

Sowing the Seeds for Sustainability: Agriculture, Biodiversity, Economics and Society, Proceedings of the Eighth Interactive Session held at the Second IUCN World Conservation Congress, Amman, Jordan, 7 October 2000, edited by Rachel Wiseman and Liz Hopkins (Switzerland, International Union for the Conservation of Nature, the World Conservation Union, 2001), pp. 127-128.

**Nature's Matchless Seeds
or Monsanto's Colonized Crops ?**

By E.G. Vallianatos

Cash-cropping in developing countries and the use of bioengineered varieties – a system that is accompanied by widespread poverty and hunger – should be abandoned in favor of indigenous crops. These do not require expensive foreign fertilizers, pesticides and heavy machinery. Moreover, the genetic diversity of native crops is a valuable resource for the rest of the world.

In essence, biotechnology is fundamentally the shuffling of genes from one species to another. The primary business idea behind such a hazardous manipulation and colonization of life is that, when successful -- adding, for instance, foreign genes to soybeans in order to make them behave in certain desired and profitable manner -- it's like the invention of a valuable product. Its owner reaps a harvest of money and power.

Global corporations and biotechnology

Monsanto is one of a handful of global corporations pushing biotechnology to its limits, especially in agriculture where it has bioengineered certain food crops to tolerate the killing power of its own toxins or to resist certain diseases or insects. Monsanto has been selling its bioengineered seeds aggressively in the United States and throughout the world, including the tropics, arguing that its modified crops would be great weapons to fight hunger. This is a dubious claim because, first, hunger is primarily a political problem and, second, nature has always been unmatched in its exquisite design of seeds to fit the limitations and possibilities of land, climate, and human culture.

Consider Africa, for example. Here's a continent with an extraordinary legacy of agricultural biological diversity which is hungry and where Monsanto is trying to gain a foothold for its ephemeral food engineering. But does Africa need Monsanto? Growing luxury crops like tea, cocoa and coffee for export in sub-Saharan Africa is probably the strongest legacy of European colonialism -- a legacy that in the dawn of the 21st century translates into hunger for about 200 million people. Africans don't need coffee, tea, and cocoa. They grow them entirely for the gastronomic pleasures of Europe and North America. But Africans need more food. Gambians, for example, produce peanuts, which they export for money to import food. They are not the exception.

Cash-cropping

The cash-cropping road to development condemns Africa to impoverishment and

hunger -- even pushing Africa's extraordinary variety of indigenous food crops to the verge of extinction. Africans eat less of their own food and eat more imported wheat, rice and corn. Why Africans eat less and less of their food goes to the very heart of their hunger and dependency on others. The Europeans heaped scorn on the fantastic variety of Africa's cereals. And Western scientists classified African grains as cattle feed. That is why many of the more than 2,000 varieties of indigenous grains, roots, fruits and other food plants have been lost -- at least from the daily diet of most Africans.

But these foods still exist in Africa and they are the answer to the tremendous food insecurity of so many millions of human beings in Africa and elsewhere in the world. In a 1996 study, The Lost Crops of Africa, the US National Academy of Sciences says that Africa's native cereals like rice, finger millet, fonio, pearl millet, sorghum, tef, guinea millet and dozens of wild cereals present a "local legacy of genetic wealth upon which a sound food future might be built."

Lost crops of Africa

Resurrecting Africa's food plants would heal the ecological wounds of the continent. Africa's cereals are tolerant of heat, cold, drought, waterlogging and infertile land. And they are also nutritious and tasty. The Academy study says that Africa's "lost" plants may benefit more than Africa because "they represent an exceptional cluster of cereal biodiversity with particular promise for solving some of the food production problems that will arise in the twenty-first century."

The lost crops of Africa present Africa, the rest of the world, and the international development community with a great opportunity to practice applied sustainable development and join the African peasants, who still use many of these indigenous food plants, in building Africa's food security around these overlooked resources.

This is also a challenge for the United States. The US Agency for International Development (AID) funded The Lost Crops of Africa. Under proper leadership, AID can move decisively in Africa in supporting the resurrection of Africa's own crops. It is almost certain that such a strategy would have lasting implications for the relations between Africa and the United States.

More food from Africa's own crops for Africa's own people will be the best medicine and solution to local hunger and probably the best antidote to the surviving cash cropping plantation using choice land to satisfy the beverage thirst of Europeans and North Americans while Africans starve. An Africa without hunger will be a grateful Africa -- thankful to the American people for their support. An Africa without hunger would be best prepared to promote democracy, international trade, and sustainable development.

Genetic riches

Undoing the cash cropping of colonialism by bringing back from obscurity

Africa's own crops -- and not the precarious bioengineered crops of Monsanto -- is bound to sow a plentiful harvest for Africa and without the expensive and hazardous foreign fertilizers, pesticides, and heavy machinery. These native crops are also valuable to the rest of the world because of their genetic richness. They could be handy in broadening the dangerously narrow path of agricultural biodiversity in the United States and other industrial countries.

So Monsanto is barking up the wrong tree in Africa and the tropics. Its failure to convince the Grameen Bank of Bangladesh, the lender of last resort for impoverished Asian women, and the American relief organization CARE to become the means by which its farm biotechnologies could reach the peasants of Asia and Africa and Latin America signal that the world is not ready to abandon its food security to Monsanto or anybody else for that matter.

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