Millions of people in Zambia are facing starvation because of the European Union’s (EU) negative attitude towards GM crops, an Australian study has found.

Zambia is in the grip of its third serious drought in five years. The Zambian government has declared a state of emergency and appealed for foreign food aid, as more than 1.2 million people face famine in the country, in addition to nine million in neighboring nations. In 2002, the Zambian government refused food aid containing GM crops from the United States, citing health and environmental concerns.

However, the new analysis published in the journal *Functional Plant Biology* suggests the decision to reject GM food aid was based on sometimes misleading information from activist organisations combined with fear that European markets would close to Zambia’s agricultural produce should GM food aid be accepted.

The study found horticultural exports and field crops are vital to the economies of many African nations. Zambia even exported corn to the EU during the 2002 drought when three million people were facing starvation.

The article’s author, Australian National University PhD student Greg Bodulovic said he hoped that people in southern African nations especially Zambia would not starve because of the irrational rejections of GM crops by African governments and the EU.

“The current situation is another example of the third world suffering at the expense of the first.”

“There is a risk that the people most in need of this technology will be unable to derive its benefits,” he said.

Greg Bodulovic said that pest- and drought-resistant GM crops could play an important part in the future improvement of agricultural productivity and hence the food supply in Africa. However, they are only part of the solution.

“African farming practices need to be improved, and irrigation and fertilisation of soils needs to be addressed.”

“New farming techniques including GM crops must be made available to African nations to curb the cycle of malnutrition, starvation and ultimately, poverty,” he said.

The study also noted that crops suited to African conditions are not being developed by the biotechnology industry, due to difficulties in recouping research and development costs. However the Golden Rice project demonstrates that collaborations between industry, public research institutions and universities to develop GM crops for the benefit of developing nations are possible.

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) has predicted that global food production must increase by 60% to feed a projected population of 8.4 billion by 2035. Currently, 842 million people do not have enough to eat, while billions suffer from micro-nutrient deficiencies due to an inadequate diet.

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