

Genetic Futures in Food and Farming SEMINAR

SUMMARY REPORT

The ITDG¹ / UK Food Group seminar "Genetic Futures in Food and Farming" was held in London on 27th March 2002 in preparation for the Convention on Biological Diversity's sixth Conference of the Parties (CBD/COP 6).

The context of the seminar was the significant commercial and trades pressures on consumers to accept GM foods and on farmers to plant seeds produced by genetic engineering (GE) technologies protected by gene patents. News of the approval of GM cotton - cotton containing the insecticide-producing gene from *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt gene) - in India, two days earlier, gave added urgency to the seminar.

The news strengthened the call from the spokesperson at the seminar for Via Campesina, the international farmers' movement, to enforce a worldwide moratorium on GM crops and gene patents. Other speakers from scientific and civil society organisations at the seminar added their perspectives. The inclusion of the Bt gene in crops covering large areas of farm land will increase genetic uniformity, affect a broad range of insects both beneficial and harmful and hasten the build up of resistant pests. Secondly, the unknown effects of genetic modification on the genetic integrity of the genome argues for precaution until improved techniques and scientific advice are available. Thirdly, the widespread use of patented genes puts seeds and crop plants increasingly in the control of corporations, not farmers.

In addition to the focus on **GE technologies**, a purpose of the seminar was to build on other calls of farmers and Civil Society Organisations at the CBD's May 2000 meeting in Nairobi (COP 5) to put farmer-centred agricultural biodiversity and genetic resources policies at the heart of the CBD agenda, securing real benefits for poor rural communities. Such policies cover:

- **Agricultural Biodiversity's** sustainable use and conservation and the free flow of genetic resources for food and agriculture through the FAO Seed Treaty
- **Farmers' Rights** vs Intellectual Property Rights and Terminator and Genetic Use Restriction Technologies (GURTs)
- **Biosafety**, liability and redress vs pollution by GMOs, especially of centres of diversity and genebanks, unregulated exports of GMOs/ LMOs

Thus, one of the main conclusions of the seminar was that the Convention on Biological Diversity - the UN watchdog on these issues - at its April meeting in The Hague (CBD/COP 6) should reinforce the importance of diversity, take a tough line on the spread of GM crops, patenting, GURTs and pollution, and reassert the Precautionary Principle with respect to the development and use of genetic engineering technologies.

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In more detail, the 6th Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity should resolve to:

- Promote Farmers' Rights to their resources, knowledge, technology choices and production systems as internationally inalienable rights
- Keep genetic resources for food and agriculture in the public domain and support rapid ratification of the FAO International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture
- Protect Centres of Diversity, genebanks and the agricultural landscape from contamination by genetically engineered crops and other organisms
- Call for an international moratorium on the field testing and commercial use of GMOs and reinforce adherence to the Precautionary Principle
- Ban the development and use of Genetic Use Restriction Technologies (GURTs) and especially Terminator Technologies
- Redirect agricultural research and development towards agroecological production
- Protect local markets that support agriculturally diverse local production
- Ensure corporate accountability and liability for biosafety.

At the seminar, speakers from Via Campesina, the Dutch Gene Bank, FIELD, GeneWatch, ODI, Find your Feet, ITDG, ActionAid and GEN examined the context, progress, opportunities and threats for taking forward these issues through presentations and discussions on:

- the sustainable use and conservation of agricultural biodiversity for food, livelihood security and the environment, promoted by formal sector genebanks, farmers and CSOs;
- the scope and ratification of the FAO Seed Treaty and promotion of a global genetic commons treaty;
- sharing of benefits from the use of genetic resources for food and agriculture;
- maintenance of the genetic integrity of Centres of Crop Diversity and international gene banks;
- enforcement of an international moratorium on GM crop releases and gene patents;
- mobilisation of farmers and Civil Society to resist corporate, WTO and market pressures to accept GE technologies and patents; and
- ways of advancing the CBD agenda on these matters.

The full agenda and illustrated notes on the presentations are available at www.ukabc.org/GeneticFutures/

This Seminar formed part of the UK Food Group Sustainable Agriculture working group's programme and ITDG's Sustaining Life and Livelihoods Campaign.

ITDG is an international non-governmental organisation that supports peoples' development and use of appropriate technologies to sustain livelihoods and the environment. ITDG works with communities and organisations in Africa, Asia and Latin America. URL: www.itdg.org

The UK Food Group is a network of non-governmental organisations from a broad range of development, farming, consumer and environment organisations in the UK, who share a common concern for global food security. Through awareness raising activities it promotes sustainable and equitable food security policies. URL: www.ukfg.org.uk