

Editorial:
A March to a Better Future for Africa's Poor?
The Introduction of Bt Cotton in Burkina Faso

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The global food crisis has sharpened attention on how to improve conditions for the poor in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), where the impacts of this crisis have been most acute. In 2008 more food riots engulfed major SSA cities than any other region in the world (Moseley 2008). Many experts suggest that increasing agricultural productivity—primarily via the adoption of controversial genetically engineered crops (GECs)—would blunt the impact of the food crisis by improving food availability and boosting rural incomes (e.g., Paarlberg 2008).

Until 2007 only the regional heavyweight South Africa had adopted GECs. Yet in 2008, Burkina Faso became the second SSA country to commercially adopt GECs with the planting of 8,500 hectares of Bt cotton.¹ Experts laud the possibly trend-setting decision as one that will boost revenues for poor producers (e.g., Vitale et al. 2007; 2008) providing greater security against rising food and energy costs. A successful adoption of Bt cotton in Burkina Faso could potentially usher in a new era of GE crops throughout SSA.

But will Bt cotton boost yields and profits? Will any gains be shared among producers of all socio-economic backgrounds? Or will Bt cotton adoption primarily benefit more highly-capitalized producers to the neglect or detriment of poor producers? Could the increased financial risk associated with more expensive Bt cotton seeds drive poor producers away from cotton production altogether? This could be disastrous since credit given by the cotton company is the primary access to fertilizers for food production. This would have the double effect of potentially eliminating what is often rural producers' primary source of income—cotton production—and decreasing food production among the poor and most vulnerable due to a reduction in access to fertilizers.

Reports analyzing other Bt cotton-adopting countries in the global South indicate higher average cotton yields, a decrease in overall pesticide use and an increase in average profits (e.g., Qaim and Zilberman