

African seed subject to exploitation

By [Michael Hamlyn](#)

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An international treaty designed to protect seeds from commercial exploitation is allegedly being violated by the US and Brazilian governments and a Texas university.

According to the Johannesburg-based African Centre for Biosafety a Tanzanian sorghum seed, held in trust under the treaty by the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) in India is being patented the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Brazilian Agricultural Research Corporation (Embrapa) and the Texas A&M University

The treaty - the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA), also known as "the Seed Treaty" - prohibits patent claims on varieties and genes of plants that are held in trust.

Mariam Mayet, director of ACB, said on Monday: "On the face of it, it appears as if the Seed Treaty has been violated.

"(It) is a new chapter in a long history of appropriation of African sorghum diversity by foreign interests."

A briefing paper by Edward Hammond published by the centre says that the gene which enables tolerance to aluminium toxicity in acid soils, which is a problem affecting parts of north America and Europe and as much as 30% of arable land in Latin America, East Asia and sub-Saharan Africa has strong commercial potential.

"Although it was only recently identified, the giant multinational Dow Chemical is already negotiating with the US government to license it.

"Japan's second largest paper products company has also expressed interest in buying access to it," Hammond said.

The gene (SbMATE) is not only useful in sorghum, but also may be used in other crops including genetically engineered (GE) maize, wheat, and rice as well a GE eucalyptus tree plantations.

"The SbMATE gene does not rightfully belong to the USDA, Embrapa, or Texas A&M, and those institutions must abandon their unjust claims to the Tanzanian gene," Hammond said.

"The institutions that are charged with protecting this resource must act to protect trust plants and genes from such claims.

"The genius of African farmers that is locked up in (international research) vaults and other seed banks cannot be allowed to be used to undermine diverse farming systems and earn profit for multinational corporations.

"These seed collections should rather serve the interests of African farmers, sustainable food production systems and the preservation and development of in situ genetic diversity.

"This does expressly not include the packaging of in trust genes and plants into patents and selling them to the highest bidder.

"Sorghum came from Africa and it remains vital for food security on the continent today. African sorghums have also historically, and to the present, been the foundation upon which the sorghum industries of the United States and other countries have depended".

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