

The Political Economy of Food Aid in an Era of Agricultural Biotechnology



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Recent years have seen numerous rejections of food aid containing genetically modified organisms (GMOs). The United States, as the principal donor of this aid, went on the defensive and blamed the European Union for hunger in developing countries. Rarely is food aid rejected. And rarely do food aid donors act so strongly to blame other donors. The reaction of both donors and recipients is also puzzling because it contradicts much of the literature from the 1990s that argued that the international food aid regime had become largely “depoliticized” following reforms to food aid policies in the 1980s. The current literature on food aid has not adequately addressed the ways in which the advent of GMOs has affected the food aid regime. I argue that scientific debates over the safety of GMOs, and economic factors tied to the market for genetically modified crops—both highly political issues—are extremely relevant to current debates on food aid. **KEYWORDS:** food aid, agricultural biotechnology, genetically modified organisms (GMOs), Africa, developing countries.

In 2002, the United States sent significant quantities of food aid, in the form of whole kernel maize (corn), to southern Africa in response to the looming famine in the drought-stricken region. It soon became apparent that the aid contained genetically modified organisms (GMOs), though the recipients had not been notified prior to the shipments being sent. Many southern African countries initially refused to accept the genetically modified food aid, partly as a health precaution and partly on the grounds that it could contaminate their own crops, thus hurting potential future exports to Europe. A number of the countries eventually accepted the food aid provided it was milled first, but Zambia continued to refuse even the milled maize. The United States argued that it could not supply non-genetically modified (GM) food aid, and it refused to pay for the milling. The United States then blamed Europe’s moratorium on imports of GM foods and seed for contributing to hunger in southern Africa.

This incident highlights a new aspect of the recent global predicament over how the international movement of GMOs should be governed.

Although there has been much analysis of this question with respect to commercial trade in recent years, particularly regarding the adoption of the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety,¹ the literature on food aid has not kept up with these new developments. Recent academic analyses of food aid have paid little attention to the question of GMOs. The literature on food aid has focused mainly on the motivations for donating food aid and its potential as a development tool. Some have argued that although economic and political considerations are present to some degree in the motivation for giving food, today it is mainly given as part of a development regime that aims primarily to promote food security and rural development rather than as a means to serve the domestic economic and political interests of donor countries.²

In light of the changes in global agriculture over the past decade, especially the rise of the United States as a major producer of GM crops, it is important to reexamine the political economy of food aid. There appear to be strong economic as well as scientific motivations for the United States to pursue its adopted food aid policy that have not been addressed by the earlier food aid literature. Both of these motivations are highly politicized. Europe has not followed the lead of the United States on GM food aid policy. The divergence of the policies of the EU and of the United States on this issue may well lead to interesting politics in the coming years in the international battle over GMOs. This time, however, the debate looks set to be played out globally with some of the world's poorest countries as unwitting participants in the conflict.

Why Revisit Food Aid Politics?

The modern era of food aid was instituted in the United States in 1954 with the passage of U.S. Public Law (PL) 480. Since then, food aid has been an important feature of U.S. assistance to developing countries, though its role has changed over time. In the 1950s, food aid accounted for nearly a third of U.S. agricultural exports, whereas in the mid-1990s, it was closer to 6 percent.³ Food aid under PL 480 is given under three different categories of assistance. Title I is government-to-government aid in the form of concessional sales with the express aim of opening new markets for U.S. grain. Title II is grant food aid distributed in emergencies. Such aid can be distributed via nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and the World Food Programme (WFP). Title III is government-to-government grants of food aid for development activities.⁴

From its origins, U.S. food aid was largely seen as a multipurpose tool. On the surface, the idea of the PL 480 was to provide the world's