

To abolish starvation Africa needs GM crops

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I used to trample them in the fields. Now I see anti-science hysteria for what it is

Once again drought is menacing the Horn of Africa. Britain's pledge this week to increase food aid for 1.3 million Ethiopians facing starvation to help them to reach the next harvest can be the only right response.

But how do we ensure that African farmers produce enough food to feed themselves? The solution must be a radical change to agriculture on the continent. It is promising, therefore that a few days ago, on July 1, the Government of Kenya, which is also affected by drought, announced plans to open its borders to genetically modified crops for the first time.

For more than a decade Africa — following the lead set by European environmental campaigners — has shuttered its windows against GM, fearing terrible damage to its people's health and its ecosystems. Instead, as more of the world's agricultural land — now totalling more than a billion hectares — is successfully given over to GM crops, African rulers are realising that banning biotech was a costly mistake for which their own people are paying.

As a former anti-GM campaigner, I used to join “decontamination” actions in the middle of the night, trampling and slashing down crop trials in the UK in the late 1990s. Looking back, I realise I was caught up in something more resembling anti-scientific mass hysteria rather than any rational response to a new technology.

We were concerned, perhaps legitimately, that GM could be dangerous. But in the ensuing ten years, the science is pretty conclusive: I am not aware of a single substantiated case of GM foods having had any negative effects on health or the environment anywhere in the world.

Instead, the impact has been almost entirely positive. Importantly for Africa, GM crops have substantially increased yields, meaning more food for the hungry and a greater harvest per acre or gallon of water. Herbicide-tolerant crops have been designed to work with more benign weedkillers than the toxic brew sprayed on conventional crops. Some biotech crops

such as insect-resistant “Bt cotton” and corn have anti-pest traits engineered into the plant itself so they require much less insecticide.

The great tragedy of the biotech revolution has been that Africa has missed out, just as it missed out on the original Green Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s that allowed India and China vastly to increase agricultural productivity and abolish famine while their populations soared.

One of the most pervasive myths about biotech crops is that they only benefit big corporations and are part of a nefarious plot by multinational seed companies such as Monsanto to dominate the world food chain. Actually Indian and Brazilian farmers were initially so desperate to adopt Monsanto’s GM technologies, against the wishes of their governments, that they smuggled the new seeds across borders. Now 90 per cent of the growers of GM crops are small farmers in developing countries such as China, India, Pakistan and the Philippines.

African farmers desperately need to raise their productivity, to increase their incomes and to better feed their families. GM is no silver bullet — affordable fertilisers, land rights and decent irrigation matter greatly — but genetically improved African crops could be vital. All over Africa and Asia there are publicly funded efforts to create transgenic varieties of subsistence crops that will be available to poorer farmers and licensed without patent protection. Current initiatives include salt-tolerant rice for use in degraded land where salinisation has reduced yields, a disease-resistant rice being developed in Uganda, so-called “iron beans” in Rwanda to tackle anaemia and an African banana resistant to a devastating wilt disease.

We must move beyond anti-GM prejudice based on pastoral myths and increase assistance for biotechnology for African farmers. To its credit, Oxfam is beginning to recognise the opportunities for what it calls “pro-poor GM organisms” in tackling hunger in Africa. Unfortunately, many environmental groups remain steadfastly opposed to any use of biotechnology. This kind of neo-Luddism is damaging. With 800 million people still constantly malnourished, we must use every tool available to feed the world while also protecting the planet.

Mark Lynas is the author of *The God Species: How the Planet Can Survive the Age of Humans (Fourth Estate)*, to be published on Thursday

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