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THE MONITOR

Uganda: Genetically Modified Crops Are Safe

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OPINION

Genetically modified organisms are adopted globally for specific special attributes that are agronomically, economically, nutritionally, socially and environmentally viable. While this has been proved, it is a right for individuals or groups to continue raising ethical concerns, especially emerging issues about GMOs.

GMO development, adoption and use are being pursued using internationally recognised procedures whose GMOs have been found safe for the environment. The safety issues raised have helped the science community to continue improving their approach to GMO development. In fact, it is these issues that were the basis for the Cartagena Protocol on biosafety, to which the Uganda government is a signatory.

We write to create awareness to people who think that GMOs when introduced will be more of a liability than a benefit to Uganda. Critics who have raised issues against GMOs have been left to enjoy audience to promote critical thinking on the possible risks as one of the safety measures and to integrate their views into research.

Due to some social and scientific fears, it took three years for the US to approve tomato, the first transgenic crop consumed by man for field trials and more eight years for it to be approved for human consumption. During this time, a number of studies were done that confirmed that this crop was safe for human consumption and the environment. Since then, we have had a number of GMO crops that have been developed, released and now widely cultivated around the world and used as food products which have been sold worldwide.

Farmers in the West have paid hefty fines for not following the regulatory requirements. Indeed these are criminals who must be punished by the law. A critical analysis of all the cases where farmers, Monsanto and other multinational biotechnology companies have lost the cases in courts is that they did not follow the regulatory requirements.

In Uganda, we are following the regulatory requirements and people should not be misguided to believe that since America has failed, Uganda will fail. We cannot therefore justify criminals in the West and use it to deny Ugandans their right of access to food and technology.

GMOs have not been resisted in Europe and USA. Instead, GMO resistance in these countries is because the technology has not been seen to be of any value. In these countries, there is support for GMOs that contain vaccines. It is only a few years away when Europe will approve potatoes that contain vaccines. Crops that contain insulin are being developed for patients that suffer from the sugar disease, diabetes.

In countries where citizens have resisted GMO, they have done so because the people do not go hungry, and drought, pests and diseases are not a problem and because their citizens do not see tangible benefits, GMOs are rejected in the absence of any documented risk. Therefore, GMO is rejected based on likely benefits. In contrast, there are many people in developed countries that are eager to receive GMOs containing vaccines or drugs for saving life.

The varieties of crops grown in Uganda are superior depending on the context of the argument. A crop variety which will yield nothing due to its inability to resist drought, pests and diseases is not superior at all to the development agencies.

Currently, scientists from Kenya, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Uganda and Sudan managed by the Association for Strengthening Agricultural Research in Eastern and Central Africa are developing GM maize that is tolerant to drought, GM cassava for resistance to the Cassava Brown Streak Disease (CBSD) to list but a few. We are using GM technology because traditional breeding tools have failed over the years to produce the desired varieties.

Again, we insist that Monsanto and other donors are supporting activities to improve agricultural production for humanitarian reasons, not for profits. It's not only Monsanto that has donated GM crops. In 2001, Syngenta donated golden rice to subsistence farmers of Asia.

The argument that GMOs have the potential in Africa to increase our dependence on Northern companies has no justification. No private seed company was at the core of GMO discovery.

Mr Masiga is a conservation geneticist working in the Agrobio-diversity and biotechnology programme of ASARECA. This article was co-authored with Dr Charles Mugoya

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