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A Legacy of Monsanto:
Should We Really Trust Them With Our Food Supply?

When I started this paper, I wanted to know more about Genetically Modified Foods (GMO's). What I did know was that I tried to avoid them in my own diet by only eating organic food; they are not required to be labeled; and they are grown in the US. Beyond that, I was not really aware of the extent to which GMO's have infiltrated our current food system. As I started researching GMO's, I kept reading references to the company Monsanto. I had heard of Monsanto before, but I just thought it was a California-based company. I had heard that it was the same company that produced and distributed Agent Orange, and I knew that it was a large Goliath of a corporation fighting for more GM crops. In some of my research, I also came across Monsanto's recent PR claim that GM food will feed the world's poor population and is more sustainable for the environment than regular agriculture. I realized that Monsanto is a big key to the debate on GM food. I decided I wanted to know more about Monsanto's history as a company. As I looked further into Monsanto specifically, the question of truth and accountability came to the forefront. Monsanto has been in existence since 1901, and in 110 years, has Monsanto proven itself to be a company that can be trusted with our food supply?

Many people have heard of Monsanto. Some people have negative reactions to the name and some have a positive reaction. Some people go out of their way to avoid Monsanto and some people seek them out. Their website heading says "Producing More, Conserving More, Improving Lives. That's sustainable agriculture. And that's what Monsanto is all about." Looking through their website further, I found their pledge. It is as follows: "The Monsanto Pledge is our commitment to how we do business. It is a declaration that compels us to listen more, to consider our actions and their impact broadly, and to lead responsibly. It helps us to

convert our values into actions, and to make clear who we are and what we champion" ("Our Pledge"). Under this pledge are listed these eight bullet points: Integrity, Dialogue, Transparency, Sharing, Benefits, Respect, Act as Owners to Achieve Results, and Create a Great Place to Work." After reading this pledge, one couldn't help but think that Monsanto is an ethical company that deserves our trust and support. Why then is there so much opposition to Monsanto?

"Integrity is the foundation for all we do. Integrity includes honesty, decency, consistency, and courage" ("Our Pledge"). Monsanto's history as a company includes anything but integrity. Their legacy includes the production of known carcinogens like PCB's, Dioxin, and Agent Orange, as well as Roundup, rBGH (recombinant bovine growth hormone), and GMO's (Robin). Beyond just producing these chemicals, Monsanto knowingly hid documentation that raised concerns about the safety of these chemicals. In the book *The World According to Monsanto*, Marie Monique Robin says, "Monsanto knew that PCBs presented serious health risk as early as 1937. But the company carried on regardless until the products were finally banned in 1977" (16). According to Ryan Stock, a journalist for *Truthout*, "the Vietnamese government claims that it (Agent Orange) killed or disabled 400,000 Vietnamese people, and 500,000 children were born with birth defects due to exposure to this deadly chemical." That number does not include all the American military members who were affected by the spraying of Agent Orange. Monsanto could argue that these incidents happened before they wrote this pledge. In fact, to distance themselves from such lack of integrity, they claim that they are "a relatively new company" ("Monsanto Company History"). They go on to say "while we share the name and history of a company that was founded in 1901, the Monsanto of today is focused on agriculture and supporting farmers around the world in their mission to produce more while conserving more. We're an agriculture company" ("Monsanto Company History"). They share the same name and history of a company founded in 1901, but they are a relatively new company? Sounds like just a fancy way of trying to distance themselves from chemical tragedies like PCBs

and Agent Orange. If they really wanted to be a new company, why keep the name Monsanto? I also take issue with Monsanto's claim that they are an agriculture company. This is just another way of trying to distance the organization from their previous business motto of "without chemicals, life itself would be impossible" (Stock).

Another bullet point in Monsanto's Pledge is "Sharing: We will share knowledge and technology to advance scientific understanding, to improve agriculture and the environment, to improve crops, and to help farmers in developing countries." Monsanto's actual practices do not include sharing or helping farmers in developing countries. Monsanto has been busy buying up seed companies and patenting their GM seeds. They have "almost 650 seed patents" (Bell). Patenting seeds means that Monsanto owns the seeds and the rights to them. For farmers, this means that they cannot harvest the seeds from one season to the next. They often are in a contractual agreement to buy GM seeds every year. GM seeds are more expensive than conventional seeds. In countries like India, the farmers are convinced to buy the more expensive GM seeds with promises of higher yields and more profits. Many farmers borrow money to buy the more expensive GM seeds, but if their crops fail (as they can do), the farmers have no backup plan. In India, many of these farmers see suicide as their only option out of their debt. This puts the farmer in a vicious cycle of having to buy more expensive GM seeds every year, with no guarantee that the crop will not fail (Malone).

Another example of Monsanto not sharing and helping farmers in developing countries is Order 81, which "mandates that Iraq's commercial-scale farmers must now purchase "registered" seeds. Monsanto is far and away the most significant player in the registered seed market" (Roberts). How does "forcing Iraq's farmers to use GM seeds, and then [...] declaring natural seeds an infringement on Monsanto technology" (Roberts) fit into helping farmers in developing countries? They are not giving these farmers a choice. They are probably worried that if they do give them a choice, the farmers will reject the GM seeds like they did in Haiti. In April 2010, Monsanto donated 60,000 seed sacks to the Haitian government to offer aid in the

aftermath of the devastating earthquake. These seeds were "hybrid corn seeds and vegetable seeds, some of them treated with highly toxic pesticides" (Bell). The Haitian government accepted these seeds, but the local farmers did not. The local farmers are trying to be independently sustainable. If they open the doors to genetically modified crops, they will be dependent on the companies, like Monsanto, who own these seeds and their patents. In terms of Order 81, it comes down to the fact that Iraqi farmers are not even given a choice as to whether or not they want to farm with GM seeds. Sharing does not mean forcing your product on someone.

Another bullet point in Monsanto's Pledge is "Transparency: We will ensure that information is available, accessible, and understandable" ("Our Pledge"). Transparency means that if people want to know if the food they are eating is Genetically Modified, they can find that information out. That is not the case in this country. The only way to avoid eating GM food is to eat organically. Under current organic standings, GM food cannot be organic. Other countries including the members of the European Union, Australia, Japan, and New Zealand require labeling of GM foods. Such practices present a problem for countries (like us) that grow GM crops. Since the United States does not require labeling of GM crops, GM crops are mixed together with non-GM crops, unless they are organic crops. If we want to export our corn and soybeans to countries that require GM food to be labeled, we need to figure out a GM labeling system (Schmidt). "Some stakeholders claim that labeling would go a long way toward assuring consumers that they have a choice in whether to consume such products, although studies have shown consumers are likely to avoid GM items labeled as such" (Schmidt). It does not seem like GM food is going anywhere, so instead of fighting the opponents of GM food by trying to sneak it into our food supply, label it and let consumers be able to make the choice for themselves. This would make Monsanto's claim of transparency an actuality, not just a PR statement.

If Monsanto is as great of a company as it claims to be, why does it seem like all their

efforts are put toward cleaning up their image from past travesties they never took responsibility for; patenting and coercing farmers worldwide to use their seeds; and hiding their products from the consumers by not labeling their GM products? If Monsanto really is as great of a company as they would like us all to believe, then they would be proud to put their name on their products and label the fruits of their labor. When you look at Monsanto's actual business practices I do not see a "relatively new agricultural company" ("Company History"). I see a chemical company from 1901, with a horrendous history including lack of human concern, lack of environmental concern, and covering up their tracks. All the while continuing to make a large profit. I see a company with the same name and the same business practices held over 100 years ago. The only difference I see is that they have spent a large amount of money to portray an image as far from their actuality as possible. When I think of the current power and control that Monsanto has over the world's food supply, I think we all need to really consider if we trust Monsanto to feed the world. I know I don't.

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