



Are GMOs the silver bullet to end hunger in Uganda?

HERMAN TUHAIRWE > FOOD SECURITY

Last week, Parliament passed the Biosafety and Biotechnology Bill into law. The law had been on the shelves of Parliament for nearly five years partly because of a tug-of-war between the voices in support and those opposed to it.

The former comprised mainly of scientists who argued that biotechnology is essential if Uganda is to transform its food and agriculture sector from small scale rudimentary to large scale and purposeful production, able to solve the persistent challenges of hunger and malnutrition, among others, that continue to plague the populace in Uganda.

The facts are indeed bare and sundry for all to see. Changing weather patterns coupled with resistant pests and diseases have indeed led to low yields in various parts of the country. Given the percentage of people in our nation that is reliant on agriculture, this argument does not need to be bellowed.

However, the Biotechnology and Biosafety Act has been heavily criticised, especially by civil society organisations and the academia. Most of the opponents of the Act have always acknowledged that indeed in the 21st Century, one cannot deny the importance of biotechnology in all spheres of life, especially in regards to agriculture.

In specific regards to agriculture, however, the production of food from genetically modified organisms (GMOs) has been the most contentious. The gist of the opponents' argument is that biotechnology is not the silver bullet that will end hunger in Uganda, and all the third world countries. Indeed,

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hunger in Uganda is not only as a result of the lack of biotechnology to influence the poor and low quality yields. Take, for example, the fact that Uganda has an estimated 20 per cent of its area covered by open water bodies of fresh water, most farmers still rely only on rain.

In many areas where rivers go through, the only visible efforts are sand mining and brick laying by the locals. The farmers have since decided to grow crops in swampy areas since they are better irrigated. As to whether the farmers are aware that most of these swamps are actually catchment areas is to be answered another day.

Take another example of rudimentary tools. Many of the farmers rely on basic and rudimentary tools like the hand-hoe to farm. You do not need to be a genius to understand that someone using a hoe does not have the same productivity as another using a tractor.

Granted, the hilly terrain of various areas in Uganda makes it impossible to use machines like tractors, but there are other ways of ensuring productivity. Another factor is the poor transport network. Analysts have argued that part of the reason Uganda is facing food shortages is due to its poor transport network.

As such, even when yields are high, most of the perishable food does not move from the remotest areas of the country in time to markets. Will all GMO food be non-perishable? I highly doubt.

At the risk of being criticised as pedestrian, I also posit that Uganda's population trends are contributing to hunger. Why pedestrian? The argument on the other side has always been that an increase in population implies an increased work force and better market for products, the reason why some of our milk farmers are seeking markets in China.

But that is only when one is working under the assumption that the work force has land to till, available implements to effectively do so, and has the "purchasing power". Can this be said of Uganda's youthful population, which comprises millions of unemployed graduates without practical skills? I highly doubt.

All these factors, coupled with experiences from other countries where multi-national corporations have used laws similar to ours to take corporate control of the food sector since their only aim is profit maximisation.

Without doubt, biotechnology has advantages. Refusal to acknowledge technological developments is like hiding your head in a sand dune while a storm gathers. But it remains to be seen if it will be the silver bullet to eradicating hunger in Uganda.

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