



Public outrage over importation of Genetically Modified Maize Meal

Press release: The Zambia Alliance for Agroecology and Biodiversity (ZAAB)

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The National Biosafety Authority (NBA) issued a press release yesterday, 17th April 2023, assuring citizens that genetically modified (GM) mealie meal to be imported from South Africa is safe. This is amid serious controversy and confusion, in a move that many feel is misaligned with Zambia's laws and policies, historical precedence, public opinion and due diligence.

According to the NBA, GM maize or soya coming into Zambia from South Africa is permitted as long as it goes through existing application procedures, similar to that of other permitted products such as cornflakes or additives to products including gravy powders or spices. However, far from assuring the public, the statement only serves to prove that standards regulating the safety of GMOs in Zambia are increasingly disintegrating.

GM technology has caused 30 years of global scientific controversy regarding its safety, leading the majority of global countries to severely regulate or restrict its use. However, as ZAAB, we contend that the Zambian government is increasingly succumbing to pressure from 'Big Agriculture' to do an about turn on caution over GMOs. Zambia's celebrated Biosafety Act of 2007 is currently being redrafted to promote and deploy the technology rather than rigorously assess its safety.

Maize is a strategic crop for Zambia

Zambia's Biosafety Act No. 10 of 2007, in Section 11(1), states that *"The Authority shall not grant any approval for the importation, development, production, release into the environment or placing on the market of any genetically modified organism or product of a genetically modified organism relating to any crop or livestock of strategic importance to national food security"*. Is maize a crop of strategic importance to national food security? The answer is YES! We are therefore of the opinion that the importation of GM maize into Zambia is unlawful.

Vital information is missing

Public access to information is the mechanism that allows us to ensure that our rights being are upheld. According to the law, the NBA is obliged to share the government's risk assessment documents with the public. It is also obliged to upload these risk assessments to an international portal called the Biosafety Clearing House (BCH). This should be replicated on a national database, usually administered by the NBA. The NBA's Scientific Advisory Committee Chairperson, Dr Sody Munsaka, should not be telling us that regulators have done a risk assessment, he should be pointing us to the documents where we can see it for ourselves, and it should be communicated in a manner in which every Zambian can engage.

ZAAB has found a total of six risk assessments on the Zambian BCH profile. These are all for maize, there are none for soya. (Note that South Africa has permitted 21 GM maize events to date and these are all mixed together in storage.) The website listed for the NBA on their PR does not work, so we could not find information there. If the NBA is not able to complete the simple task of publishing their risk assessments onto a website, as they are legally obliged to do, can we feel safe that they're accomplishing the vastly more complex task of evaluating GMOs coming into our country? The fact that they're either not doing these risk assessments, or alternatively, not making this information available to the public, does not inspire confidence.

The risk assessments are not scientifically credible

The six risk assessment documents that are available cannot be described as vigorous by any means. They appear to be summaries of the safety data that is prepared by the producers of GMOs for their permit application. Three-pages long on average, these risk assessments do not include any experimental designs, any data coming out of trials or any peer-reviewed scientific data. There is no narrative showing how authorities evaluated the safety information they received. Most critical, is that maize is not a staple food in the countries where this safety data was generated. This is not rigorous or science-based decision-making; this is rubber-stamping processes designed and funded by industry.

The public should not be misled regarding the facts of GM foods safety research. Globally, no feeding trials have been conducted with humans to assess safety. Even animal feeding trials are voluntary, and when they are done, these are largely carried out on birds or rats, for a limited 90 day period. In a controversial two-year study published in 2012 on the impacts of GMOs consumed by rats, scientists used the same rats and a similar experimental design to that typically used by companies such as Monsanto for their 90-day feeding trials. Impacts such as cancerous tumours and kidney and liver malfunctions only started to show after four months. Impacts on the next generation were also observed. The release of this study resulted in a vicious smear campaign from the biotechnology industry against the scientist, resulting in his work being retracted. It was however re-published in another journal and serves as a stark warning that long-term, peer reviewed science on the safety of consuming GMOs is negligible.

Concerns

The recent announcement by the NBA leaves us with grave concerns about how GMOs are being regulated in Zambia. Our key concerns include that:

1. Access to information is not adequate and does not fulfil legal obligations on public participation and transparency. For example, the National Biosafety Act (Section 14.6(b)) obliges the NBA to inform the public of any risk assessment report relating to a GMO or product of a GMO. This has not been done. Therefore, it undermines our ability to ensure that our rights are upheld .
2. The safety of our food is not assured and GMOs are not being vigorously regulated. This is concerning when dealing with a technology that has caused 30 years of scientific controversy regarding its safety.

3. Maize is a staple food for Zambians. The countries where safety data is being generated from do not consume maize as we do.
4. The law is being weakened as vested interests influence grows over our regulators.
5. Policy inconsistency is undermining our confidence in the ability of the current government to do what is right for this country and not for industry. Within a space of two weeks, government stated that the nation has adequate reserves of maize, thereafter that they are planning to “import to export” and now to import for consumption. It also implies that GMO safety assessments were carried out between 4th April 2023 and 17th April 2023. What are we supposed to believe?
6. Even when due process is followed, it is evident that the NBA and other regulatory bodies do not have the capacity to effectively regulate GMOs. Yesterday’s discovery by the NBA that some mealie meal made from GMO maize was already being sold in Zambia, particularly in less informed communities and high population density areas, is testimony to this position.

We have a few questions

1. Why has the NBA, a regulatory body, become a proponent and promoter of GMOs?
2. How can Zambians have confidence in the NBA as an institution when the Board Chairperson (who is supposed to provide checks and balances on the secretariat) is the one announcing that the institution will abrogate the law that governs their existence?
3. Has Zambia changed its position on “importing to export” to “importing to feed the Zambian people”? If so, why? Given that Zambia has been recording bumper harvests in the last two seasons, with constant government assurances that the country has enough strategic maize reserves? Where has this maize gone to?
4. If ALL GMO maize and soya beans from South Africa are safe for human consumption, why was the consignment discovered yesterday labelled “safe for people 4 years and above”, and not just “safe for human and animal consumption”?
5. In whose interest is this being done? Who stands to benefit?

Our Demands

- i. We call on the Republican President, His Excellency Mr. Hakainde Hichilema to urgently intervene in this matter and compel the NBA to uphold the law by rescinding the decision to allow the importation of mealie meal made from genetically modified maize.
- ii. The Government of the Republic of Zambia should source non-GMO maize and/or mealie meal for its people. It has a responsibility, based on its own laws to find healthy and safe food for its population – and we believe that resources are available for such emergencies - without resorting to GMOs whose safety is still under dispute despite years of research and investment.
- iii. Zambia should never go the GMO route in Agriculture production and or consumption; we stand to lose our competitive advantage over other countries that grow GMO

maize. We risk environmental, human and animal health and the consolidation of corporate power over our seed and food systems. Alternatives exist – GMOs have never been the solution even after more than 30 years of the technology.

Ends//

Notes for Editors:

- Zambia's risk assessments on the BCH are available here:
<https://bch.cbd.int/en/countries/ZM>
- Dr. Munsaka states that regulators have approved GM maize coming from South Africa. However, South Africa has approved 21 maize varieties to date while we can find only 6 maize risk assessments done by Zambian regulators. Bulk shipments from South Africa would potentially be comprised of all of the approved maize events.
- The controversial study done by Giles Seralini is the only long-term study on rats to date. A discussion on this controversy can be accessed here:
<https://acbio.org.za/gm-biosafety/setting-record-straight-seralini-gm-maize-rat-study-sa-government-urgently-intervene/>
Republished study <http://www.nature.com/news/paper-claiming-gm-link-with-tumours-republished-1.15463>