Humanitarian Assistance or Corporate Interest? Monsanto and USAID in Haiti

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ETHICAL CURRENTS

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Under the rubric of humanitarian relief and recovery for Haiti following the 2010 earthquake, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) delivered more than 475 tons of improved seed (seed that has been specifically modified, either through selective breeding or genetic alternation to offer an advantage in its cultivation) donated by the Monsanto Corporation to peasant farmers. Improved seed for maize, cabbage, carrot, eggplant, melon, onion, tomato and spinach were distributed through USAID’s Watershed Initiative for National Natural Environmental Resources (WINNER) program. According to USAID, this is “a 5-year $126 million dollar project to build Haiti’s agricultural infrastructure, capacity and productivity in a sustainable way.”

Monsanto’s partnership with USAID echoes other scenarios, such as in India, where the introduction of agricultural biotechnology through a development project has negatively impacted the lives of people whose livelihood depends on farming. In Haiti, the decision to provide improved seed biotechnology was made only four months after the January earthquake, as a form of humanitarian relief, not as part of development. The distribution of improved seed was met with strong resistance by Haiti’s peasant movement. In June 2010 the Peasant Movement of Papay (MPP), representing the interests of farmers near the city of Hinche, organized a march of some 10,000 farmers and burned 60,000 sacks of seed donated by Monsanto and distributed by USAID. Their concern was the long-term impact of improved seed on agriculture and food security and if the corporate interests of Monsanto in establishing a new market for improved seed—and its associated inputs and technology—was being placed ahead of the interests of the peasantry. The protest slogan used for the demonstration was “Semans Peyizan = Souvrennte alimand” (Peasant [local] Seed = Food Sovereignty).

The vast majority of Haiti’s domestic food production is generated by independent, small-scale peasant producers who rely on a system of cultivation that has been practiced by generations and remains mostly unchanged since the Haiti’s independence in 1804. One of the key elements in this system is the ability of farmers to purchase local seed adapted to specific geographic areas or agro-ecological zones. Catholic Relief Services (CRS) published a seed sector assessment for Haiti’s Southern Department in March 2010, several months prior to the arrival of improved seed from Monsanto and the MPP protest. USAID produced a similar assessment in June. Both reports found that farmers did not have problems accessing local seed, they were not interested in adopting improved seed, disaster response is not the appropriate moment for introducing this type of technology, and efforts to improve domestic production
should not begin with improved seed. The USAID study found that, “In the season immediately after the earthquake, farmers planted slightly less seed than normal; however, their reasons for doing so were numerous... Lack of available seed did not emerge as a cause of decreased sowing of land.” Furthermore, the results of the USAID assessment “validated USAID’s decision not to support immediate seed distributions as an emergency agricultural response in Haiti, as they highlighted chronic problems inherent in the Haitian seed system and revealed that such issues predated the earthquake.” The findings of both assessments clearly demonstrate that seed supply is not a critical obstacle to peasant agriculture, which should raise concerns about USAID’s quick decision after the earthquake to distribute Monsanto’s seed.

An immediate ethical question raised here is the inherent conflict between corporate interest and humanitarian interest that can emerge in partnerships designed to deliver much needed relief to populations affected by disaster. Perhaps a sense of urgency in Haiti and the state of chaos in Port-au-Prince in the months following the earthquake provided a convenient moment for the delivery of improved seed which otherwise may have been met with greater scrutiny and resistance. Another issue is the practical relevance of anthropological knowledge about agricultural systems for understanding and assessing the potential impact of seed biotechnology on local food security, biodiversity and national food sovereignty. The case of Monsanto in Haiti demonstrates the failure of a public-private partnership in meeting the needs of a disaster-affected population. Perhaps more significantly is the potential long-term harm that crop biotechnology can cause to agricultural systems, seed supply and food security once introduced under the guise of humanitarian assistance.

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