

US-EU Dispute Over GMO Worries Consumers in Africa

By Lewis Machipisa

HARARE—Fearing for their food security, African consumer associations are watching with deep concern the impending trade dispute between the United States and European Union over the mandatory labeling of genetically modified organisms (GMO).

The groups fear that without proper labeling, consumers may end up importing and eating GM products unknowingly.

“Consumers have rights, in particular, to know what they are eating, and that it is safe, to choose what they want to grow and eat, to be heard, and to redress,” says Amaodu Kanoute, Consumers International director for Africa.

Those opposed to GM technology say they fear the long-term effects on consumers. The U.S. is urging the EU to scrap its biotech food rules on labeling GM food and products, according to media reports. Washington is planning “to file a case with the World Trade Organisation (WTO) as soon as possible” over the EU decision, the reports said.

The United States is concerned that once the labeling of GM products becomes mandatory the “EU biotech

guidelines could become a model for developing countries and significantly limit the reach of the technology.”

Regulations by the EU “could cost U.S. companies US\$4 billion a year and disrupt efforts to launch a new round of global trade talks,” the reports added.

The Consumers International’s regional office for Africa, which represents 120 consumer organisations in 45 African countries, has come out in full support of the EU’s position.

“We would like an assurance that our rights are respected and to this end we would like to support the EU’s legislation, in particular, its position on precautionary principle and mandatory labeling of all GMOs or their processes,” says Kanoute.

“These are the real concerns which the United States should address, rather than trying to use international institutions to force consumers to accept their products,” says Kanoute.

The Consumers International says it endorses and calls for measures “to ensure that genetically modified food and animal feed are safe. And that all products be subject to a mandatory pre-market examination by the appro-

appropriate regulatory authorities and approved for sale only after they are found to meet the standard of presenting a reasonable certainty of no harm.”

As a safety measure, the Zimbabwean government last week banned the importation of GMOs or products without the approval of the Bio-safety Board of Zimbabwe.

“It must be pointed out that most countries producing GM crops and products are not labeling them. This highlights the need for importers and transporters to seek the advice of the board before deciding to import,” said the Research Council of Zimbabwe.

With Zimbabwe planning to import more than 600,000 tons of staples maize and wheat in the near future, there are fears that some of the food could come from South Africa, which will begin harvesting GM maize at the end of the year.

“If we allow these modified products to enter our country without proper monitoring, they could adversely affect our markets,” said the Research Council of Zimbabwe.

While biotechnology is being touted as the future of farming and food security in the developing world,

WHO Turns Spotlight on Mentally Disabled

By Marwaan Macan-Markar

the technology, however, remains firmly in the hands of a few multinationals that are out to dominate the market.

In 1998, 100 percent of genetically modified seeds came from just three companies. Monsanto is by far the largest, with between 85 percent and 90 percent of the market, followed by Zeneca and Du Point/Pioneer.

Consumers in Africa need assurance on the ability of genetically modified foods to solve the food security problem in the region.

"Our concern arises from the fact that the first crops produced by the industry were mainly cash crops for export such as cotton and soya beans; not necessarily crops to ensure self-sufficiency in the region," says Kanoute.

"Early priority research was on terminator-style technology, which produces sterile seeds, or which are dependent on patented chemicals to grow. There are serious doubts now about whether the technology will address the problem of food security," he says.

Source: Inter Press Service, 21 September 2001

MEXICO CITY—If you are diagnosed with a mental disability in Hungary, your identity card is often taken away, making it difficult for you to indulge in such everyday activities as borrowing a book from a library.

And if you are a patient in one of the country's mental health facilities, you may be "locked in cages for months at a time" because there is not enough staff to provide basic care.

Such forms of discrimination and harsh treatment, however, are also common beyond the borders of that central European country. Research done in over 15 countries across Europe and Latin America by Mental Disability Rights International (MDRI) reveals that children and adults with mental disabilities are often subjected to treatment that are equally "inhuman and degrading."

"Throughout the world, people with mental disabilities face pervasive discrimination, abuse, neglect and segregation from society," says Brittany Benowitz, a programme associate at MDRI, a Washington D.C.-based non-governmental organisation (NGO). "Children and adults with mental disabilities are routinely and arbitrarily detained in psychiatric facilities, orphanages and other closed institutions around the world."

What is more, reveals the World Health Organisation (WHO), the combination of "gross human rights violations in mental hospitals" and the lack of efficient community-based health services tailored for mental health patients are "only some of the trials" faced by people with such health disabilities.

But the Geneva-based health body is determined to confront such an abusive trend by drawing global attention to this problem. Thus, it chose to focus on mental health for this year's World Health Day, observed last April 7.

The theme of World Health Day, "Stop Exclusion - Dare to Care," also sums up the focus of a year-long campaign that will culminate in the World Health Report on mental health to be released later this year.

"An estimated 400 million people today suffer from mental or neurological disorders," states the WHO. Of that number, an estimated 288 million people are affected by alcohol-related problems and some 60 million are afflicted with mental retardation.

In addition, reveals the WHO, there are over 40 million registered cases of epilepsy, some 20 million cases of dementia and close to 45 million with schizophrenia.