

South African Small Farmers Pushed to Plant GM Seed


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DURBAN, South Africa – Baphethile Mntambo has been farming organically for the past five years because she knows that avoiding chemicals will in the long-term benefit her yield. She decided not to plant genetically modified seeds because she has heard that they cannot be saved for the next season and will eventually deplete her soil. But she is not entirely sure how and why. 

“I have heard about GMO, but I don’t understand what it is exactly,” she says. “The only thing I know is that it will cost a lot of money to buy the seeds, the fertiliser and the pesticides.”

Mntambo is one of 50 small-scale farmers in the Valley of a Thousand Hills in South Africa’s KwaZulu-Natal province who have been taught how to farm organically by non-governmental organisation Valley Trust. The farmers learn to plant seasonal crops that will provide their families both with food security and an opportunity to generate income by selling their produce at local markets.

“We decided to promote organic farming to create sustainability for small-scale farmers. We believe it is the only way to give them food sovereignty and stability,” explains Valley Trust food security facilitator Nhlanhla Vezi.

The Valley Trust used to cooperate with the Department of Agriculture, according to Vezi, but the collaboration ceased when the department started to put pressure on small-scale farmers to form cooperatives if they wanted its support. “The Department makes very attractive offers to provide farming equipment, water piping and seeds, but then uses this as a strategy to push GMO because of agreements they have signed with multinational GM seed patent holders,” says Vezi.

Rural farmers are often lured into planting GM seeds by the Department of Agriculture by promises of substantial bank loans and the prospect of huge earnings, agrees Lesley Liddell, director of Biowatch, an NGO promoting alternatives to GMO farming by encouraging farmers to inter-crop, use natural fertilisers and non-chemical crops. “But in the end, most farmers end up in huge debt, because they can’t save seeds and are obliged to buy the matching GM fertilisers and pesticides.”

Yet, small-scale farmers are often so desperate for financial support that they consider planting GMO crops against better knowledge if they are offered the seeds for free. “I know that GMO is not good in the long run, but if someone gave me these seeds I would still plant them,” says Tholani Bhengu, another small-scale farmer who works with the Valley Trust.

“For me, the most important thing is to bring food on the table every week. I can’t afford to think now about what will happen next year.”

Because small-scale farmers in rural Africa often have little or no formal education, they are generally unable to make informed choices around GMO farming. “We encourage them to attend portfolio committees that discuss GMO regulations, but the farmers’ knowledge is very limited, so it’s difficult for them to contribute. They understand the issues but not the legislation,” says Liddell.

South Africa is the only country within the Southern African Development Community (SADC) to grow GM crops — maize, cotton and soya — commercially. Since 1997, GMO farming is regulated by the Genetically Modified Organisms Act.

“The adoption of GM crops in SA has increased over the last ten years and this has also filtered down to small-scale farmers,” confirms Priscilla Sehoole, chief communications officer of the national Department of Agriculture.

“As with any other technology, there are potential risks associated with GMO technology and these include those related to human and animal health and also the environment,” she admits. “Therefore, the regulation of all activities involving GMOs is subjected to a scientific safety assessment process that evaluates the potential risks.”

Seehole says the South African Department of Agriculture would like to harmonise GMO policies across SADC to “eliminate some of the technical barriers that (currently) hinder trade in the region.”

But anti-GMO activists, such as the African Centre for Biosafety, are opposed to this approach. “The GM industry is pushing for harmonised legislation because it will make it easier to commercialise varieties of GM crops across countries. But those concerned with biosafety very much doubt if regional harmonisation (of biosafety legislation) would be of advantage,” says African Centre of Biosafety director Mariam Mayet.

“At the moment, each SADC country has its own policies and all these laws are very different from each other. This means that each GMO application has to go through the approval system and public consultation of each country, which is good for transparency and accountability ” she explains.

“When South Africa passed GMO legislation in 1997, most people weren’t aware of how highly contentious the technology would become. But now there is no way back. Once you’re in it, you’re in it,” says Mayet.

South Africa’s food industry is already saturated with GM, she says: “Everything is contaminated, and to make matters worse, labelling of GM content is not mandatory. We need serious policy reform and to implement a testing system that traces which foods contain GMO and which do not.”

Over the past decade, South Africa has entered trade agreements with large, multi-national agricultural biotechnology corporations, such as Monsanto, which — in an attempt to control the world’s agricultural production — promote the subsidisation of patented GM seeds. Through an incentive system supporting monocultures, small-scale farmers are systematically integrated into commercial agriculture, mainly for export, and encouraged to put together their land.

“It all looks very nice on paper, but it is actually a clever ploy to get access to people’s land. Small-scale farmers who sign up for GM deals quickly lose control over seed management, production and eventually their land. This means they lose their food sovereignty,” says Mayet. “GMO marginalises poor, small-scale farmers. We are in for hard times and need to fight for people’s right to land and resources. But we won’t give up.”

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