Africa joins the world in global protest

But why does everyone hate Monsanto and does it really matter?

arindambanerjee via 123RF

A sangoma and a finely manicured suburban matriarch. A dreadlocked student and a baby on her dad's arm. A little girl with a flower tiara and a teenager with the "Jou Ma Se GMO" poster. It's been a long time since South African's were so united in political protest and all across our continent Africans joined the worldwide march against one single company.

The movement against GM foods and the corporation that produces them is growing. The voices of their opponents are as passionate and compelling as those singing their praises. But isn't it perhaps a bit too easy to write off Monsanto as the great global evil that spells the end of civilisation as we know it.

Cape Town and Johannesburg were among 400 cities worldwide where protests took place at the weekend against genetically modified crops and pesticides.

The third annual March Against Montsanto, a US biotechnology giant, drew tens of thousands of people in more than 40 countries in Europe, Africa and the Americas.

Supporters of the growing mass movement claim the organisms are toxic and are causing widespread ill health. Proponents of GMO counter that the claims are without foundation and that genetically modified foods are the only way of feeding the world.

Some in the science world accuse the anti-GMO movement of hysteria and fear-mongering while others say there is a basis for the mounting opposition.

In addition to the two South African cities, demonstrations took place in Burkino Faso, where Montsanto had introduced GM cotton, in Paris, Los Angeles, Brussels, Rio, Santiago and several other places.

In Burkino Faso, protestors demanded a 10-year moratorium on the planting of Monsanto seeds. They want independent research to be conducted to determine the effects of the technology.

Sangomas marching against Monsanto

The social media and website platforms of the anti-Montsanto lobby in South Africa state that research has shown that Montsanto's GM foods "can lead to serious health conditions such as the development of cancer tumours, infertility and birth defects" and that "the seeds are bad for the environment".

Many activists see this as much as a battle against the effects of GMOs as it is against giant monopolies that exercise huge influence and control over citizens across the globe.

They see citizen power as a potentially powerful counter-veiling force against corporate domination and greed.

Campaigners against Montsanto argue that food allergies have skyrocketed since the introduction of GMOs in the mid-90s and health issues such as autism, digestive problems and reproductive disorders are on the rise.

"Animal testing with GMOs has resulted in cases of organ failure, digestive disorders, infertility and accelerated aging."

On herbicide use, they state:

"When Monsanto came up with the idea for Round-up Ready crops, the theory was to make the crops resistant to the pesticide that would normally kill them. This meant the farmers could spray the crops, killing the surrounding weeds and pests without doing any harm to the crops themselves. However, after a number of years have passed, many weeds and pests have themselves become resistant to the spray, and herbicide use increased (both in amount and strength) by 11% between 1996 and 2011. Which translates to lots more pesticide residue in our foods".

The African Centre for Biosafety has produced a document that claims that Africa is being bullied into producing defective Bt Maize.

It lists the following as one of its key findings:

"Monsanto's Bt maize, MON810, has failed hopelessly in South Africa as a result of massive insect resistance, after only 15 years of its introduction into commercial agriculture. In an effort to deal with the pest infestation, Monsanto has compensated South African farmers who experienced more than 10% damage on their genetically modified (GM) insect resistant crops - some farmers experienced as high as 50% insect infestation."

The full document can be accessed here.

The Centre describes genetic engineering as "undoubtedly one of the most controversial technologies to emerge in the 20th Century; the advent of modern biotechnology has 'triggered major scientific, social and political controversies' since its introduction in the 1970's".

Meanwhile, the debate rages on. Some argue that GMOs produce better yields while others dispute this. They say that while you pay more for GM seeds, there is reduced spraying of herbicides and pesticides and a better quality product is produced.

But at the heart of all the passion, the research, the 'for and against'... is there something else at play?

There are few issues that create as much heated passion than Monsanto and GMO. Writing at www.modernfarmer.com Lessley Anderson asks the question; "Why does everyone hate Monsanto?" And she comes up with some hard to swallow answers.

"Over the past decade, Monsanto has become a pop cultural bogeyman, the face of corporate evil. And it seems everyone, from your plumber to your mother, has an opinion about the company. How did Monsanto go from the future of American innovation to a late-night punchline? The answer, of course, is complicated but numerous experts point to a fuse: the bungled launch of GMO seeds in Europe in the late '90s that progressed into a vicious war of disinformation that shows little sign of abating.

"If you set aside for a moment from the usual debate about whether GMOs are bad or good, a curious fact emerges. For a rich and powerful company that seems to excel at nearly everything it does, Monsanto sucks in one important aspect: spin control."

Modern Farmer aims to recognise the escalating importance, even urgency, of global agriculture issues and to raise awareness.

At www.grist.org Nathanael Johnson conducted six months of research for a series on GMO's and eventually doubted whether any of it mattered at all. He says:

"The reason it's so hard to see the facts here is that the actual genetically modified organisms have been crowded out by the things they represent. This is a problem. I'm not opposed to using GMOs as a metaphor to discuss our technological hubris (or prowess) - I just want us to be explicit about it. We should notice when the metaphor begins to diverge from the ground truth. The facts on the ground, in turn, can help us adjust our thinking on the larger issue."

"We need metaphors - they're how we come to understand the world. But they grow sterile and useless without a continual exchange between the abstract and the incarnate, between meaning and reality. They become, in fact, cliches - words we repeat without thinking. Which, sadly, is where too much of the conversation about GMOs remains stuck today."

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