applications by Monsanto to introduce genetically modified maize and cotton into Nigeria be set aside as Nigeria must not be a dumping ground for failed or risky technologies.

Let me conclude these welcome words by sharing an extract of what HOMEF stands for:

HOMEF is an environmental/ecological think tank and advocacy organisation. It is rooted in solidarity and in the building and protection of human and collective dignity. We believe that neoliberal agendas driven by globalization of exploitation of the weak, despoliation of ecosystems and lack of respect for Mother Earth thrive mostly because of the ascendancy of enforced creed of might is right. This ethic permits the powerful to pollute, grab resources and degrade/destroy the rest simply because they can do so. HOMEF recognizes that this reign of (t)error can best be tackled through a conscious examination of the circumstances by which the trend crept in and got entrenched. Thus, HOMEF will have as a cardinal work track continuous political education aimed at examining the roots of exploitation of resources, labour, peoples and entire regions. HOMEF hopes through this to contribute to the building of movements for recovery of memory, dignity and harmonious living with full respect of natural cycles of Mother Earth.⁵

Welcome to fruitful deliberations.

NOTES

¹ See Joke Falaju. July 18, 2014. **Nigeria to accelerate adoption of GM crops.** The guardian, reposted on <https://www.geneticliteracyproject.org/2014/07/18/nigeria-to-accelerate-adoption-of-gm-crops/> and accessed on 23 May 2016. See also, HOMEF.2014. **Not on our Plates- Why Nigeria does not need GM food -** <http://www.homef.org/sites/default/files/pubs/not-on-our-plates.pdf>

² **BBC. EU allows sale of more GM food crops for livestock**
24 April 2015 <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-32450268>

³ Friends of the Earth International.2003. **Playing with Hunger – The reality behind the shipment of GMOs as Food Aid.** Amsterdam. Pp9-10

⁴ Union of Concerned Scientists.2009. **Failure to Yield: Evaluating the Performance of Genetically Engineered Crops.** http://www.ucsusa.org/food_and_agriculture/our-failing-food-system/genetic-engineering/failure-to-yield.html#.VOLSFGM-iFI Accessed 23.05.2016

See also <http://thefreethoughtproject.com/buy-myth-gmo-crops-increase-yields/> and <http://www.gmwatch.org/news/archive/2013/15065-union-of-concerned-scientists-respond-again-to-pam-ronald-s-attacks>

⁵ See more at: <http://www.homef.org/content/about-home#sthash.6dHW5m8U.dpuf>