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There is a good deal of reason why we should be perturbed with the rather flippant manner in which the Minister of Science and Technology, Mrs. Grace Ekpikwre, is treating the issue of the introduction of Genetically Modified Crops (GM crops) into Nigeria's agrarian system.

At a two-day round-table meeting with stakeholders on the subject recently, the Minister clearly jumped the gun in announcing that, "the meeting is intended to produce a blueprint for the introduction of Genetically Modified crops into Nigeria. It is therefore essential that you are part of this important effort of developing a road-map for the introduction of GM crops in Nigeria." The Minister, as we can see, has already come to the conclusion that GM crops are good for the country.

Whatever is the personal opinion of Mrs. Ekpikwre, the issues at stake pertaining to GM crops are of such magnitude that there must be wide ranging public debate and indeed a public enquiry with internationally acclaimed experts and relevant committees of the National Assembly involved, examining the pros and cons. In the first place, the Minister was wrong making such a categorical statement without establishing whether there was a supportive legislation on the subject or not. From the facts before us, there is no such law to back the position stated by the Minister.

Decisions on the subject would be momentous and of such lasting and indeed irreversible effect that they cannot be left to the whims of a public functionary. In this instance, it is obvious that the Minister has a closed mind on the issue thereby precluding vigorous public debate. A serious root and branch evaluation and debate as to whether there is a need for GM-Crops in the country is absolutely essential and it will be against the interest of the country and its 140 million odd stakeholders to truncate such an important discourse.

The issue of global food insecurity and spate of food riots in some countries cannot be used to stampede the nation into taking a hasty decision it might come to regret, "....before the end of the year." Many concerned Nigerian citizens as well as a plethora of environmental

groups have called into question, correctly in our opinion, the criteria used to assemble those who took part in the 'stakeholders meeting.' How were the 'stakeholders' chosen? What was the criteria? How representative are they of public opinion, desires and thought? The modus operandi itself leads to suspicion. The venue of the meeting belongs to the estate of the late maximum ruler, Sani Abacha and the funding was provided by a private bank, according to the reports.

This is of course a classic case of putting the cart way ahead of the horse. Before the Minister does much damage, the National Assembly and The Presidency must come into the picture. Popular participation and a no-holds-barred debate are crucial and cannot be replaced by meetings held by a cabal at a secret location.

Who is going to benefit from the introduction of GM crops in Nigeria? And at what cost? The health and well being of the Nigerian people cannot be of great concern to the Biotechnology giants peddling their wares in the eternal pursuit of markets. For a start, the merchants of GM crops and foods should explain why Nigeria should embrace their produce when these have been proven to be unsafe by experts in their own countries, whose laws require appropriate labelling to guide the public as to their nature.

Here in Nigeria, Environmental Rights Action (ERA), for one, has pointed out that GM crops, apart from health concerns, cause environmental harm, thrive only on toxic chemicals and remain patented products of multinational corporations. By the very notion of genetic modification, the processes involved in this mode of crop production entail alteration of the ecosystem, with potentially grave consequences for the environment and humans.

As we can see there are critical areas of disagreement which is why public participation is essential. It is rather alarming that there are already reports that GM crops had been in our markets long before the authorities could even contemplate formulation of appropriate policies to deal with the issue. It is to be hoped that experiments are not already being conducted, not unlike, the infamous Pfizer experiments in Kano.

It is absolutely essential to recall that recent surveys have shown incontrovertibly that organically produced foods are the most preferred in the advanced economies. Organic foods command a premium in both internal and external markets. The demand for them is projected to grow in leaps and bounds in the decades ahead. We must, as part of an overall export strategy tap into this growing market

For this reason the Federal Government has a moral duty as well as a political responsibility to compel the Science and Technology Minister to re-examine the facts available on GM crops and seek the requisite expertise to guide the Ministry and Government on the subject. The National Assembly must also insist on its oversight function, as it helps to fashion out a vigorous examination of policy. As for the introduction of GM crops before the end of the year 2008, it is in the national interest to perish the thought.