

Safe Food Alliance – A Manifesto

A demand for safe and secure food for all, without Genetic Engineering (GE)

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I. THE PROBLEMS WITH OUR CURRENT FOOD SYSTEM

Our current food system (which includes all processes involved in keeping us fed: growing, harvesting, processing, packaging, transporting, marketing, consuming and disposing of food and food packages) is one that is inflicting tremendous violence on the planet, the poor and the health of all those who consume it. Here is how.

1. **Our small farmers have been pushed to a state of despair** because of loss of self-confidence, increasing dependence (from buying inputs to marketing); failing seeds, loss of soil fertility; increase in pest attacks, displacement due to land-grabbing, high risk mono-cropping, low market prices; exploitation by middlemen, and failing / unpredictable monsoons due to global climate change.
2. **Our soil has lost its fertility** because of decades of abuse from intensive industrial agriculture (mono-cropping, chemical fertilizer application, use of heavy machinery)
3. **Our food is contaminated with toxic chemicals** used as fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides, bleaching agents, fungicides, synthetic hormones, preservatives, artificial colours, disrupting our nervous, endocrine and reproductive systems, and causing cancers and other unknown diseases.
4. **Our endemic gene pool and our ancient and collective knowledge about food crops is being completely taken over by the corporate giants.** The biggest and most immediate danger here is with the irreversible contamination of our existing stock of seeds with genetically modified genes, and the corporate take-over of our seeds in general.
5. **Our globe is heating up** Modern agricultural practices contribute a lot to the global green house gas emissions, the use of fertilizers alone contribute to about 7 %. While traditional systems make agriculture a net absorber of green house emissions and helps save the planet. Burning fossil fuels to transport food for thousands of miles across the planet also contribute to the larger problem of climate change.
6. **Our food lacks nutrition due to refining.**

7. **Our vendors, traders and small entrepreneurs are being displaced and robbed of their livelihoods**, by the entry of giant multinational corporations into every area of processing, packaging and retailing of foods.
8. **Our lands are being polluted from the excessive packaging waste generated** from the use of enormous use of plastics and other non biodegradable poison materials.

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II. OUR VISION: SAFE AND SECURE FOOD; A JUST FOOD SYSTEM

A just food system should ensure safe and nourishing food for all people, while restoring the land and the livelihoods of the poor. We believe and demand that:

1. **Land :** Agricultural policies should be pro-small farmers and ensure a secure access to their lands and natural resources. All forms of land-grabbing for development into industrial parks, residential complexes, corporate farms or SEZs should be stopped. Use of farming lands for bio fuels should not be allowed.
2. **Seeds:** All forms of artificial modification in the laboratories and control of seeds and other natural resources that affect agriculture should be banned. Traditional seed varieties that belong to our land must be propagated, and these should remain with the farmers.
3. **Farm Inputs:** All synthetic chemical fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides and fungicides should be banned. All farmers must be assisted in every possible way to be freed from external dependencies and to generate and rely on labour-intensive technologies and organic agricultural inputs generated within the farm, to restore the soil fertility and water availability, and to manage pests.
4. **Market:** All agricultural produces should be ensured a reasonable 'minimum market price'. The Government should adopt a policy to not allow the imports of cheap agricultural commodities into India, while the same commodity is being cultivated here.
5. **Nutrition:** Nutritious and wholesome foods should be promoted in the place of refined foods.
6. **Local Foods:** Local foods must be promoted in the place of foods transported from far away.
7. **Livelihoods:** Livelihoods of the poor (vendors, traders, small entrepreneurs processing food) should be promoted, and giant corporations should be kept away from trading, retailing and processing foods where possible.

8. **Packaging:** Eco-friendly and bio-degradable packaging should be used to the maximum extent possible.

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III. GM FOODS: A BACKGROUND

GM crops and food: GM crops are a product of an imprecise technology which changes the genetic structure of the plant irreversibly by adding or deleting a gene or a string of genes, usually from a completely unrelated organism. The technology is imprecise and induces instability at the genomic level, resulting in many changes at the cellular, organ, organism and eco-system levels.

A GMO's foreign genes may transfer into related wild species or the GMO may behave unpredictably, become out of control and damage ecosystems. It is for this reason that the regulation of genetic engineering has to have a precautionary approach, since each genetically engineered organism is a biohazard and has the capacity to multiply uncontrollably and irreversibly.

Precautionary principle: A precautionary approach introduces a more scientifically rigorous analysis, with a broader scope and wider range of experts. Precaution is involved at all steps in decision making, in areas where action may lead to seriously harmful effects, from the practice of science and the research agenda, to regulation and governance. Because the threats of GE are so broad, and it's harmful impacts could be severe and irreversible, the precautionary principle must be strictly applied.

The '**Precautionary Principle**' builds on a series of straightforward and well-established ideas that¹

- Prevention is better than cure;
- The polluter should pay.
- We should look for 'no regrets' options.
- We should recognise the intrinsic value of non-human – as well as human – life.
- The complexity and variability of the real world limits the ability of scientific knowledge to predict.
- We must recognise the vulnerability of the natural environment.
- The rights of those who stand to be affected by an activity must be prioritized rather than those who stand to benefit from it.
- There must be scrutiny of all available alternatives and an examination of justifications and benefits as well as risks and costs.
- Long-term, holistic and inclusive perspectives are needed in environmental protection.

¹ Stirling, A (1999) Science and precaution in the management of technological risk. Report for the European Commission – JRC Institute of Prospective Technological Studies, Seville. <http://www.jrc.es/pub/EURdoc/eur190561en.pdf>

- Policy analysts have concluded that the Precautionary Principle is more scientific than conventional risk assessment.²

The Alliance firmly believes in the following fundamental truths on GMO's.

1. GM crops cannot provide more food for the hungry millions!

None of the GM crops that are being developed today in the country are capable of an increased yield. All GM traits are for stress tolerance or pest resistance or herbicide tolerance. Yield is not a mere biological trait that can be increased by a gene change.

Genetically engineered crops with bio pesticides like Bt have proved to be destructive on the beneficial organisms. The persistence of the toxin in the soil leads to the killing of a variety of insects in soil and destroying the soil ecosystem. The high level of the toxin in the plant also leads to the pest gaining resistance very easily.

Besides, the process of genetic engineering also destabilises the natural genome of the plant making the plant vulnerable to varying problems including climatic stresses. The recent failure of Bt cotton in the dryland districts of Andhra Pradesh and the subsequent advisory of the Andhra Pradesh agricultural university to not to use Bt Cotton in dryland conditions is a tell tale story.

On the contrary Organic farming or ecological farming has been repeatedly proved to be very efficient and productive while at the same time restoring the fertility of the soil.

2. GM cannot provide more profits for farmers!

Profits in farming are dependant on input costs, production costs and market prices. GM hopes to get a minor reduction in production costs for a short duration in unique and ideal farming conditions. Thus, its profits are also very vulnerable and will be applicable for a short duration only for a farmer who can afford a lot of other inputs. That is it favours industrial farming with huge input, production and maintenance costs, and a ability to reach accessible markets. On the other hand, more than 60 % of farmers in our country are small farmers, and organic/ecological farming offers a better, alternative in terms of profits as well the family's wellbeing.

Bt cotton has caused losses to farmers in almost all dryland areas of the country. With the poor market conditions and already existing debts of the cotton farmers this has broke the last straw of the farmer increasing suicides.

Bt cotton has also been responsible to the death of thousands of goats and sheep and in some cases buffaloes and cows. Over the past four years, more than 3000 animals died in Andhra Pradesh suspected because of Bt cotton. In Madhya Pradesh and Haryana and Punjab this is now spreading.

² European Commission (2000), Communication on the Precautionary Principle, COM (2000)1, Brussels: European Commission

Bt cotton has caused allergies in farm labourers in many places and has reduced milk yield in cattle.

GM not a solution for farmers profits is evident from the fact that Bt cotton, now accounting for more than 60% of India's cotton production (unofficially 75%) has still not helped cotton farmers to escape debts or help improve their poor livelihood standards.

3. GM food is unsafe for health!

GM food has known to cause serious health problems like Allergic reactions, immune system disorders, liver toxicity, kidney toxicity, growth related problems, and recently has been observed to lead to infertility³ and serious reproductive disorders. All these have been found at the experimental level with rats.

No long term tests have been conducted to determine the effects of GM foods. Most importantly, there are no independent studies that have been done. Agribiotech Companies produce their own safety studies and deny public access to them.

4. The gene revolution is not an evergreen revolution and is merely an extension of the destructive “Green” revolution.

Green revolution brought a momentary increase in yields, but added the most toxic chemicals and acidic salts to the soil and food. It encouraged monocultures and weaned people to renounce their traditional food systems and adopt rice and wheat based system. It focused on the fertile areas of the country and intensified agrochemical based, water intensive, nutrient extractive, agriculture to feed the entire country and lead both the irrigated and the dryland agricultural practices into ruins. It has been the equivalent of what a narcotic could do to a human body, providing instant happiness but destroying all abilities of the body in the short and the long run.

“Green” revolution is the reason for today's food insecurity and dismal picture of per capita average nutrient intake, as well as falling per capita consumption of food grains in the country. There are no solutions for these pressing problems from the “fathers” of this “green” revolution.

Now, genetic engineering or the Gene revolution portrays itself to be the “evergreen”revolution. Genetic engineering is undoubtedly the new fad of agribiotech scientists. We firmly believe this is a propaganda promoted by the group of academics hand in hand with the planners of the country and the agribiotech giants.

Even the recently released report from the UN and World Bank sponsored International Assessment of Agriculture Science, Technology and Development – IAASTD⁴

³ **Biological effects of transgenic maize NK603xMON810 fed in long term reproduction studies in mice - October 2008, available at**

http://www.bmgfj.gv.at/cms/site/attachments/3/2/9/CH0810/CMS1226492832306/forschungsbericht_3-2008.pdf

⁴ www.agassessment.org

says that “*genetic engineering of crops will not play a substantial role in addressing the key problems of climate change, biodiversity loss, hunger and poverty. The future of farming lies in a biodiversity-and-labour-intensive agriculture that works with nature and the people, and not against them.*”

IV. DEMANDS FOR AN IMMEDIATE BAN ON GM CROPS

Having firmly placed a belief in the fact that GM foods cannot

ensure food security to all by feeding the hungry, or

make food safe or nourishing, or

make our soil fertile, or

restore our environment, or

secure farmers' livelihoods,

we the alliance of physicians, lawyers, traders, human rights activists, farmers, consumers and academicians, envision the following steps and measures to be taken immediately.

1. All GM crop approvals and field trials must be stopped immediately.

The food crops Banana, Black Gram, Brinjal, Cardamom, Cowpea, Finger Millet, Papaya, Pearl Millet, Pigeonpea, Potato, Rice, Sorghum and Sugarcane are being genetically engineered in various institutes in Tamil Nadu. About 31 GMO's are being developed. Two varieties of rice and one variety of Brinjal, and one variety of ladies finger are in field trials.

2. Genetically engineered foods must be subject to long term and intergenerational tests before an open air field trial is permitted in Tamil Nadu.

These tests have to be independently analysed by experts and the state government should facilitate this process with the central government

As of now, for the field trials for rice, brinjal and ladies finger no safety tests have been done.

3. No GM foods should be allowed through imports or through other means. All GM processed foods should be mandatorily labeled.

4. State agricultural universities (SAU) must disengage any partnership research on GM crops with any private companies.

SAU's are created for the sole purpose of the welfare of the farmers of the state and must not engage in any GM research n collaboration with companies. This policy of partnership research leads to a complete disorientation of the priorities of the SAU and end up becoming a “mere out sourced labs” for the companies and are against the welfare of the farmer.

5. The proposed National biotechnology regulatory authority should be opposed.

The authority is against the constitutional right of a State of the Indian union to permit field trials of genetically engineered crops or not. This is enshrined in the constitution as agriculture corresponds to the State list, the regulation of which is an exclusive right of the State.

The role of the State seems to have been reduced to mere compliance and enforcement rather than active participation in choosing what is required and apt for its people.

6. Medicinal Herbs, staple crops like rice and other culturally significant crops should be declared as NOT to be genetically engineered.

Medicinal herbs like Jivanti, Ashwagandha, Nilavembu and Bramhi are part of the ancient Siddha and Ayurvedic medicinal systems .

Rice being the culturally most important crop for Tamil Nadu must be preserved in its entirety. Gm rice will contaminate and destroy the biodiversity of rice.

All these crops are being Genetically engineered.