

# GMO`s and Hybrids: Insights of different stakeholders

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With the recent announcement of USAID Nepal Economic, Agriculture and Trade Activity (NEAT) program, to embrace 20,000 Nepalese farmers from three different districts videlicet Chitwan, Nawalparasi and Kavre, to facilitate a research on hybrid maize seeds, a colossal buzz has occurred these days. Upon dissection, this whole development has its roots on MONSANTO; a US based multinational agro company which occupies lions share in Genetically Modified (GM) and transgenic seeds. This has bred buoyancy as well as pessimism among different stakeholders.

The Ministry of Agriculture and Co-operatives, Department of Agriculture, USAID and Monsanto are in this squad to promote the use of hybrid maize seeds and provide training to the Nepalese farmers. This was made public in a workshop held in the capital city on 12<sup>th</sup> September, 2011. 50 stakeholders including both private and public sectors involved in agriculture research and development, progressive farmers and those in agri-business attended the workshop to discuss maize yield gap, major challenges in maize industry and strategies to further maize production. USAID/NEAT and Monsanto, in harmonization with Government of Nepal are scheduling a pilot project to encourage hybrid maize seeds in key pocket areas. People from different walks of life have perceived this advancement in varied ways.

From the time of this proclamation, activists are endeavoring to intensify their voices against Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) and Monsanto. They are handing out flyers and campaigning against it. They have also created a page on Facebook "STOP Monsanto in Nepal". In this day and age, this social network has eased people to raise their voices and this has appeared as a very influential means to revolt. We have a very fresh instance of Arab upheaval, which was initiated from such platform. On account of the possible detrimental effects these GMOs will engender in Nepalese farming system, activists are uniting to oppose Monsanto. For them, the beginning of Monsanto seeds is a boulevard to control seed supply and eventually to control people. They are annoying about the chemical agriculture and genetic pollution that the GMOs and Hybrids will bring. Activists are demanding USAID, Monsanto and Government of Nepal to devote on sustainable agriculture rather than on chemical intensive agriculture.

There are two schools of judgments within agricultural intellectuals. These academicians are reasonably at odds on the potential impacts of Hybrids and GMOs in natural ecosystem and human wellbeing. One section seems fairly affirmative to these recent advancement of Hybrid seeds in Nepal but it is noteworthy to mention that they represent very small number and they are backing hybrids only. They are on the side to welcome further more hybrid seed companies in Nepal so as to foster yield and to meet the yield gap but they have some guiding principles.

They want it to come through government prescribed procedures of registration and only after scientific exploration and field trials. During the discussion, one senior Professor from Institute of Agriculture and Animal Science, Rampur Campus focused on the necessity of scientific research on GMOs and its latent impacts on health and environment prior to go against it. In contrary, there is a sizeable group on the other side which has parallel interests as that of activists. Based on the consequences from genetic pollution to dependency, which the Monsanto has brought in other parts of the world, this group of scientific community is annoying over the recent advancement.

Among the stakeholders, farmers are the nucleus but paradoxically greater part of this population is unaware about this progress. Moreover, they are unacquainted with genetically modified organisms and hybrids. They are found to be interested in productivity only. Generally, they opt to grow hybrids as it yields higher. They simply buy seeds from nearby agro-vets with no prior knowledge in relation to the seeds and ecological niches. However, they are familiar with the fact that these enhanced varieties should be supplied with huge chemical inputs like fertilizers and pesticides. They also shared their experience of serious pest infestation (particularly during post harvest period) in hybrid maize plants as compared to local land races. But, thanks to the rising number of feed industries in Chitwan district, they do not need to worry on storage. There is one attention-grabbing reality about the maize use. Majority of the farmers cultivate local maize varieties for their home consumption. Upon inquest, they revealed the good taste and so called “organicness” of the local maize as the main reason. Fortunately, we also got an opportunity to meet with farmers who were amongst the hardest hit a couple of year ago due to barren cobs. The hybrid maize seeds they had planted did not yield because of the seedless cobs. They were demanding with the government to create a policy for compensation under such circumstances. Due to porous border with India, lots of unregistered seeds come to the farmers’ field and farmers do not get compensation upon failure of such seeds.

Some progressive farmers were fortunate to attend the workshop organized in Kathmandu. Analyzing the distinctiveness of these farmers, they were found to be the one having firm association with District Agriculture Development Office and having large agricultural land. “We have to bear only 25% of the seed cost and rest will be contributed from donor (Seed Company). This is a very good program for farmers”, a participant who attended the workshop shared with us. He further added, “They want to develop this place as a seed producing area.” But he was in the dark about its marketing side. He was pointing his finger to Indian Seed Companies for this current protest. For him, this conspiracy of Indian seed companies is just to maintain their market share which will be replaced if a large company like Monsanto comes as a market player. This overall conversation mirrors the cheerfulness in leading farmers due to the proposed USAID project.

Another most important stakeholder is government agriculture development officers. Recently, a mixed team of public and private sectors had toured Monsanto India and visited the research farm. They had communicated with local Indian farmers and valued the benefits of hybrid maize seeds. Opportunely, we met a government officer who was in the tour. He was constructive about the USAID program. For him, hybrid is a solution for a country going through the problem of food insufficiency and population explosion. He said, “We lack proper certification, market mechanism and suitable price policy for organic products.” Showing the disappointing consequences of previous organic farming trainings and farmer field schools, he zeroed on the construction of infrastructures before departing to organic. Other government officers urged the prospective of our own open pollinated maize varieties which have the production potential as that of hybrids upon the employment of improved cultivation package.

This overall sensitivity from diverse stakeholders has raised the significance of sustainability and biodiversity conservation in agriculture. This has also raised the consciousness among general public.

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