
1.) FAO Declares War on Farmers Not on Hunger (An open letter to Mr. Jacques Diouf, Director General of FAO)

http://www.grain.org/nfg/?id=180

28 May 2004

Dear Mr Diouf,

We, the undersigned organisations, movements and individuals involved in farming and agricultural issues, wish to express our outrage and disagreement with the FAO report released Monday, May 17th ("Agricultural biotechnology: meeting the needs of the poor?"). This report has been used in a politically-motivated public relations exercise to support the biotechnology industry. It promotes the genetic engineering of seeds and the further skewing of research funding towards this technology and away from ecologically sound methods developed by farmers. The way in which the report has been prepared and released to the media, sadly, raises serious questions about the independence and intellectual integrity of an important United Nations agency. The report turns FAO away from food sovereignty and the real needs of the world's farmers, and is a stab in the back to the farmers and the rural poor FAO is meant to support.
We are deeply disappointed that FAO has breached its commitment (and your own personal pledge) to consult and maintain an open dialogue with smallholder farmers' organizations and civil society. By failing to consult such organizations in the preparation of this report FAO has turned its back on those who are most directly affected by the technologies it promotes.
Rather than recommending the strengthening of the role of smallholder farmers in the management of their agricultural biodiversity and improvement of crops vital to their livelihoods, which some of FAO's field work actively and successfully promotes, this report proposes a technological "fix" of crops critical to the food security of marginalized peoples - calling for the development of transgenic cassava, potato, cowpea, millet and teff.
Hunger in the world is growing again despite the fact that global per capita food production has been higher than ever before. Issues of access and distribution are far more important than technology. If we have learned anything from the failures of the Green Revolution, it is that technological 'advances' in crop genetics for seeds that respond to external inputs go hand in hand with increased socio-economic polarization, rural and urban impoverishment, and greater food insecurity. The tragedy of the Green Revolution lies precisely in its narrow technological focus that ignored the far more important social and structural underpinnings of hunger. The technology strengthened the very structures that enforce hunger. A new 'gene revolution' will only exacerbate the worst errors of the Green Revolution. Has FAO learned nothing?

History demonstrates that structural changes in access to land, food, and political power - combined with robust, ecological technologies via farmer-led research - reduce hunger and poverty. The 'gene revolution' promises to take us in the opposite direction. It is based on astronomically costly, elite, industry-dominated research using patented technologies. The same resources, if directed to farmer-led, participatory research networks, would generate far more equitable, productive and ecologically sound technologies.

Although the 200-plus page document struggles to appear neutral, it is highly biased and ignores available evidence of the adverse ecological, economic, and health impacts of genetically engineered crops. For example, the report bluntly states that transgenic crops have delivered large economic benefits to farmers and helped reduce the use of pesticides. This assertion is based on field data from a highly selective set of studies of Bt cotton. Contradictory research is ignored. The data used from India are based exclusively on field trials conducted by Monsanto in 2001. The report ignores data collected from farmers' fields by several state governments and other independent researchers during the 2002 season (the year Bt cotton was released). These show that Bt cotton failed. The small, inconclusive studies of Bt cotton in Mexico, Argentina and South Africa are disingenuously used to bolster support for transgenic cotton varieties. Reference to another study suggesting benefits for cotton farmers in Burkina Faso and Mali concludes without much of a base that West Africa - already under unjustifiable trade pressures - will lose millions of dollars if they do not embrace Bt cotton.

Although the FAO report does mention that genetic engineering is dominated by corporations, it overlooks the fact that only one company - Monsanto - owns the GM seed technology sown over 90% of the total world area sown to transgenics. Five companies make up virtually 100% of the transgenic seed market. This represents an unprecedented dependence of farmers on global agribusiness that FAO should view with alarm and for which FAO should propose alternatives. Just proposing that more public research funding is dedicated to it, is not a solution. More investment in this technology - as the FAO recommends - will inevitably increase corporate monopoly control over the world's food supply. Impoverished countries will be forced to accept patent laws, contracts and trade regimes that weaken their internal capacity to fight hunger. Four days after your report was published, the Supreme Court of Canada shamefully sided with Monsanto against Canadian farmers Percy and Louise Schmeiser simply because the corporation's patented seed contaminated their farm. In a number of countries contamination is already resulting in cases where farmers are threatened or prosecuted because genetically engineered pollen blew in their field!

The more farmers are dependent on the biotech industry, the fewer options they will have to support and further develop their own farming and livelihood systems. It is unacceptable that FAO endorses the need for intellectual property for corporations. This amounts to FAO support for corporate biopiracy since the genetic resources that corporations seek to patent result from the collective breeding work of farmers over thousands of years.

Genetic contamination is polluting the very heart of the world's centres of crop diversity. Yet FAO brushes aside this tragedy with hardly a comment. Yet, for the very cultures that created agriculture this is an aggression against their life, against the crops they created and nurture, and against their food sovereignty. For several decades the FAO has been leading an international debate to address the issue of genetic erosion. With the advent of genetic engineering the threat of erosion has increased. As the normative

intergovernmental institution for genetic resources, FAO should be developing policies to prevent genetic erosion and take action to address the negative global implications. We are stunned to find that, to prevent gene contamination (while protecting corporate monopoly), the report supports the absurd option of using Terminator technology, a technology that would prevent farmers from saving and re-using harvested seed. Farmers' organizations, civil society organizations, many governments and scientific institutions have condemned this technology. As Director General of FAO, you stated in 2000 that FAO was against genetic seed sterilization. Incredibly, your report endorses a technology that would risk the food supply of the 1.4 billion people who depend upon farm-saved seed around the world.

These biases, omissions and unsubstantiated conclusions turn this report into a disgraceful public relations tool for the biotech industry and for those countries that seek to export this technology. It is an insult to those FAO member governments that, courageously, have been resisting industry and political pressure and who are developing viable alternatives for long-term seed security and food sovereignty. It is a rejection of the efforts of those scientists and policy makers - some within FAO - who have contributed to the new participatory technology development, agro-ecological methodologies, sustainable productivity and other approaches that put the role and rights of farmers first.

We believe that FAO has broken its commitment to civil society and peasants' organizations to consult on issues of common concern. There was no consultation with smallholder farmers' organisations, yet there appears to have been extensive discussion with industry. For those of us in civil society organisations and social movements that considered the FAO as an institution that we could relate to and a forum to debate these issues and possibly move forward, this is a tremendous setback. Farmers and civil society organizations will meet and consult in the coming months to determine what further actions should be taken regarding FAO and the negative repercussions of this report.

Yours Sincerely,

(people and organisations signing on)

Dear friends & colleagues,

A few of us around the world have taken the initiative to draft an open letter to the Director General of FAO to express our disagreement with the report "Agricultural biotechnology: meeting the needs of the poor?" that FAO launched on 17th May - an unprecedented move by FAO's publicity machine in support of genetic engineering.

We invite everybody (individuals and organisations) to sign-on to the letter.

To sign on, please send an email to openletterfao@grain.org indicating your name, your organisation and your country. Please indicate whether you sign-on personally or in the name of your organisation. The deadline for signing-on is Monday 7th June.

Thanks for your support!

René Segbenou, Coalition pour la Protection du Patrimoine Génétique Africain, Côte d'Ivoire
Elfrieda Pschorn-Strauss, Biowatch, South Africa
Sarojeni Rengam, Pesticides Action Network Asia and the Pacific, Malasia
Elisabeth Bravo, Red por una América Latina Libre de Tansgénicos, Ecuador
ETC Group
Patrick Mulvany, ITDG, United Kingdom
Henk Hobbelink, GRAIN, Spain

FAO's press release about the report can be read at:
http://www.fao.org/newsroom/en/news/2004/41714/index.html
The full report can be downloaded from:
http://www.fao.org/docrep/006/Y5160E/Y5160E00.HTM

2.) Biotechnology: FAO response to open letter from NGOs

http://www.fao.org/newsroom/en/news/2004/46429/print_friendly_version.html

16 June 2004 -- FAO Director-General Jacques Diouf responded today to criticism from non-governmental organizations on FAO's recent report on biotechnology.

16 June 2004, Rome -- FAO Director-General Dr Jacques Diouf has sent the following letter to NGOs in response to their criticism of FAO's recent State of Food and Agriculture report.

It has come to my attention that an open letter addressed to me is circulating on the internet for signature by NGOs and other members of civil society. This open letter appears to be in response to misleading press headlines and a mistaken interpretation of FAO's recent report, "Agricultural biotechnology: meeting the needs of the poor?" in the 2003-04 issue of The State of Food and Agriculture.

Those of you who have seen this open letter are urged to read my speech introducing the report and the report itself, rather than relying on secondary interpretations of this very important and complex subject. Therefore, I am transmitting to you the full text of my speech. The full report is available in Arabic, Chinese, English, French and Spanish at http://www.fao.org/documents/index.asp . Readers are further asked to consider that while this report emphasizes biotechnology, it is not meant to represent all components of FAO's broad mandate and commitment to promote agricultural development and alleviate hunger.

The open letter mentions several points that require clarification regarding FAO's working methods and our position on agricultural biotechnology, particularly transgenic crops.

1. The State of Food and Agriculture has been published every year since 1947. The report examines key developments in food and agriculture at the global, regional and national levels and provides in-depth analysis of important issues shaping food and agriculture. It reflects the views of the most known specialists of Member States on the subject. FAO has always respected scientific viewpoints in its reports but, as is always the case in controversial subjects, there are differences of opinion.

2. As regards biotechnology, I should point out that FAO's position is determined by its competent statutory bodies under the guidance of the FAO Conference and of Summits of Heads of State and Government. For instance:

* The FAO/WHO Codex Alimentarius has agreed on the principles and guidelines for assessing health risks related to foods derived from modern biotechnology. Foods derived from the GM crops currently being grown have been evaluated according to existing procedures for risk assessment and have been deemed to be safe to eat. However, the absence of evidence of harm to human health from the consumption of foods derived from GMOs is not a guarantee that they are completely safe; therefore FAO recommends continued monitoring and refinement of risk assessment procedures;
* The FAO/WHO Codex Alimentarius Ad Hoc Intergovernmental Task Force on Foods Derived from Biotechnology, open to all Member Nations is the body responsible at international level to elaborate standards, guidelines or other principles, as appropriate, for foods derived from biotechnology;
* FAO has recently published the guidelines adopted by the 130 Members of the International Plant Protection Convention for pest-risk analysis for living modified organisms. Such agreements can help harmonize regulatory procedures globally.

3. As far as food sovereignty is concerned, FAO negotiated for 7 years to arrive at the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources which will become operational on 29 June 2004. This treaty recognizes, for the first time at the international level, farmers' rights and the rights of countries originating genetic resources. Further, under FAO's umbrella, genetic resources for food and agriculture are conserved at the international level by the international agricultural research centres of the CGIAR. FAO also assists developing countries to conserve their national genetic resources in situ and in vitro.

In the above context, I would also mention that, in the Declaration adopted at the World Food Summit: five years later (WFS: fyl) in June 2002, the Heads of State and Government reaffirmed "the right of everyone to have access to safe and nutritious food". Under the initiative of the FAO Council, an Intergovernmental Working Group has been established to develop a set of voluntary guidelines to support effective policies and measures for the right to adequate food.

4. Regarding the fight against hunger, the 1996 World Food Summit committed FAO Members to reducing by half the number of hungry persons in the world by 2015. In speeches, interviews, and press conferences, I have always reflected the discussions of the WFS, by indicating that the lack of political will and of mobilization of financial

resources are the main obstacle to meeting this goal. Implementation of concrete projects in poor communities in rural and peri-urban areas are the priority for ensuring food production, employment and income, and thus achieving sustainable food security. These projects should emphasize:

* small water harvesting, irrigation and drainage works (wells, canals, impoundments, treadle pumps, etc.). The other FAO annual report, The State of Food Insecurity 2003, indicated that 80% of food crises are related in some way to water, especially to drought. Yet Africa, for example, only uses 1.6% of its available water resources for irrigation.
* the use of improved seeds and seedlings, particularly those issued from the Green Revolution and conventional plant breeding and tissue culture; the combination of organic and chemical fertilizer in soils that are no longer placed under fallow and are now depleted due to population pressure and clearly deficient in plant-available phosphorus; the integrated biological control of pests, insects and plant diseases without making excessive use of pesticides and complying with the PIC Agreement negotiated under the auspices of UNEP and FAO; and simple post-harvest technologies;
* diversification of village and household farming systems, with the introduction of short-cycle animal production (poultry, sheep, goats, pigs) and the provision of feed, vaccine and shelter; artisanal fisheries and small-scale aquaculture;
* the construction of rural roads, local markets and storage and packing facilities, meeting quality and sanitary standards;
* the negotiation of more equitable terms for international agricultural trade.

I have always maintained that GMOs are not needed to achieve the World Food Summit objective: improved seeds and plant material generated by international agricultural research centres, particularly within the framework of the Green Revolution and by national research systems, including hybrids and varieties from inter-specific breeding are barely used by the smallholders of the Third World.

In the meantime, I have always drawn attention to the need to feed a world population that will increase from a current six billion people to nine billion in 2050, requiring a 60% increase in food production, while expanding the arable land area is becoming increasingly unfeasible because urbanization, industrial expansion and transport infrastructure is encroaching upon rural land and deforestation and the cultivation of fragile ecosystems are causing soil degradation. Such a situation will require intensified cultivation, higher yields and greater productivity.

With this in mind, we will have to use the scientific tools of molecular biology, in particular the identification of molecular markers, genetic mapping and gene transfer for more effective plant enhancement, going beyond the phenotype-based methods. Decisions on the rules and utilization of these techniques must however be taken at the international level by competent bodies such as the Codex Alimentarius.

The developing countries should not only take part in the decision-making, but should also develop their scientific capacity and master the necessary expertise and techniques so that they can understand the implications and make independent choices in order to reach an international consensus on issues that concern all of humanity.

FAO provides support to the countries of the Third World to this end and will continue to do so.

Finally, in contrast to the Green Revolution which was generated by international public research and provided national research systems with improved genetic material, at no expense, biotechnology research is essentially driven by the world's top ten transnational corporations, which are spending annually US$3 billion.

By comparison, the CGIAR system, the largest international public sector supplier of agricultural technologies for developing countries has a total annual budget of less than US$300 million. The private sector protects its results with patents in order to earn from its investment and it concentrates on products that have no relevance to food in developing countries.

FAO, in accordance with its mandate, will continue to provide a framework for ensuring a dialogue on these issues at the international level. Such a dialogue should be based on sound scientific principles allowing the analysis of socio-economic implications as well as sanitary and environmental issues.

For the sake of transparency, I would be grateful if you would post this reply on your internet site.

Yours sincerely,

Jacques Diouf

Related links

* The State of Food and Agriculture 2003-04
  http://www.fao.org/docrep/006/Y5160E/Y5160E00.HTM
* Open NGO letter to FAO
  http://www.grain.org/front_files/fao-open-letter-june-2004-final-en.pdf
* Biotechnology: meeting the needs of the poor?
  http://www.fao.org/newsroom/en/focus/2004/41655/index.html
* FAO's Web site on biotechnology in food and agriculture
  http://www.fao.org/biotech/index.asp?lang=en