

The Power of Giant Companies: Do Ugandans Need Elections?

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Ideally, presidential and parliamentary elections are held so that the leaders who serve the people's interests are chosen. Particularly, under parliamentary democracy, the people's representatives in the national assembly are supposed to ensure that the electorate's wishes or worries are catered for by making laws or formulating policies that hinder the executive or the private individuals from undertaking activities that would undermine the public good as defined

by the concerned people. Apparently, this has not been the case in Uganda on the issue regarding the introduction of genetically modified organisms (GMOs).

From the public debates, there has been a popular opinion against the introduction of GMOs in Uganda. For example, most contributions to the debate in 2014 from Members of Parliament, scientists and civil society were against the GMOs (*The New Vision*, 2014 p.7). It is astonishing to learn that within a short time in the same year after the debate, Members of Parliament not only allowed the introduction the GMO's but were also used to distribute GM maize seeds for planting in their constituencies. According to a source in the Uganda National Assembly, talked to the author on the condition of anonymity, beginning with the 2014 planting season, the Members of Parliament (both from the ruling and opposition parties) are given GM maize seeds with a tag not for sale that they distribute to peasant farmers for planting in their respective constituencies. One of the Members of Parliament, who also talked to author on the condition of anonymity lest he would be accused of leaking secret information, confirmed the revelation by pointing out that the GM maize seeds are supplied through parliamentarians to be grown in the maize growing areas.



When Ken Lukyamuzi, a vocal opposition MP and an environmentalist who was initially opposed to the introduction of the GMOs in Uganda was confronted on the issue on a radio debate recently, he could not deny. However, he said the blame on the secret introduction of GMOs should not be pinned on him as an individual but the whole parliament.

In addition, according to eye witnesses from Kasese and Kisoro districts, the growing of genetically modified seeds (GMs), especially maize, is a reality on the ground. From what the eye witnesses have observed, if the GM maize seeds are planted in good fertile soils, they initially bear big cobs. But the cobs do not taste good if they are roasted and eaten fresh. In addition, the seeds from the cobs of GM maize cannot be replanted while they do not do well when they are subsequently grown (after getting new seeds off course) without fertilisers as well as being spread with requisite chemicals. The observation of the eyewitnesses reflects the characteristics of GM crops world-wide – they are accompanied with “with a lot of baggage like pesticide use” (Parker and Ryan, 2014 p. 22).

It is disturbing to know that the state of Uganda has embraced the introduction of genetically modified seeds without thoroughly scrutinising their economic, health and environmental dangers. Economically, they pose the potential danger of enslaving end-users, ‘namely, the poor farmers that are eventually forced by multinational giants in America and Europe to relinquish all control over indigenous seeds that are genetically modified and then reintroduced as new crops.... Without being dramatic about it, the aggressive business model of marketing GM seeds around the world was pioneered by Monsanto. This is the same company that sued a Canadian farmer named Percy Schmeiser in August 1998 because the farmer’s crop became cross-pollinated by Monsanto’s genetically modified canola’ (Opiyo Oloya, 2010 p.14) for royalty fees. The introduction of GMOs in Uganda pose the danger of the people in the country losing total sovereignty because they will not be in position to control their means of survival. As Mugisha (2012 p.13) argued, the secret introduction of GMOs will ‘quicken the distortion of Uganda’s rich biodiversity and cause farmers to be dependent on inputs for their livelihoods. Traditional farmers’ practices of preserving and multiplying indigenous seeds will also suffer extinction, forcing farmers to buy fresh supply of seeds for every planting season. Farmers will have to sign licensing agreements with stipulations that ban reuse, resell, saving, supplying or transfer of seeds to any person because seeds will be patented. In this way, multinational GM companies will have absolute monopoly over production and distribution seeds thereby undermining and compromising Uganda’s food sovereignty’.

The GMOs also pose a health threat. The potential hazard of GMO technology was discovered in August 1998 by ‘Dr Aparad Pusztai, from the Rowett Institute in Scotland who found that rats fed with GE “potatoes showed serious health damage’. Since then, there have been other studies that have galvanised debate in the science community about the safety of GMO products – to this point, absolutely no scientist can say unequivocally that GMO foods are safe for humans and the environment’ (Opiyo Oloya, 2002 p.10). If the GMO foods are not safe for human consumption, why are the genetically modified maize seeds secretly given to peasant farmers for planting in Uganda?

The justification for introducing GMOs is that: ‘Somebody who is hungry does not have a choice’. GM, organic, or whatever – you have to feed the people’ (Rice in Asiimwe, 2011 p. 27). Really? Is the state bothered by the people who sleep hungry in Uganda? By introducing GM, will the government state start providing free food to those who do not have? It could be argued that the introduction of GM is to increase food production. In the past, Uganda was self-sufficient in food production and potentially was a food basket for the whole of east African region without GM seeds. By implication, even if there has been an increase in population, the country could easily increase food production to meet the needs of increased population without introducing GM seeds. Therefore, it is now clear that GM seeds were not genuinely introduced even when they were resisted. It seems the introduction of genetically modified seeds is the last battle against peasants. According to Holt-Gimenez and Kerssen (2015), there has been a long war against the peasants in Third World countries (including Uganda) by the World Bank. The hidden agenda could be to get rid of peasants so that transitional corporations can easily grab land in Third World countries – it began in 2008 (Borras et al., 2011). For that matter, the peasants are being poisoned through the food they grow and eat. Even the elites (including the MPs being used to promote the growing of GMO crops on large scale) should take care because the genetically modified maize being grown is sold on open market after being harvested. They or their children will consume it because it will be difficult to identify and label it.

Why did the Members of Parliament allow the introduction of GMOs in Uganda when initially they were publicly opposed to the scheme? It seems the MPs were cornered into the business of promoting the growing of GM crops because the country is moving towards general elections. Since most of the MPs bribe voters to be elected into parliament and as a result are compelled to get loans to use during campaigns, which renders them broke for the entire term’ (*Sunday Vision*, 2014 p. 8), they could be easily compromised in order to get money for the impending elections. It seems Monsanto has taken the advantage of the situation to make the MPs not only allow the introduction of GMO crops but also to take an active part in the promotion of their growing by peasants. If Monsanto has been able to influence the Congress to favour its activities in the US by spending more than US \$ 10 million on campaign contributions in the past decade – and another \$70 on lobbying since 1998 (Parker and Ryan, 2014, is it difficult for it to compromise the already described indebted MPs by giving them the campaign money they badly need?

Credible rumours only lacking concrete evidence because bribery is undertaken secretly have it that the MPs were given or promised a lot of money so that they could supply the genetically modified maize seeds to the peasants for growing in their constituencies. This could be true because it is no longer a secret that the MPs just recently received 100million UGX (Uganda Shillings ostensibly as fuel refund (Mugerwa, 2015). However, it is surprising that the government could accommodate the fuel refund for MPs within the budget when it could not afford to do so for the teacher’s salary increment agreed on a number of years ago (Musingunzi, 2015). It is not strange for the MPs to be bribed with money. In 2005, the MPs were given just UGX 5million to remove term limits from the Ugandan Constitution. Therefore, it is most likely that money was used to compromise the MPs to betray their people when there has been struggle against the introduction of GMOs in Uganda.

Since 2002, there has been a strong resistance against the schemes of the giant Monsanto American Seed Company to secretly introduce genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in Uganda. Before 2002, Monsanto signed a multi-million shilling deal with a local seed company known as Farm Inputs Care Centre (FICA) to produce 'high-quality' seeds for the East African region. Because Monsanto is well known for genetically modifying crops such as maize, canola, soya and others in the guise of feeding the world, the deal was suspected to be having a hidden agenda and was opposed by Opiyo Oloya, a *New Vision* columnist and a Ugandan living in Canada in 2002. He was supported by Ugandans considering the response he got from the readers (see for instance Apedel, 2002 p. 22), and because of the support he had, he was invited for the debate on the issue by parliament in 2014 (see *The New Vision*, 2014 p. 7).

But Monsanto continued with its machinations. In 2002, again it approached a local company to grow hybrid maize under a contract for export. The deal was also suspected of having a hidden agenda of secretly introducing GMOs in Uganda because the hybrid corn would be supplied by Monsanto companies acquired in 1998 for the express purpose of expanding its biotechnology business to Europe, Asia, Latin America and Africa (Opiyo Oloya, 2002). The plans to secretly introduce GMO seeds continued unhindered because it seems President Museveni was aware of what was going on. This can be discerned from the president's secret dealing with US officials to start the growing of genetically modified cotton for export under African Growth Opportunity Act (AGOA) (Mulumba, 2002); President Museveni was a fervent supporter of AGOA. Years later, it emerged that Uganda was embracing the introduction of genetically modified crops without a law to regulate them and had gone a step ahead to allow the laboratory and field testing for GMO crops such as GM bananas in Kawanda, BT cotton in Serere, GM maize in Kasese and cassava, rice and sweet potatoes at Namulonge (Mugisha, 2012, p. 13).

Having allowed the experimental testing for GMO crops, the government came up with The National Biotechnology and Biosafety Bill in November, 2012 to facilitate the development and application of GMO technology in Uganda. When the bill was taken to parliament for debate, it was not passed because it did not provide enough safeguards. It was shelved for sometime until it emerged out that the MPs of the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) party had agreed in principle to pass it. While the civil society organisations and public generally were up in arms against the move, it is when it was revealed that the people of Uganda had been betrayed by their government and their representatives in parliament even from the opposition.



Conclusion

If the GMOs pose a danger to the people but the elected governments and people's representatives cannot avert or stop it completely due to the power of giant companies, like Monsanto, using money not only in Uganda but also in the US as elaborated by the article of Parker and Ryan entitled 'The Monsanto Menace', does Western representative democracy make sense anymore? Let the readers ponder over the question. In Uganda, the Western-influenced media has portrayed the situation as if the people are in the process of electing their leaders come 2016. Considering the issue of lost sovereignty under the World Bank and International Monetary Fund imposed economic policy of macroeconomic stabilisation (Asiimwe, 2011), together with the use of the peoples representatives to promote the growing of the potentially dangerous GMOs in the country, do we need elections? The elections require money and the giant companies provide it to achieve their objectives. In the process the people's interests are not catered for. Therefore, the exercise of elections is simply to serve the interests of the powerful giant companies in the world but not the people – the vote of the electorate does not matter as the citizens are made to believe by the donor-funded civil society through their advertisement in the media towards the 2016 general elections in Uganda.

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