

Blame games

So, it is now the Europeans' fault that Africans are starving. Because the EU refuses genetically modified (GM) food, African farmers are denied this potentially helpful technology. That is the US administration's latest interpretation of the various European moratoria, bans, labelling regulations and invocations of the precautionary principle to protect their consumers from the 'threat' of GM crops. US President George W. Bush's assertion, linking the GM saga to starvation, may be an exaggerated argument in the ongoing trade war between the EU and the USA about GM food (see 'Food fights', *EMBO reports*, 4, 647–649; 2003), but he has a point. Last year, Zambia's President Levy Mwanawasa refused GM maize offered by the USA as food aid because "this poison" would endanger the health of his starving people.

But hundreds of millions of North Americans, Argentinians and Chinese, among others, have been consuming GM foods for years and show no signs of being poisoned. And the latest report on the purported threats of GM crops to consumer health, published in mid-July this year by 25 scientific experts for the British government (www.gmsciencedebate.org.uk/report), found that GM crops pose only a "very low" risk to public health and stated that there is "no scientific case for ruling out all GM crops and their products." Even so, such health risks are probably not the main reason why President Mwanawasa and other African leaders refuse GM maize from the USA. They rather fear that if this food aid is used to grow maize, it could "contaminate" local plant breeds and endanger southern Africa's grain exports to Europe.

But blaming European policies on GM crops for famine and death in Africa is only a distraction from the real problem. President Bush does not have to go as far as the other side of the Atlantic Ocean to find plenty of people responsible for the humanitarian crisis in Africa—just a little walk from the White House to Capitol Hill is sufficient. In a spending frenzy, Congress has increased

farm subsidies to a record US \$20 billion this year as part of a farm bill of US \$180 billion for the next decade. This is a gross distortion of the supposedly free markets that the USA is always eager to defend.

Fat government subsidies allow farmers in the developed world to buy all the paraphernalia they need—such as fertilizers, herbicides, pesticides, machinery, high-yield seeds and irrigation systems—to squeeze the maximum out of their fields. Farmers in developing countries do not have access to these 'goodies' and are glad if they can eke out just enough food to feed their families. For them, competing in the world market is impossible. Amadou Toumani Touré and Blaise Compaoré, the presidents of Mali and Burkina Faso, respectively, pointed out in *The New York Times* (July 11; 2003) that subsidies of US \$3 billion to 25,000 US cotton farmers amount to more than the entire economic output of Burkina Faso, where 2 million people depend on growing cotton. As a result, worldwide cotton prices remain artificially low, and cotton farmers in Mali and Burkina Faso are not able to cover their expenses, even if labour costs in these countries are much lower than in the USA.

Europe also is in no position to point the finger of blame, as its agricultural policy is an even better example of how to distort free trade. Farmers in the 15 EU member states received a staggering €47 billion of subsidies in 2002 compared with the €670 million the EU spent on humanitarian aid. This amount of money is sufficient to run not just one but several African nations: 2001 estimates of GDP are US \$3.2 billion for Eritrea, US \$9.2 billion for Mali, US \$12.8 billion for Burkina Faso and US \$7 billion for Malawi, according to the US Central Intelligence Agency (www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html). And so a minority of farmers are able to flood the world markets with artificially cheap grain, soy, cotton, meat and other products. The result for developing countries, home of 96% of the world's farmers, is devastating. While most Africans are

barely surviving—or often not surviving—on less than US \$2 per day, the average European cow is pampered with US \$2.50 a day in subsidies, Nicholas Stern, the World Bank's chief economist, pointed out during a speech he gave last November at the Center for Economic Studies in Munich, Germany.

Focusing on GM crop policies in Europe is therefore only an attempt by the US government to distract attention from the real problem. It is not plant biotechnology that is going to save poor farmers, as President Bush claimed. Clearly, though, it could help and there are already some promising developments. US universities announced in July that they would not seek returns for their patents on GM plant technologies if they were used to create improved crops for developing countries. Biotech companies have also signalled their willingness to waive patent rights for GM crops to be used in poor countries. This is all laudable, but is only a drop in the ocean. The best genetically engineered drought-, virus- and pest-resistant crop that produces all the necessary vitamins and micronutrients will have only low impact in the long term, as long as farm subsidies in the developed world purposefully exclude farmers in the developing world from the global market. If poor farmers do not get a fair price for their products, whether GM or not, they are not able to increase production and create some wealth that would allow them to survive the next environmental disaster that causes another round of famine and death. Much more effective than squabbling over GM food policies would be to address the flawed policy of granting farm subsidies and its destructive effects on agriculture in the developing world. US, Japanese and European farmers will not starve if they receive less government support, but many farmers in the developing world will be able to survive if they finally get a fair price for their products.

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