Questionable Quick Fixes: Genetic Engineering for Food and Ethanol

For years Columban missionaries have raised a voice of concern over the moral and ethical application of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and the patenting of seeds in agriculture. There are also scientific, environmental and health reasons to question the use of GMOs. Now, as the debate turns to the role of biofuels like GMO-based ethanol to fight global warming, we raise our voice again to caution against quick fixes and smokescreen solutions.

Despite claims from the agribusiness industry that GMO crops will feed the world and end global hunger, fundamentally Columbans see in the communities where we live and serve around the world that GMO-patented seeds keep local farmers, their families and communities, and the Earth excluded from the Table of Life. By being unable to afford the patented seeds, or losing their farms to cheap imports, or seeing the rural landscape altered to suit the needs of large agribusiness and monocrops, farming communities and the environment are unfairly paying the real price for “cheap” food.

Today, we are faced with two crises: skyrocketing food prices and rising temperatures. The agribusiness industry has seized this moment as an opportunity to continue to promote GMO seeds, Bt corn in particular, as the solution to the world’s food needs, as well as claim that it has the answer to global warming in the form of corn-based ethanol production. As a result along with other facts, a global food crisis has emerged.

If there was any doubt about the connection between the promotion of GMOs and ethanol, recently, some of the biotech industry’s biggest players including Monsanto teamed up to form the Alliance for Abundant Food and Energy (AAFE, www.foodandenergy.org).

According to this corporate alliance, “Meeting the food and energy needs of an evolving planet are challenges that can be met simultaneously. The answer lies not in scaling back agricultural innovation and biofuels, but continued investment in them.”

We can be skeptical about the motives of such an alliance when the participating companies have such large financial gain at stake. The agribusiness industry sees ethanol production as a world of opportunity to increase profits while simultaneously appearing environmentally progressive. A top scientist at Dupont affirms this notion when he said, “New strains of genetically modified corn will play a key role in meeting soaring demand as U.S. thirst for ethanol fuel cuts into supplies.”

The connection between biofuels and rising food prices is confirmed by a World Bank study released in July 2008, stating that: “The increase in internationally traded food prices from January 2002 to June 2008 was caused by a confluence of factors, but the most important was the large increase in biofuels production from grains and oilseeds in the U.S. and EU.” We can take the link one step further and say that if the U.S. is one of the world’s leading GMO corn for ethanol producers then the U.S. is also one of the leading contributors to the global food crisis. This connection has serious implications for both our trade and agricultural policies.

GMO corn-based ethanol is not the only culprit contributing to the food crisis. GMO tree plantations are contributing to the cellulose ethanol market which in turn is impacting local communities’ ability to meet their food needs. For example in the southern region of Chile, indigenous Mapuche communities are being pressured by the Chilean government to hand over their land used for farming to make way for GMO pine and eucalyptus plantations which are then used for cellulosic ethanol.

By altering the Mapuches’ traditional way of life, they are loosing their right to food sovereignty and being forced ever deeper into poverty and hunger.

We believe that communities around the world have the right to food sovereignty, to choose what and how their food sources are used. We believe that GMO foods and GMO-based biofuels deny people both of these two essential human rights. Columban missionaries, based on 90 years of sharing the table with communities who have been pushed to the margins of society because of the global systematic prioritization of profits over people,
raise our concern yet again for any solution offered such as GMO’s for food and ethanol as the silver-bullet answer to some of Earth’s most serious challenges: climate change and world hunger.

Time and time again, Jesus invited the vulnerable, marginalized, and outcast of His time to come to the table to share in life-giving food and fellowship. We, as disciples of Christ, are called to keep the Table sacred.

Amy Woolam Echeverria is Coordinator of the Columban Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation office, Washington, DC.

---