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African Agriculture

As someone concerned about farming in Africa, Florence Wambugu should know that low yields, malnutrition and declining incomes will not be significantly improved through genetic modification (27 May, p 40). Her evangelising of GM technology as the cure-all for problems of hunger, malnutrition and poverty neglects the underlying economic, historical and geographical factors behind Africa's underdevelopment and the exigencies of global capitalism.

Even if GM crops were introduced to Africa, appropriate capital inputs such as pesticides, fertilisers, machinery and adequate storage would still be needed to plant, grow and harvest crops.

Subsidies for these inputs have diminished through the imposition of structural adjustment by the World Bank and the subsequent abolition of marketing boards in Africa, Consequently, crop yields have plummeted, rural communities have migrated towards the informal urban sector, and land has lost its productive value.

In addition, without adequate infrastructure to access markets and with the continued presence of unscrupulous middlemen, those small farmers who do remain will receive little benefit from a higher-yield crop.

Biotechnology will represent a further incentive to move production towards capital-intensive agro-exports for private profit and away from labour-intensive food agriculture that traditionally provides nutrition and income for the rural poor.

Whatever one might surmise about the environmental risks of GM technology, investment in GM crops fails to tackle the underlying causes of poverty in rural Africa and merely provides rich pickings for multinational agribiotech corporations. Daniel Brett School of Oriental and African Studies, London

Wambugu has presented a robust and comprehensive defence of GM science, not least in the context of the potential scale and significance of GM agriculture in Africa and the rest of the so-called Third World.

If, as she argues most persuasively the choice is between sustaining a massive increase in population at an acceptable standard of life on the one hand, or starvation on the other, the West has no right either to deny vast areas of the globe access to GM technology or to damage their agricultural economies by

restricting imports on the grounds of so-called "GM contamination". Ian Lloyd ian@sirianlloyd.freeserve.co.uk

Christian Aid believes that genetically engineered crops are irrelevant to ending world hunger, will concentrate power in too few hands, and will strip small farmers of their independence.

Christian Aid's Indian research shows that land reform and simple irrigation can boost crops by 50 per cent. This should be tried in Africa instead of subjecting this famine-ridden continent to dubious genetically engineered foods that have not even been sufficiently tested for human safety.

See the recent article "The safety of genetically engineered foods—Reasons to expect hazards and the risk for their appearance" at www.psrast.org/defknfood.htm. Andrew Taynton, Safe Food Coalition, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

Raised Bed Agriculture allows people to feed themselves on a local basis that provides total community food security and it is a proven food production system that is ecologically sound, economically viable, socially responsible and Biblically based.