

**MUNLOCHY GM VIGIL RESPONSE TO THE DRAFT REPORT FOR
COMMENT - JUNE 2003**

(The Use of Genetically Modified Crops in Developing Countries – Nuffield Council on Bioethics – A follow-up discussion paper to the 1999 report *Genetically modified crops: the ethical and social issues.*)

Much of the draft shows a lack of evident input from underdeveloped countries. The question that must be asked of this follow-up discussion paper is, must its relevance to a developing discourse be found in solely aspirational scenarios for GM crops which are projections of wishful thinking based entirely on first world perspectives? The report reads very much as if it were predicated on the supposition that GM crops will be good for underdeveloped countries. Attempts to cover all the angles of anticipated counter-arguments to this hypothesis are little more than conciliatory balancing acts of a half-hearted rationality.

Colonial and post-colonial patronage is unfortunately not corrected by “The council felt it was important not to neglect perspectives of developing countries.....” (page v), when such perspectives are absent from the main text and footnotes. At this stage it would be useful for the Council on Bioethics to look at a recent study of Africa from the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex, which has surveyed all the current empirical data as opposed to speculative aspirations (*Genetically Modified Crops and Sustainable Poverty Alleviation in Sub-Saharan Africa: An Empirical Assessment of Current Evidence* – Aaron de Grassi, 2003).

On page ix, in the Executive Summary, “We therefore affirm the recommendation made in our 1999 report that genuinely additional resources be committed by governments, the European commission and others, to find a major expansion of public gm related research into tropical and sub-tropical staple foods, suitable for the needs of small-scale farmers” as distinct presumably from monies entering other areas to stimulate markets and economic benefits. And why haven’t biotech companies been interested in this area of research?

The impact of European regulations on GM crops (page x) says little about the actual impact of EU and US crop and food subsidies on the economic development in the countries under discussion, by far the greatest cause of imbalance and insufficient self-determination for their economies and agricultural sectors. The text does however appear to be conveying an effort to project a sense of guilt in order to relax EU GM regulations from the periphery.

Whilst the report comments in the Executive Summary on the unacceptability of the introduction of gm crops into any country through grain from food aid being sown, and this is welcome, the recommendations made about food aid in general are elitist, patronising and extremely one-sided.

Again, this is reflected in the introduction (page 1) where it is stated that “Many....are unconvinced about the risks of GMcrops”. This is blatantly false on any standard of measurement into social attitudes in general and more specialist attitudes and assessments in particular.

The case of Argentina could have been examined more thoroughly in the report, especially since the economic crisis has meant food aid in the form of GM soya being consumed without choice in soup kitchens in the vulnerable urban areas, a fact which the bioethics committee ought really to follow-up. (See *Soya Solidarity or Food Apartheid? The Business of Hunger in Argentina* – Blackwell and Stefanoni, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, no.44, Feb 2003)

Going into the socio-economic context (the role of agriculture in developing countries), the report’s recognition that countries such as India with aggregate surpluses of food whilst people remain unable to afford enough to eat (because of a lack of cash through underemployment and unemployment) is a crucial observation. It is also worth bearing in mind that at the same time there is a huge demand for organic, labour-intensive quality produce. The types and the varieties of crops grown not only affects income levels, but also the levels of nourishment or under-nourishment. Dumping unwanted food aid rather than cash is one thing, dumping narrow and unwanted agricultural systems is quite another.

The Green Revolution has done much to adversely affect the quality of the soil. Costly technological treadmills do this and reduce the demand in the agricultural labour market. These trends and the overall patterns of increasing landlessness have to be more rigorously incorporated into the bioethical scenarios.

Section 3 contains many fair-weather assumptions about genetic modification and nature, at times resounding with an audible clunk: “Since the genetic code is universal, genes from one organism can generally work in any other organism” and “Once transferred, transgenes behave like any other gene and can be managed further in a conventional breeding programme” (page 14). Such statements are undermined over the page where strict monitoring is recommended for GMcrops as well as conventionally bred crops. One corollary of this is that an insufficiency of relevant data should not be used to pursue speculation about naturalness and unnaturalness into

philosophical dead-ends, converting empirical assessments into, as it were, imperial assessments.

In the report's noted risks associated with the benefits of a list of protean, early stage GM crops, the question about achieving the same end by other means is asked correctly. The Report should do more to rigorously examine priorities, costs and benefits. To run into logistical and political challenges, as the Report does in section 4, only to leave them dangling is not thorough enough; it is here that the perspectives and voices from the underdeveloped world need to be represented.

To omit the impact of subsidised cotton and food and feed products exported from the US and EU is plainly crass. To then suggest pushing an expensive set of experiments from the first to the third world where credit is in short supply and risk management mechanisms a long way off, seems to be not only crass but dangerously irresponsible. For the Report to then proceed imperiously through the precautionary principle to an endorsement of the safety of GM foods, in the light of the real lack of any health testing whatsoever, suggests a thoroughly unethical approach, sailing like missionaries on a pirate ship. And if European consumers remain sceptical why should the underdeveloped world want to grow, export or eat GMOs? Because a consortium of biotech companies can adeptly lobby a US administration into a world trade war, backed by a UK administration hanging onto its coat-tails, and blackmail the world with the threat of starvation? What kind of shameful ethical stance is that?

The Report certainly attempts to ameliorate these sorts of implications by counter-balancing acts: "Few areas remain in Africa or even Latin America, where farm land can be expanded without significantly lower returns than are obtained on existing land, or intensification of fragile lands (for example, converting grazing to maize in parts of Southern Africa; shortening fallows in shifting cultivation in parts of West Africa)" (page 75) – as well as, it could be added, considerations of land distribution and the priorities for growing new and old varieties of staple crops with locally driven agendas determined locally.

To conclude: the policy threads set out in the Report, with an early plea for a non-polarised, rational discussion, have naively followed a tedious line of already long discredited and threadbare dominant discourses. Until the bioethics committee tackles this challenge and begins seriously and actively to include perspectives from the under-developed world, its work will remain marginal and only partially accomplished. Perhaps it could also change the balance of the working group, replacing those with a vested interest in gm products with experts who work on the ground in underdeveloped countries with a neutral stance and an open mind.

