Famine in Africa is again in the headlines. It results from the concurrence of a number of environmental and social factors, such as enduring drought, global inequalities, the HIV/AIDS epidemic impact, and faulty agricultural and trade policies, at both national and international levels. Overall, famine in Africa is the consequence of a lasting record of exploitation, exclusion and neglect over its poor population.

When the scale of famine reaches a critical point of international public sorrow, developed countries offer food aid as their prompt solution, satisfying their charity vein. However, in this occasion food aid has unexpectedly lead to an epic battle between famine and dignity after the government of Zambia has rejected genetically-modified (GM) maize as food aid in order to contain the associated health and environmental risks. The news detonated at the World Summit on Sustainable Development, held recently in Johannesburg, and the position of Zambia soon achieved adhesion from NGOs, farmer groups, scientists, and even a few governments. The decision, however, shocked many countries and citizens, as their belief that donations are just to be duly taken and thanked was
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overturned. Some governments, biotechnology corporations, and influential media criticised the African defiance as absurd, fearing that Africa was again escalating foolish governance against its starving population.

However, Zambia's decision to reject GM maize as food aid is not a misguided action. It is rather a pragmatic response to the continuing lack of a consensus on the safety of such crops. International law, particularly the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, upholds the right of countries to protect themselves against the health and environmental risks posed by GM organisms. Why should international agreements that safeguard people and their environment be dropped when a country faces famine? The scale of vulnerability in Africa precisely requires that international agreements and every concern of the international community are thoroughly respected and attended. In the European Union, for instance, GM crops are not farmed commercially, their imports can be legally banned, and every citizen has the right to know and to decide whether to consume them or not. Why should things be different in Africa?

In addition, GM food aid may threaten local agricultural systems. Poor farmers often use part of donated grain as seed since they suffer seed insecurity alike, partly because they had to consume seed saved for the following agricultural season to alleviate immediate food needs in the household. Consequently, GM food grains, when sowed or even misplaced in rural areas, may cross-pollinate with local varieties and, therefore, undermine farmer seed systems and biodiversity conservation. In fact, the concerns around food aid are equally valid for the case of seed aid. Some agrobiotechnology corporations are publicly keen to donate GM seeds in agricultural emergency programmes, if they have not done this already, which is suspicious of a dubious arrangement between assistance and product promotion. In general, the spread of GM seeds, from either food or seed aid, can result in genetic cross-fertilisation, especially in crops like maize, and therefore threaten the local crop genetic resource dynamics. Consequently, such kind of food and seed assistance may impair the ecological resilience and sustainability of the agricultural systems in Africa, further undermining food and livelihood security among poor farmers.

Furthermore, the diffusion of GM crops may erode crop and livestock trade of African countries in international markets. If African governments and farmers loose the control and capacity to track the attributes of their agricultural production, their trade prospects will further shrink because many European and other countries ban the import of foodstuff that cannot be proven to be GM free, in accordance with current international legislation. Thus, assistance programmes that claim to be benevolent and inoffensive may result in a deeper cycle of agricultural and food crisis. Accordingly, Zambia's position is sound enough and reflects the serious ecological, health and economic implications of this issue for the African nations and their people.

Some countries under the lead of the United States, in conjunction with biotechnology corporations and some major research centres, have taken a proactive stance on GM organisms. They believe that everybody should conform to their confidence and devotion over any new technology, arguing that technological progress will feed...
the world, despite historical evidence does not prove it. It is now shameful that the unresolved dispute around GM organisms has been ingeniously moved from political and scientific circles internationally to the very turf of poverty and hunger in Africa.

Countries that have a vigorous policy towards GM crops seem to have excesses of such agricultural production and are ready to donate it, probably because it is not easy to allocate it in international markets, not even to convince their domestic consumers. It is an abusive practice for countries to get rid of their GM food surpluses by dumping them on starving and desperate people under the pretext of food aid. A poor woman in Africa has just as much right to feed her children with safety and with dignity as anywhere else. Good governance also means giving food to starving people in ways consistent with international law and respecting the universal principle that all people are born equal and should be treated as such.

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