

ETHICAL CHALLENGES OF THE USE OF GENETICALLY MODIFIED CROPS IN
NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This work, 'Ethical Challenges of the use of Genetically Modified Crops' examined the moral implications for genetic modification of plants from a Christian perspective. The use of Biotechnology to enhance nutritional value and improved crop yield had raised a number of fundamental moral questions all over the world. In spite of these controversies, the use, practice and consumption of genetically modified foods/crops has been presented as the ultimate weapon against poverty and hunger in Nigeria by the present administration. On Friday 27th of February, 2015, the National Assembly passed a bill titled "Biosafety Management Agency Bill" which was sponsored for passage in the House of Representatives by Hon Uzoma Ikem Abonta and Senators. Emmanuel Bwacha and Robert Borriface in the Senate respectively, this bill gives final approval for the use and practice of genetically modified crops in Nigeria. The researcher employed descriptive method of research to examine the ethical challenges inherent in the use and consumption of genetically modified foods/crops in Nigeria. A seventeen item structured interview guide was designed for the purpose of carrying out field survey from experts in the field of agronomy, and biotechnology in two Universities, namely, University of Ibadan and Ladoke Akintola University of Technology, Ogbomoso. Three Agricultural agencies were consulted and experts in these institutes were interviewed. They are; International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA), Ibadan. National Root Crops Research Institute (NRCR), Umudike and National Biotechnology and Development Agency (NABDA), Abuja. The research findings suggests that though genetically modified crops has the tendency to increase crop yields, improve the nutritional value of plants and resists the activities of pests and droughts thereby enhancing food production and supply but its safety from some ethical implications which are inimical to consumers health, environment, income and comfort of the farmers and economy of the nation cannot be guaranteed. More so, the practice of genetic modification of crops is tantamount to exploitation of nature and not conservation of nature by man. Therefore, the research concludes that the Bible stresses the fact that nature is God given and should be used responsibly and within limits because man is answerable to God as stewards to an owner. The researcher recommended that instead of pursuing genetically modified foods/crops, Nigeria as a country should boost organic agriculture by funding it and creating enabling environment for marketing and distribution of farm produce for both subsistence and commercial farmers.

CONCLUSION

So much controversy has been generated over the adoption of genetically modified crops so much that it calls for a serious appraisal. The benefits and adverse effects of genetically modified crops have been considered in this work. The issue of genetic modification of crops stems from the challenges of poverty and hunger facing agriculture. The technology came about as a means of combating the problem of food shortage and hunger in the world. The United States of America has been giving genetically modified foods to developing countries like Nigeria in the hope of alleviating the problem of hunger and poverty. However, anxieties have been raised over the genetic and health implications of using and consuming genetically modified crops / foods.

Nigeria signed and ratified an internationally binding Biosafety protocol known as Cartagena protocol on Biosafety in 2000 and 2002 respectively. This protocol entered into force on the 11th September, 2003. As a signatory, Nigeria made efforts at domesticating the Cartagena protocol with the 6th National Assembly passing the bill but the bill was not assented to by the president because it was passed a day before the expiration of the life of that assembly. The bill was therefore returned under the 7th National Assembly. The National Assembly had called for a public hearing on the bill and the bill has been passed waiting the assent of the president. Apparently, when the president finally put assent on the bill, genetically modified crops will thereafter become a legalized thing in Nigeria. The usage and consumption will take its effect. However, presently, by importation of both foods and fruits, genetically modified crops and foods are here with us in Nigeria. Our confectionary companies presently use genetically modified foods i.e. Cadbury, Coca-Cola, Nestle, and others.

Since GM has found its way into Nigeria, there is therefore a need for caution. There are many ethical challenges which militates against the use of genetically modified crops and foods. Health wise, environmental factor, economic challenges and different inimical challenges are posed to farmers and consumers. Also, it has political colouration which evidently explains why America and other developed nations are seriously pushing for it. This reveals deeply disturbing questions about who controls genetic developments and for whose ends? It revealed arrogance, unaccountability and undue hunger for power on the part of multi-national companies who are on the verge of monopolizing agriculture. The risks of genetically modified crops should be taken seriously. The uncertainties in the appropriation of GMC merit a generally precautionary approach towards environmental and health risks. Genetically modified crops should only be done if they confer significant human or ecological benefits. It is very prudent to avoid applications that are more likely to spread their genes or threaten biodiversity.

Having considered the ethical challenges in the use and consumption of genetically modified crops, the researcher hereby concludes that genetically modified crops may not be the ultimate solution to hunger in Nigeria. Therefore, it is expedient for the policy makers, agriculturist, churches and the nation as a whole to revisit the conventional organic agriculture. In the opinion of the researcher, Nigerian farmers, if sufficiently mobilized, has the capacity to grow food that will feed the population. Challenges militating against both the provision and supply of food should be addressed; factors which foster hunger and poverty, like, poor storage facility, poor road network, unavailability of market for the sales of produce, drought and crop resistant pests should be worked upon. A stable and accessible loan facility for farmers will equally be helpful.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of this conclusion, the researcher therefore recommends the following:

- That there are many challenges ahead of the government, especially in the areas of safety – testing, regulation and placement of sustainable policy.
- Every citizen has a right to know what he / she is consuming. There is a need to enlighten the general public on what genetically modified crops and foods are, highlighting the advantages and disadvantages of accepting it as a source of food.
- Individuals should be encouraged to engage in small scale farming of conventional crops because it enhances food production. This is because small scale farms tend to produce several crops at once, thus reducing nutrient depletion.
- Churches, especially Baptist churches should rise up as a contemporary voice and make her stand known on the issue of genetically modified crops. Some denominations like Catholic and Anglican has spoken on this issue and Baptist as a denomination cannot sit on the fence.

Finally, the researcher is of the opinion that nothing less is acceptable in order to allow true choice of consumers. Another essential requirement is to give the public (consumers) a real say over present and future directions or decisions on food productions, since it is not ethically appropriate to eat what one does not know.