

# Could Brexit Benefit Africa Through Science-Based Decisions on GMOs?

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Prime Minister Theresa May's recent visit to Kenya, South Africa and Nigeria was the latest in the United Kingdom's global diplomacy effort to secure strategic economic partnerships in preparation for the UK leaving the European Union (EU). In the first visit of a UK Prime Minister to Africa since 2013, a 29 person delegation of government and private sector representatives pursued May's goal of becoming Africa's biggest foreign investor within four years. As a result of the trip, trade and investment deals worth some 300 million GBP were announced, involving everything from automobile manufacturing and digital money transfer services to insurance and agricultural technology. Importantly, the UK also reached a deal with the Southern African Customs Union and Mozambique to facilitate trade and announced major investments in education and voluntary family planning for the future of African youth.

Trade between the UK and Africa already is worth 31 billion GBP annually. By 2050, a quarter of the world's consumers will be African. According to the Prime Minister, "With a shared passion for entrepreneurship, technology and innovation, now is the time for UK companies to strengthen their partnerships with Africa to boost jobs and prosperity both at home and overseas."

According to the African Agricultural Technology Foundation, 233 million Africans are either suffering from hunger or are malnourished; 32 million of these are under the age of five. While Africa's economy is driven by agriculture, farming continues to be largely at a subsistence level: 80 percent of the 51 million farmers are small holder farmers. Further, 95 percent of all farming in Africa is entirely dependent on rainfall. The challenge under these conditions is to increase food production by 50 to 70 percent by 2050 without destroying the environment. What will be required is a combination of increasingly sophisticated farming techniques (e.g. precision farming), precision breeding; improved stewardship; access to advancements achieved by modern biotechnology to increase drought tolerance, increase yield, and combat plant pests and diseases; and enabling regulatory policies and frameworks. Critical is the fact that more efficient agriculture directly translates into freeing women and children to pursue other economic activities and/or education.

On the eve of May's state visits, her government released the first set of notices to businesses and citizens to prepare for the possibility of the UK exiting the EU at the end of March 2019 without a deal in place. Consistent with the approach taken for medicines and other sectors, the notice on developing genetically modified organisms (GMOs) confirms that existing UK laws implementing the key EU regulations on environmental release and marketing of GMOs, with limited revisions to reflect the new reality of the UK as a third country vis-à-vis the EU, will continue to apply post-Brexit. The notice also clarifies that current EU market approvals for cultivation of GM crops, which today are limited to an insect-resistant maize and five varieties of carnations that may be sold as cut flowers, will continue to be recognized until their expirations. The notice states that the approved insect-resistant maize is not being grown in the UK and that this is not expected to change. The basis for

this prediction is not clear. Going forward, GMO products could be exported from the UK to the EU only if approved by the EU; and from the EU to the UK only if approved by the UK.

If the UK leaves the EU without an agreement in place, decisions on marketing applications would necessarily be taken within the UK rather than by the EU. Discussions are ongoing as to whether decisions would be made jointly at the UK level or by each devolved nation separately. The UK has clarified that “the same [EU] risk assessment process will be applied” and, as is the case now, GMO approvals both for trials and for marketing would be granted only if “a risk assessment shows human health and the environment will not be compromised.”

What is interesting to consider in a post-Brexit world, is the potential for the UK and the EU to reach contrary decisions on GMO applications despite using the same risk assessment process. Put another way, would the UK’s traditional insistence on science and risk-based decision-making result in positive decisions on the same dossiers that continue to be blocked in the EU by the precautionary principle and politics?

Traditionally, Africa has followed closely the EU’s GM policies to preserve its possibility to sell to the EU market. Increasingly, however, there are signals that Africa is charting its own course based on science, evidence and its longer term interests. Already a decade ago, the AU High-Level African Panel on Modern Biotechnology concluded in its “Freedom to Innovate” (2008) report that “agricultural biotechnology holds the promise of improving food security, and better nutrition. AU member states must invest in agricultural biotechnology to address long-term issues such as nutrient deficiency, and needed improvements to overall agricultural productivity”. Similar recommendations were made with regard to the use of biotechnology related to animals, fisheries, forests, health care, the environmental, and biofuels. The AU High-Level African Panel on Emerging Technologies continues to explore how new solutions and technologies might be deployed for even greater gains.

While Africa will take its own decisions, the question is whether independent decision-making on GMOs by the UK might benefit Africa and support advancement toward realization of its sustainable agriculture goals. In effect, a divergence in decisions on GMOs between the UK and the EU could reinforce and embolden those who already have concluded that every tool – including modern biotechnology – will be necessary to rise to the formidable challenges facing the continent.

Increased competition for trade with the African bloc could bring more benefits. In his annual State of the European Union speech to the European Parliament on 12 September, European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker called for creating a single EU-African trade and investment framework to bring up to 10 million jobs to Africa in the next five years. While the EU is still Africa’s main trading partner at 36 percent, trade with China has risen to 16 percent and, in future, a chunk of the EU trade will be trade with the UK.

Whether it occurs due to a hard Brexit in March 2019, in December 2021 following an agreed transition period, or at some later date, the UK almost certainly will be a third country vis-à-vis the EU in the near future. While there likely will be short term pain for the UK, the future could be quite interesting for Africa.