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## **Helping Africa Achieve Millennium Development Goal 1: A Hyperbole-Free US Genetically Modified Food Aid Policy**

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Recently, US President George W. Bush vowed to double direct humanitarian and development aid to Africa to nearly US \$9 billion by 2010. Optimistically, this aid will help sub-Saharan Africa advance part of Goal 1 of the United Nations (UN) Millennium Development Goals: to reduce by half the proportion of people in the world who suffer from chronic hunger by 2015.

As an ancillary imperative, Bush needs to vow that the United States will establish a genetically modified (GM) food aid policy toward Africa that is free of emotional rhetoric. As evidenced by the deplorable policy-making collision in 2002 involving Bush, the US Agency for International Development (USAID), certain environmental nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and Zambian President Levy Mwanawasa, hyperbole in policy formulation can be injurious to the achievement of Goal 1, which is to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, in Africa. A clear, scientific verdict is not yet in on the continuing acrimonious debate over whether GM organisms might hold the biotechnology key to higher crop yields and the alleviation of chronic hunger. Irrational language by key policy makers can only lead to paralysis and confusion in food aid policy to Africa, while millions of famished lives might hang in the balance.

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In August 2002, in a surprise policy reversal, Mwanawasa rejected about 17,000 tons of US corn in the form of food aid from USAID. Significantly, about 30 percent of the corn was grown from genetically modified corn seeds. This was the same GM corn Americans have been consuming since 1996 and the same corn that the UN World Food Programme (WFP) had been distributing in Africa — including Zambia — over the previous six years. However, now the Zambian government was inexplicably rejecting the food aid completely.

At the time, Zambia faced the risk of famine affecting 2.3 million of its citizens as a result of a regional drought and reduced imports from Zimbabwe. According to World Health Organization (WHO) statistics, an estimated 13 million people faced famine in southern Africa, and 300,000 people could have died of starvation by February 2003. As a result, the Zambian government sought out help from the WFP, whose international director said that it was impossible to feed Zambia's hungry without genetically modified food. The food agency began bringing in corn, a staple food for many Zambians, by calling on donor governments, including that of the United States. The relief corn was genetically engineered to resist worms.

The Zambian president labeled the corn aid “poison,” saying he was not prepared to use his people as “guinea pigs,” even though, in some areas, Zambians rioted and looted to get the GM food. Additionally, the Zambian leader stated he'd rather “die” than eat something “toxic.” The WHO said that there was no evidence that the GM corn was dangerous. UN officials pleaded with the Zambian government to reconsider its policy position.

The Zambian president said that certain environmental NGOs influenced his decision to declare the donated American corn to be poison. Indeed, Greenpeace, among others, heavily lobbied the government not to take the corn. USAID Administrator Andrew

Natsios vehemently accused the unnamed environmental NGOs of endangering the lives of millions of Africans by encouraging their governments to reject the unconditional GM food aid. Natsios failed in his own intensive lobbying efforts to convince the Zambian government to accept the US food aid. The United States insisted that the corn was safe.

In the same spirit, Robert Zoellick, the US trade representative, condemned the propaganda-like proliferation of Europe's hostile policies toward science as the real policy influence culprit. This Luddite and unethical position of inventing dangers about genetically modified food was leading to starvation in the developing world, Zoellick asserted.

Speaking on the subject of Third World hunger, Bush accused the European Union (EU) of exacerbating famine in Africa by blocking the use of GM crops based on groundless, pseudoscience fears. This policy, he contended, was preventing many African nations from planting the crops and reaping the benefits of higher yields out of fear that their products would be rejected by hostile European markets.

Although the media sensationalized the Zambian president's reference to poison, it was actually crop contamination and allergy concerns about genetically modified organisms raised by the British Medical Association that mainly swayed the Zambian government.

Three policy-formulation lessons that can help illuminate Africa's path toward the achievement of Goal 1 are embedded in this Zambian cautionary tale.

Initially, Bush and future US presidents must declare a clear, specific food aid policy toward Africa. As a matter of comity, USAID must respect and accept Zambia's right to reject such food aid under the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, which sets forth comprehensive rules for the cross-border movement of genetically modified organisms and permits countries to restrict such imports based on environmental or health reasons.

Significantly, the pioneering protocol endorses the precautionary principle, permitting an import ban of such organisms to protect the public interest even when there is a lack of scientific evidence to support that restriction. The exporting party must seek written permission from the importer prior to the first import of these organisms. Since 2004, Zambia has been setting up a regulatory regime in accordance with the protocol.

As a truly humanitarian gesture toward the achievement of Goal 1, the United States should absorb the cost of milling genetically modified food in any future shipments to Africa. As a result, the GM seed could not be planted at all. In 2002, Zimbabwe and Malawi accepted the same corn aid that Zambia refused on this condition but absorbed the cost themselves, a move that was cost-prohibitive for Zambia. The United States needs to develop and implement a pan-Africa, uniform policy.

Lastly, environmental NGOs and the media would do well to embrace at least the spirit of the UN's groundbreaking Cardoso Panel on Civil Society. This panel seeks to advance the UN's emerging partnership role with civil society organizations in policy setting and influence. Indeed, there are now thousands of such organizations that have consultative status with the UN, paving the way for them to have a "voice in global affairs." Hyperbole has no place in this promising partnership. Environmental NGOs and the media must not sensationalize the emotional words of US and African leaders in the GM food policy debate. More specifically, the facts need to be the polestar in telling the story.

African nations need not face a Hobson's choice<sup>1</sup> in GM food aid if these three lessons are followed.

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<sup>1</sup> Hobson's choice is an apparently free choice that is in reality no choice at all — the absence of a real alternative. It is named after Thomas Hobson who ran a livery stable in Cambridge, England, in the seventeenth century. A customer who wanted to rent a horse had only one real choice: to rent the horse nearest the stable door; Hobson wouldn't rent horses out of order.