

PUSHING HYBRID MAIZE SEEDS

Maoist Nepal and Monsanto

IRIN

AN EFFORT BY US DONORS and multinational agribusiness Monsanto to partner with Nepal to boost local maize production with imported hybrid seeds has met civil society opposition calling—instead—for home-grown solutions.

“If an organization like USAID (US Agency for International Development) wants to help us with a company like Monsanto, we would hope that they would help us to actually develop our own hybrids instead, not to import their foreign seeds,” said Hari Dahal, spokesperson for the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives, at a recent parliamentary hearing on food sovereignty, as reported in local media.

USAID announced last September its intention to set up a pilot training partnership with Monsanto and the Nepali government, which promotes hybrid maize seeds to boost yields in a country where 41% of the population is estimated to be undernourished.

Maize is a staple of the local diet, especially in the maize-producing hilly central interior of the country, which suffers from chronic food insecurity.

In addition, Nepal grows only half of the maize demanded by the animal feed industry and imports the shortfall of 135,000 tons annually, according to USAID.

Demand for hybrid maize seeds, used primarily in the animal feed industry, has increased as animal feed has constituted a growing source of income for commercial farmers.

Opponents of the proposed partnership say it would substitute one form of dependence for another—from the currently imported maize to maize seeds from abroad.

According to the government, the country required 22,656 tons of maize seed in 2011—less than 1% of which was supplied by registered imports.

Calling the US-headquartered Monsanto a “biotech Goliath”, local activists have taken to social media to block the company’s expansion in Nepal, citing concerns of loss of local seeds, dependence on seed imports and environmental damage to the land and surrounding communities.

Known for its genetically-engineered products worldwide, Monsanto has been sued—and settled out of court—in the Americas throughout the last decade multiple times for alleged health and environmental damages linked to its practices. It has also sued farmers whom it accused of patent infringement.

While this would be the first time a donor subsidizes the cost of hybrid seeds on such a large scale in Nepal—targeting 20,000 farmers in three commercial maize-producing districts of Kavre, Chitwan and Nawal Parasi along the southern lowland belt in the Terai region bordering India—Monsanto has been exporting hybrid maize seed to Nepal since 2004.

Kiran Dahal, Nepal country representative for Monsanto, said almost 100% of its seed is used to produce maize for the feed industry, but it is up to the farmers to decide where they sell their maize and for what purpose.

Monsanto's presence was unheralded, unsubsidized and until recently, largely unnoticed, said Sabin Ninglekhu, an organizer of the Facebook campaign. "To be honest, we didn't know Monsanto was in the country before the USAID announcement."

Over the past decade commercial farmers in the lowlands have started using hybrid varieties, drawn by the potential of higher yields.

In hybrid breeding technology, strains are cross-pollinated to create offspring with combined strengths. Agronomists note that although first-generation hybrids produce higher yields, their offspring often may not give the same results, requiring farmers to purchase new seeds every season.

As yet, no comprehensive long-term report on the distribution and yield of hybrid seed application in Nepal has been produced, according to the Agriculture Ministry.

But preliminary findings in the lowland Nawal Parasi and Palpa districts in 2011 suggest almost doubled yields from hybrid seeds over openly-pollinated local varieties—from 0.8 to 1.5 tons per hectare—as reported by the South Asia office of the international Center for Maize and Wheat Improvement (CIMMYT) based in Kathmandu.

But blocking seed imports is only the initial goal of local NGOs protesting against Monsanto: The end objective is to boost local seed use and production by investing more in agricultural research and development, said Facebook campaign organizer Ninglekhu.

"We have used this Monsanto movement as an opening to talk about the ministry's agricultural vision, its understanding of food security and seed sovereignty and what policies are in place to address these. Monsanto is not the only option."

Nepal's political climate was still fragile in late 2011, five years after the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Accord to end a decade of civil war, noted the Washington DC-based International Food Policy Research Institute.

Both the agriculture and science ministries "lack the power, capacity, and continuity to set the country's long-term agricultural R&D (research and development) agenda," IFPRI concluded.

The principal government agency devoted to such research—the National Agricultural Research Council—has produced only two hybrid corn strains since its establishment in 1991.

One type has not been taken up by private seed producers as it was deemed not commercially viable, and the other is still undergoing approval, said Chitra Bahadur Kunwar, a senior scientist at the council's National Maize Research Programme.

Meanwhile, the increasingly scant availability of openly-pollinated local seeds, which can be reused from one season to the next, leave farmers vulnerable to the caprice of importation, said Durga Lamichhane, a commercial maize farmer from Gaidakot in Nawal Parasi District.

“Our local seeds are about to disappear. If for some reason these hybrid seeds do not come, we would be in a situation of emergency,” said Lami-chhane, referring to a growing trend among commercial farmers not to save local seeds due to a preference to buy hybrids and other improved seed varieties.

But striving for no seed imports is not realistic, noted Andrew McDonald, a CIMMYT cropping agronomist for South Asia.

“Nepal is not alone : the food security of almost every nation is contingent on input supply chains that transcend national boundaries.”

For Tilak Prasad Kandel, a commercial farmer with a hectare of land in Nawal Parasi, the concern is not dependency, but rather lack of government spending to develop local hybrids. “There are alternatives to Monsanto.”

Though promoting maize hybrids is important to boosting maize production and profitability in Nepal, USAID's decision to partner with Monsanto alone was questionable, said McDonald.

“I don't think USAID should be in the business of choosing 'winners' by working with a single seed company in a market environment where many private companies are active.”

The US ambassador in Nepal, Scott H DeLisi, noted on his own Facebook page on 2 December that “the critical discussion is not about the role of a single company but about the future of agricultural development in Nepal,” and in a 5 December statement USAID said project consultations are on-going.

“We have not worked out the details of the pilot as yet and are still consulting with a variety of groups including the private sector, academia, the MOAC (Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives) and Nepal Agriculture Research Council (NARC), civil society and farmer groups. We will take their feedback into account as we further discuss the form of partnership that best meets the needs of Nepali farmers.”

About 16 different maize hybrids from multiple companies are registered for sale by the government's regulatory process.

No matter the source of seeds, the USAID pilot project would help farmers trying to grow hybrid maize, said Kandel. Not only would it subsidize seed costs, but also provide much-needed education on how to use the seeds, which is the biggest problem for farmers, he added.

According to farmers in Nawal Parasi, the subsidy would cover 75% of the cost of Monsanto seeds.

But for now the partnership remains a proposition as the government has not joined.

USAID has stated it “will not move forward independently to fund such a programme” and “encourages this dialogue, which underscores the critical need for Nepal to increase its agricultural production through improved seed technologies and cultivation practices”.

The government’s Natural Resources and Means Committee has requested a report addressing concerns about seed sovereignty from the Agriculture Ministry for a hearing expected to be held in January. □□□

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