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Converging Networks and Clashing Stories: South Africa’s Agricultural Biotechnology Debate
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The debate over agricultural biotechnology in South Africa is not only polarized, but also complicated by the increasingly blurry boundaries of food governance. This was particularly apparent during the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), held in Johannesburg in August 2002. This article explores how the politics and policies surrounding genetic modification (GM) in South Africa have taken shape within a range of overlapping transnational networks of information, advocacy, regulation, and resource exchange. Drawing on fieldwork conducted before and during the summit, it examines how South African actors identify with and draw on these networks, but also express concerns and aspirations defined by more localized experiences and conditions. It observes how South Africa has come to be seen as a pivotal site for the future of GM farming and food across the whole of the African continent.

Scenes from the Summit

The World Summit on Sustainable Development, held in Johannesburg in August 2002, saw many moments of high drama. But one of the most surprising scenes took place in the cavernous convention hall of the accompanying Civil Society Global Forum, just as Vandana Shiva, one of the world’s best-known opponents of genetically modified organisms (GMOs), finished speaking. In the audience, several men and women, who had earlier identified themselves as small farmers from Asia and Africa, immediately raised their hands to object to the presentation. In response, Shiva abandoned the sedate question-and-answer format and let loose a barrage of insults, refusing to hear the farmers speak. As someone who has written voluminously in support of “indigenous knowledge” and traditional agrarian economies, Shiva is the last person one would expect to disagree with the small farmers’ worldview, yet during the summit, she and certain small farmers clashed repeatedly.
In the exhibition hall, the Ubongwa Farmers Union hung a hand-lettered banner reading “Vandana Shiva, don’t speak for African Farmers.” And the day before Shiva’s presentation, several hundred protestors marched in Johannesburg, claiming their “freedom to farm.” They distributed press releases that demanded “the freedom to grow any crop of their choice, the freedom to access the best available technology, and the freedom to improve agricultural productivity.” They “wanted the WSSD to respect their freedom to see for themselves the economic and technological viability of all new technologies, including agricultural biotechnology” [Mitra 2002]. These “Farmers from Africa and Asia” presented Vandana Shiva with a “Bullshit Award” for “advancing policies that perpetuate poverty and hunger.”

Shiva was not the only prominent summit participant who could be accused of trying to speak for—or through—small farmers. The alternative media reported that the pro-GM small farmers’ group had in fact been sent by Monsanto, the world’s largest producer of GM seeds [Matthews 2002]. At the summit, Monsanto also hosted suppers, at which pro-GM farmers from Kwa-Zulu Natal [the South African region where a substantial number of smallholders have adopted GM crops] could share their views with journalists [Pearce 2002]. AfricaBio, an industry-funded, pro-GM nongovernmental organization [NGO], sponsored its own contingent of small-farmer spokespeople, among them T. J. Buthelezi, the head of the Ubongwa Farmers Union in KwaZulu Natal and a veteran on the pro-biotech public-relations circuit [AfricaBio 2002c; GMWatch.org 2004]. In the anti-GM camp, meanwhile, Biowatch South Africa, an NGO run by white environmental and food safety activists, had provided a group of dancers with T-shirts proclaiming “Hands Off My Genes,” which the dancers wore over customary Zulu attire.

Genetically modified organisms did not appear on the agenda for the summit, but pro- and anti-GM activists geared up for a rowdy fight anyway. The WSSD and Civil Society Global Forum convened at a time when famine-threatened countries in southern Africa were refusing genetically modified food aid from the United States, and the United States was criticizing the European Union for imposing a “Luddite” GM stance on hungry former colonies. In this context, agrobiotechnology’s advocates and opponents worked overtime to sell their story about how GMOs would help or harm the global South, and Africa especially. And while the politicking and rhetorical performances at the summit produced no resolutions, they did illustrate two points. First, the debate over GM in South Africa, as elsewhere, is not just extraordinarily polarized, but also complicated by increasingly blurry divisions between the traditional categories of political-economic actors. At the summit, it was not always apparent who stood for what, or who represented whom, or what authority they possessed. This blurring was often strategic—as when corporations promoted their cause via NGOs—but it also reflected much broader changes in the roles and relationships between