

The Philippines bans some genetically modified foods

But golden rice could help thousands of nutrient-deficient children



Wasting a golden opportunity

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Greenpeace described it as a “monumental win”. Lauro Diego, a rice-farmer in the Philippines, sees it as a “triumph” against “genetic erosion”. But advocates of genetically modified (gm) foods say the decision could be disastrous for poor Filipinos. In April environmentalists convinced a court in the Philippines to ban golden rice, a gm food that had been approved for cultivation in 2021. Green groups claimed it could contaminate other crops. Their success could scupper a golden opportunity to feed the Philippines—and possibly Asia.

Most Asians eat white rice, which is not very nutritious. Partly as a result, around a sixth of Filipino children do not get enough vitamin a. This deficiency can contribute to blindness or premature death. One solution is to engineer the rice to include beta-carotene, a chemical precursor of vitamin a that turns kernels gold.

No serious scientific evidence suggests that golden rice, or any gm foodstuff, harms human health. America, Australia and New Zealand have ruled it safe. The golden-rice project is not run by greedy corporations—a common fear of anti-gm activists. It is managed by the Philippine government and the International Rice Research Institute (irri), an organisation based in the country. Some farmers were meant to receive free seeds. The first harvests, in 2022, produced more than 100 tonnes of rice, which mostly went to children at risk of vitamin-a deficiency. (This is still a tiny share of the 20m tonnes of rice cultivated in the country that year.)

Across Asia, gm crops for human consumption are not commonly grown. The Philippine ban, which also blocks cultivation of a gm aubergine, could set a precedent. Bangladesh, where a fifth of children are vitamin-a deficient, has been mulling whether to approve golden rice. Arif Hossain, a Bangladeshi biotech advocate, fears it will now be blocked. (Since 2013 farmers there have cultivated the aubergine banned in the Philippines. It is engineered to repel insects, and has improved yields while cutting insecticide use.)

Elsewhere in Asia governments are hesitant to upset farmers, often a powerful voting bloc. Indian farmers rail against gm foods; only gm cotton is grown in the country. Mr Diego says “farmers are not always included” in decisions on crops. He is part of masipag, a group in the Philippines that promotes “food sovereignty” and agriculture “led by farmers”. It argues that Filipinos can get more vitamin a by eating other foods, such as squash, than golden rice. Greenpeace says advocates have yet to show concrete evidence that gm crops would be in the best interests of Filipinos.

The Philippine government says the golden-rice ban will have “significant” implications for food security. For every year that golden-rice cultivation is delayed, thousands in Asia will die, says Matin Qaim, a researcher from the University of Bonn who sits on the Golden Rice Humanitarian Board, a pro-gm group.

Some 60% of the world’s people live in Asia. Food demand is rising as populations grow. Climate change is damaging harvests. gm crops, which in principle better resist droughts, heat and floods brought on by a warming planet, may save lives. ■

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