

*Opinion Editorial by Dr. Tewolde Egziabher*

“REAL FOOD SECURITY, NOT DEPENDENCE  
ON BIOTECH CORPORATIONS, SHOULD BE OUTCOME  
OF SACRAMENTO CONFERENCE.”

The U.S. government is convening a ministerial-level Conference on Agricultural Science and Technology in Sacramento, California, June 23-25. I am among the more than 180 ministers of agriculture, environment and trade, who were invited to attend. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the meeting is being called “in support of the U.S. commitment to strengthen global food security,” to “focus on the critical role science and technology can play in raising agricultural productivity in developing countries,” and to “broaden participants’ knowledge and understanding of relevant science and technology, including biotechnology...”

As the general manager of the Environmental Protection Authority of the government of Ethiopia, I had hoped to attend this conference in order to help strengthen my nation and the world’s food security. However, although I am unable to participate in person, I want to convey my strong opinion that the best way to ensure food security is to advocate for policies that enhance local food production systems. I do not believe that the U.S. government’s agenda of advancing industrial agriculture methods of chemical use, food irradiation, and genetically engineered (GE) crops is in the interest of Ethiopia or other developing nations.

Why do we oppose this industrial-based agenda? First, this notion that genetically engineered crops will save developing countries misses the real point. The world has never grown as much food per capita as it is doing now, yet the world has also never had as many hungry. The problem is not the amount of food produced, but how it is both produced and distributed and at what cost. Maldistribution and poverty explain why in 1997, 78 percent of all malnourished children under five in the developing world live in countries with food surpluses. We have plenty of food; it’s just not reaching those who need it most.

Next, to my knowledge, there has not been one commercially grown GE, or transgenic crop, that out-yields all other varieties of that crop. What the transgenic crops have done so far is tie the farmer to specific chemicals and a specific company. For example, farmers in developing countries who use genetically engineered seeds that cannot reproduce—and so can’t be saved and used for next year’s crop—become tied to transnational companies like Monsanto.

As a result, farmers are tied to a technology that is controlled from another country and therefore subject to decisions outside of their control. Let me give an example: Ethiopia just had a war with Eritrea that provoked a trade embargo. Suppose we had become dependent on some crop variety from the United States, Japan, or Kenya? What if, during this political fracas, our trading partners had said, “No more seed?” What then? Without local control, local availability of food can never be certain. In Africa there are many politically unstable countries. If every time there was a breakdown of law and order, the system of food production were to suffer, it could mean death to millions.

The biotech industry is suggesting that food security will come through the farmer’s loss of control of essential agricultural inputs. Do you see the lie? This is food insecurity. Ultimately, it is the people’s voice that is going to make a difference. My people want to be free to use the alternatives that already exist: local, organic, biological-

ly diverse, environmentally sound and sustainable agriculture that focuses on meeting the needs of local populations and is under local control. It can work as well in California as in Ethiopia, if the U.S. government and biotech industry allow it to. ☛

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