

The Price of Aid 2004. A Film by Jihan El Tahri, Produced by Dominant 7, Distributed by First Run/Icarus Films. VHS, color, 55 min.

For a long time, the conventional wisdom has been that the World Food Program administered by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) was an enterprise motivated purely by altruistic if not humanitarian considerations. The film, “The Price of Aid” by Jihan el Tahri however, seeks to debunk that widely held notion. Using Zambia the Southern African country that was ravaged by famine a few years ago, and had received aid from the World Food Program (WFP) as a case study, the film highlights the below the radar political and trade intrigues that appear to characterize the operations of the World Food Aid Program. It also attempts to show the lack of consensus between the United States and the European Union in the use of genetically modified food for famine ravaged countries. According to a line in the narrative, “Zambia’s plight revealed the hidden agenda behind USAID and highlighted the role of genetically modified products (GMP). It has also uncovered the simmering trade war between the United States and Europe—a war in which GMP is a vital weapon”.

Perhaps it is pertinent to ask how the producers of the film came to such sweeping conclusion. They did so by interviewing a cross-section of officials from Zambia, USAID, the European Union (EU) and World Food Program and the responses they got contributed to their conclusion.

According to Mandia Sikatene, the Zambian Minister of Agriculture, “Food Aid is good business for America but not necessarily good for Africa”. Guy Scota, also a former Zambian Agriculture Minister echoed Sikatene’s assertion. In his opinion, the story of famine in Zambia was blown out of proportion by the Western media edged on by WFP with the view to push the American public to donate to their cause. To Scota, the Zambian famine was “localized and temporary”. But since WFP relies on charity, to recruit fresh donors, it amplified the food crises, since “when victims of famine are visible”, donations tend to come in torrents. Mr. Scota went on to say that the US over-produces its maize which is highly subsidized, in order to get rid of the excess, the US kills two birds with one stone by giving food “relief to the needy and earn some political capital” while also helping its economy with the Food Aid Program. For Scota, the Food Aid Program is “a thriving business in the US”.

USAID was established in 1954 by the Agricultural Trade Development and Assistance Act (otherwise known as Public Law 480). It is the agency saddled with the bureaucratic responsibility of administering US bilateral aid worldwide. The World Food Program is an arm of USAID. To give credibility to the economic side of the Food Aid Program, the producers interviewed Nathan Sukiennik, the director of operations of Port Lake Charles in Louisiana which is the hub of operations for WFP in the US. According to Sukiennik, “every ton that is loaded to a vessel in Lake Charles provides \$55 to our economy. In this area we are talking about probably upwards of \$55 million to the economy, it dominoes all through the area”. Port Lake Charles has close business ties with USAID and the effect according to Jim Grigus, the director of the Port “is horizontal—from farmers down to car manufacturers”.

Mr. Penn's explanation for why non-GM products are not provided to famine stricken countries is that market forces come into the equation: "the consumer will pay a premium price for that separation" and he reminded the world that "it's food aid. It's donated products". Translation: take what you are given and stop whining! Enoch Kavindele, at the time, the Zambian Vice President, is of the opinion that "America has not been forthright in helping us acquire Non-GM products"- a claim that was countered by Mr. Pen, the USAID undersecretary "If the developing world doesn't accept biotech, then it gets even further behind in economic development". However, for Mr. Scotta, "It's a game". As he saw it, "WFP was always looking for victims. Zambia learned to play the victim. The crisis was exaggerated because it served everybody to exaggerate it".

Another issue of contention is the use of genetically modified food which could be injurious to the consumer's health. The grains that WFP provided to Zambia were all genetically modified. "We started receiving literature and it was showing these risks. And the WFP said: why should you complain when we have been feeding you on GMP for the past 7 years? Zambians couldn't believe it. We were not given the opportunity to know this. We were told you are poor, you have no choice. You are beggars, you can't be choosers" Mr. Sikatane said he was told by WFP after the Zambian president complained at the United Nations General Assembly about refusing further food aid from the WFP because they were genetically modified products.

Mr. J.B. Penn, at the time the Undersecretary for Farm and Foreign Agricultural Services for USAID however, disputes the Zambian claim: "we have 275 million Americans who consume large bio food every day and there's not one here-not one case of adverse health effect from that food, yet you have people starving in Africa and you have people who are saying perhaps you shouldn't eat that food. The same food we send to Africa is the same food we consume here in the United States every single day". But is this entirely accurate?

Pierre Andre Wiltzer-France Minister for Cooperation and Development asked for objective appraisal of the issue "there are many uncertainties; even on a scientific level as to the long term effects of genetically modified grains. But it is a debate that must be held in an objective, calm manner without being rushed". Mr. Wiltzer added that the EU does not impose products in famine stricken countries that the country does not want. "American scientists have told our scientists that they can't guarantee that it (GM) products is safe" Mr. Sikatane added.

Judith Lewis-the Regional Director -WFP East/ Southern Africa brought a moral dimension to the issue "Do we starve people to death when food is available? That's the dilemma". When she was asked why other non-genetically modified foods like rice, sorghum, beans etc couldn't be given Ms. Lewis answered "I don't know. We work with the resources that we are given. The US government decides what they are going to give to WFP".

Apart from potential health implications of genetically modified on Zambians, another issue of contention concerns maize/corn seeds for planting. Mr. Sikatane puts this in perspective: “if we adopt GM, we won’t have our own seed banks. We would be forced to buy American seeds every day. It is a risk to our health and to our economy”. Mr. Sikatane’s points were echoed by Paul Nielsen, the EU Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid “the worry is that the company that has the patent may turn up one day and say: but you have a large part of your country covered with seed materials of GM which is our protected property. This is part of the worry”.

The long term economic implications of heavy reliance on GM seeds earlier stressed by Mr. Sikatane was drawn home by France’s Minister for Cooperation Mr. Wiltzer who said the EU won’t accept agricultural products from Zambia if she used seeds that were genetically modified. He went on to accuse the US of exhibiting “a show of economic force” because the US is “seeking to get a maximum of its products into the market” and does not want the debate to be confused “with that of a fight for famine”. “The Europeans are playing political games” was how Mr. Penn summed up Mr. Wiltzer’s accusation. “It’s a selfish reason. Mr. Sikatane said. “They (the US) want to ensure that the sub-region would be a big market for their farmers. That’s all. The people to be assisted must be assisted to be self-reliant. That is most important”. Food Aid, he went on to say, has made people into “slaves. It has turned people into zombies and beggars. We can’t be called beggars in the land of plenty”.

The lesson one draws from the film apart from trade and political intrigues between the two economic giants, the US and the EU, is that African nations such as Zambia, have finally come to the realization that the solution to famine does not lie in going cap in hand to beg for foreign food assistance but in their capacity to look inward and encourage the production of food beyond subsistence level. The message has been embraced by the people of Zambia and one hopes that other African nations would follow their example.

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