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Green activists 'are keeping Africa poor'



Women tending their crops by hand in the Democratic Republic of Congo

Mark Henderson, Science Editor

Western do-gooders are impoverishing Africa by promoting traditional farming at the expense of modern scientific agriculture, according to Britain's former chief scientist.

Anti-science attitudes among aid agencies, poverty campaigners and green activists are denying the continent access to technology that could improve millions of lives, Professor Sir David King will say today.

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) from Europe and America are turning African countries against sophisticated farming methods, including GM crops, in favour of indigenous and organic approaches that cannot deliver the continent's much needed "green revolution", he believes.

Speaking before a keynote lecture tonight to the British Association for the Advancement of Science, of which he is president, Sir David said that the slow pace of African development was linked directly to Western influence. "I'm going to suggest, and I believe this very strongly, that a big part has been played in the impoverishment of that continent by the focus on nontechnological agricultural techniques, on techniques of farming that pertain to the history of that continent rather than techniques that pertain to modern technological capability. Why has that continent not joined Asia in the big green revolutions that have taken place over the past few decades? The suffering within that continent, I believe, is largely driven by attitudes developed in the West which are somewhat anti-science, anti-technology - attitudes that lead towards organic farming, for example, attitudes that lead against the use of genetic technology for crops that could deal with increased salinity in the water, that can deal with flooding for rice crops, that can deal with drought resistance."

Sir David, who stepped down in December as the Government's Chief Scientific Adviser, will use his presidential address to the BA Festival of Science in Liverpool to accuse governments and NGOs of confused thinking about African development.

"Solutions will only emerge if full use is made of modern agricultural technology methods, under progressive, scientifically informed regulation," he will say. "The most advanced form of plant breeding, using modern genetic techniques, is now available to us. Plant breeding needs to meet a range of demands, including defences against evolving plant diseases, drought resistance, saline resistance, and flood tolerance. The problem is that the Western-world move toward organic farming - a lifestyle choice for a community with surplus food - and against agricultural technology in general and GM in particular, has been adopted across Africa, with the exception of South Africa, with devastating consequences."

His remarks will place him in direct opposition to former Whitehall colleagues. The Government endorsed recently the International Assessment of Agricultural Science and Technology, a report from 400 scientists and development experts published in April, which championed small-scale farming and traditional knowledge. The exercise was led by Professor Bob Watson, the chief scientist at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Sir David said that its findings were short-sighted. "I hesitate to criticise Bob Watson, who I admire enormously, but I think that we

have been overwhelmed by attitudes to Africa that for some reason are qualitatively different to attitudes elsewhere.

“We have the technology to feed the population of the planet. The question is do we have the ability to understand that we have it, and to deliver?” Sir David, who was born and brought up in South Africa, added: “I think there is a tremendous groundswell of feeling that we need to support tradition in Africa. What that actually means in practice is if you go to a marketplace in a lovely town like Livingstone in Zambia, near Victoria Falls, you will see hundreds of people with little piles of their crops for sale.

“This is an extremely inefficient process. The sort of thing we're seeing existed in this country hundreds of years ago. I don't believe that will lead to the economic development of Africa.”

He will cite the example of rice that can resist flooding, which has been developed by the International Rice Research Institute in the Philippines. Its development has been held up for several years because scientists felt they could not use GM techniques, such is the scale of Western-influenced opposition to the technology.

He will also accuse green groups such as the UN Environment Programme of agitating against new technologies on the basis of speculative risks, while ignoring potential benefits.

“For example, Friends of the Earth in 1999 worried that drought-tolerant crops may have the potential to grow in habitats unavailable to conventional crops. The priority of providing food to an area of the world in greatest need appears to not have been noted. For decades, approaches to international development have been dominated by this well-meaning but fatally flawed doctrine.”

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