

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

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 choice¹ in GM food aid if these three lessons are followed.

¹ 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.