



Nongovernmental organizations and genetically modified crops in Kenya: Understanding influence within a techno-civil society



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ABSTRACT

Genetically modified (GM) crops in Kenya are situated in a highly networked and transnational environment, where technical decisions are tied to livelihoods, politics and culture. Within that environment, certain nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have been extremely influential, driving local decisions about whether and how GM crops will be adopted, and creating a technocratic policy environment. Building on interdisciplinary frameworks that connect agency with place and identity, I argue that NGO influence stems from the creation and management of organizational identities that link two powerful ideologies: the notion that the advancement of technology is tightly coupled to societal progress, and the view that a strong civil society is necessary for an informed and representative democracy. Utilizing ethnographic data, the concept of techno-civil society is presented as a means to understand the merger of these two ideologies as NGOs negotiate their identities and frame their role in deciding Kenya's future with GM crops. Especially during key regulatory and technological developments in 2004–2005, the creation of a techno-civil society helped produce a scientized decision-making system that was closed and polarized. Acknowledging, and not essentializing, the normative dimensions of civil society and the values associated with technological pathways may help de-polarize debates about GM crops in developing countries.

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1. Introduction

In the polarized debate about genetically modified (GM) crops in developing countries, both proponents and opponents claim that international actors drive the national agendas of countries in the Global South. Advocates of GM crops argue that European environmental organizations compel poor countries to ban the importation and development of GM crops (Paarlberg, 2008). Those opposing GM crops assert that certain multi-national companies and bi-lateral donors strongly push these same countries to accept and develop GM seed and plants (Zacune, 2011). But how exactly do these or other international actors influence local decision makers?

One way to better understand the polarization of the GM debate – and possibly move beyond it – is to take a more local viewpoint. A growing number of scholars argue that we must root analyses within empirical studies that situate GM crops in specific local contexts, and within historical and contemporary understanding of society, economy, politics and geography (Dowd-Uribe and Bingen, 2011; Harsh and Smith, 2007; Schnurr, 2012; Shah, 2008; Stone, 2010). Such a local viewpoint does not ignore international factors. Rather, the challenge is to understand exactly how international dynamics intersect with local realities: Which local actors on the

ground in developing countries have significant agency or influence in setting the agenda for agricultural research and the strategy for biotechnology regulation? What are the roots of that influence? How is that influence mobilized? Whose interests are represented when it is? To what ends?

This paper addresses these questions through the case of Kenya.¹ I focus on nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), a category of actors that is prominent and active in GM debates in Kenya. I argue that certain NGOs that are strongly in favor of GM crops have been very influential in deciding whether or not GM crops will be developed and used, and that these NGOs helped create a technocratic policy environment related to GM crops. The paper demonstrates how NGOs have been able to acquire funds, obtain access to decision makers and drive the GM agenda by creating and maintaining distinctive organizational identities where they frame themselves as constituents of, what I term, a techno-civil society. The concept of techno-civil society refers to the joining of two powerful ideologies: the notion that the advancement of technology is tightly coupled to societal progress; and the view that a strong civil society, which encourages broad representation and open and informed decision making, is necessary for a healthy democracy. Not

¹ Some data used here previously appeared in an unpublished PhD thesis (Harsh, 2008).

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only do these ideas strongly resonate with international development policymakers and practitioners (Jasanoff, 2002; Mercer, 2002), they also run deep in the history and culture of donor nations in both Europe and North America (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999; Marx and Smith, 1994).

The analysis builds on frameworks from the fields of development and science and technology studies that focus on the interaction between agency, identity and place (Harsh et al., 2010; Mosse, 2005; Shrum, 2005). The most active NGOs working in the area of GM crops construct a techno-civil society identity by flexibly framing themselves as *local representatives and fora for farmers and the general public, servants of technology-based progress, and apolitical trainers and educators that communicate the science behind biotechnology*. By focusing on the critical regulatory and technical decisions made about GM crops in 2004–2005, the paper illustrates how the creation of this techno-civil society led to a policy environment that was highly ‘scientized’ (cf. Kinchy, 2010): complex socio-economic, cultural, political dimensions of GM crops were collapsed into a narrow scientific framing of risks that privileged participation from elite scientific actors. The result was a decision-making system that closed, and ironically, quite uncivil. Furthermore, the NGOs constituting a techno-civil society contributed to the creation of a more antagonistic social and political environment, and defined a narrow and technological view of societal progress. Through squeezing away much of the space for debate about GM crops, the merger of ideologies about technology and civil society is one of the root causes of polarization of GM crops in Kenya.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, I present background information on political economy and agriculture in Kenya, situating GM crops in a highly networked and transnational environment, where technical decisions are tied to livelihoods, politics and culture. Next, I introduce a theoretical framework for understanding influence and agency inside that environment focusing on how agency within highly scientific and international networks is linked to identity and place. Common framings for debates about GM crops and NGOs are also presented to provide the theoretical underpinnings for the concept to techno-civil society. The methodology is then briefly introduced. Identity is ethnographically explored through actors’ motivations, organizational modes of operations, and definitions of success and failure. I focus on NGOs that represent a prominent coalition actively engaging with GM crops in Kenya. I then make the empirical argument about how these NGOs gain influence through constructing identities that merge ideologies about technology and civil society, and explore the consequences of this for the GM decision-making system, or what I refer to as the governance of GM crops in Kenya (cf. Harsh, 2005). The conclusion reflects on the relevance of the argument for social analysts as well as for development policymakers and practitioners, and makes suggestions to help move beyond the polarization of GM crops.

2. Agriculture in Kenya

Under colonial rule, there was a strong provincial administration that governed rural agricultural areas. The provincial administration was used by the colonial governor as a means to exclude African participation in matters of local governance, becoming the authority in all local matters, including preserving law and order, collecting taxes, and arbitrating grievances (Branch and Cheeseman, 2006: 18). As the colonial period was nearing its end, sympathetic and well-educated Kenyans were brought into the provincial administration (Branch and Cheeseman, 2006: 19). In addition, middle class farmers were given private land titles as a means of separating them from peasant farmers who were

considered the root of anti-colonial agitation (Branch and Cheeseman, 2006: 19). It was these elites – newly created bureaucrats and land-holders – that were poised to benefit from independence from British rule in 1963. Many became large farmers and took up seats in Kenya’s first parliament. These same elites also became tied to “representatives of transnational capital” that played a key role in the export of Kenyan agricultural commodities: Europeans whom the post-colonial government allowed to stay on their land or remain in Kenya as “expatriate managers,” and Asian businessmen who were encouraged to become Kenyan citizens so they could continue to run their enterprises (Branch and Cheeseman, 2006: 21). Rather than re-structuring the economy through land re-distribution,

[t]he post-colonial state was a significant investor in Kenyan capitalist estate agriculture and industry and encouraged further private Kenyan and international capital investment... (Branch and Cheeseman, 2006: 15).

Kenya became what Branch and Cheeseman refer to as a “bureaucratic-executive” state (Branch and Cheeseman, 2006: 15). The state was supported by a coalition or “pact of domination” between elites, transnational capital, and the executive: the president and prominent ministers (Branch and Cheeseman, 2006: 15). Kenya is distinctive among African post-colonial states in two main ways. First, the executive maintained strong political control in rural farming areas through the bureaucracy of the provincial administration. For example, groups that represented resistance to the regime – such as peasant farmers groups in Central Province who supported opposition politicians in favor of land reform in the mid to late 1960s – were repressed through the bureaucracy of the provincial administration via electioneering and ‘extra-legal’ activity (Branch and Cheeseman, 2006: 26). Secondly, uneven economic opportunity between and among ethnic groups during colonialism – while common across Africa – was very pronounced in Kenya. Combined with a strong provincial administration, this led to “ethnically based ‘boss politics’” in the post-colonial era (Gertzel, 1970: 15 in Branch and Cheeseman, 2006: 22).

Throughout 50 years of history, the fundamental nature of the Kenyan state has remained relatively unchanged; rural agricultural areas remain extremely important to Kenya’s politics, economy and culture. Despite significant recent events – political and ethnic unrest after a disputed presidential election in 2007 followed by indictments at the International Criminal Court, a successful constitutional referendum in 2010, and a relatively peaceful election in 2013 – Kenya’s elite politicians in the executive can still act with impunity (Githinji and Holmquist, 2012). Corruption and ethnic patronage within the bureaucracy allow the executive to control the distribution of resources, including influencing profits from agricultural production through the National Cereals and Produce Board (see for example, Namunane and Opiyo, 2009; Mwere, 2013). Agriculture also remains at the center of Kenya’s political economy and culture. In 2011, the agricultural sector represented 75% of Kenya’s labor force and accounted for about 19% of Kenya’s gross domestic product (CIA, 2012). Acknowledging its importance, the government made agriculture a key part of the Economic Pillar of the National Vision 2030 Strategy, Kenya’s current development plan (Government of Kenya, 2012). Additionally, many poor rural households depend on land and agriculture for their livelihoods, culture and way of life. Most of the food grown in Kenya – 75% of total agricultural output – is grown and consumed by subsistence farmers (IFAD, 2011).

This high percentage of subsistence output is motivation to improve the performance of the agricultural sector through research and development (R&D) (and thus hopefully improve food security and export earnings). When examining agricultural R&D in

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