BIOTECHNOLOGY AND GMO COMMISSION AT THE GLOBAL FORUM AT NASREC
Thursday, 29 August 2002, 10.30 am – 1.30 pm

Section 1: Situational Analysis
Biotechnology is a broad and inclusive term for all technologies that manipulate biological processes. Modern biotechnology or genetic engineering, however, is the subject of great controversy as it involves the horizontal (as opposed to vertical, from parent to offspring) transfer of foreign genes to unrelated species that would never normally interbreed in nature. There is great concern about its impacts on human, plant and animal health, the environment and our ecosystems. There is also great concern about the socio-economic impacts of genetic engineering, particularly in terms of the monopolistic corporate control over agricultural production systems, and the job losses that will ensue through genetic engineering.

Global concern over genetic engineering resulted in the negotiations and final conclusion of the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, an international agreement to regulate primarily the movement between countries of GMOs. The right of countries to make decisions based on risk assessment and the Precautionary Principle has been enshrined in the Biosafety Protocol.

The Commission was hosted by Biowatch, South Africa and Third World Network. Speakers at the Commission were Dr Vandana Shiva, Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Environment; India, Silvia Ribeiro, ETC Group, Mexico; Prof. Terje Traavik, Norwegian Institute of Gene Ecology; Percy Schmeiser, farmer from Canada; and Fred Kalibwani, a farmer from PELUM, Zimbabwe.

Section 2: Priority Issues
- Patenting of seed and enforcement of intellectual property rights by companies on seed (case study of Percy Schmeiser and Monsanto) removing Farmers' Rights to save seed
- Contamination by GE seeds and crops of non-GE seeds and crops, with ensuing threats to centers of origin and diversity and co-existence being made impossible, as well as the implications for liability
- Food security is paramount, irrespective of the technology chosen
- Farmers' Rights, particularly over seed saving, and to choose whether or not to grow GE crops
- Benefits and risks to farmers need to be assessed over the long term and in the larger context
- Risks to human health and the environment, and the need for reliable, case by case risk assessment
- Application of the Precautionary Principle in view of the lack of data and scientific uncertainty over the health and environmental impacts of GMOs
- Independent and publicly funded science and research is urgently needed, given that commercialization has proceeded before adequate biosafety research has been conducted
- Corporate control over agricultural production, and the limited relevance of the technology to the developmental aspects of farmers and developing countries
- Capacity building and information needed, as many developing countries lack the capacity to evaluate the risks
- Biosafety laws and regulation for developing countries must be underpinned by good science
- Farmer innovation is able to develop crops and seeds that have advantageous traits
- Sustainable alternatives, which are existing and viable, should be supported through research, policy and implementation

Section 3: Specific Recommendations
- Information and capacity building for farmers
- Independent and publicly funded research and risk assessments
- Capacity building for biosafety regulations
- Farmers choosing to plant GE crops must not put in jeopardy the choices of adjacent farmers choosing not to plant GE crops
- The promotion of alternatives, such as non-GM alternatives, or less invasive techniques

- Needs-driven and farmer-driven research and technologies
- Keeping farmers' control over seed, and their right to save seed
- Upholding the Precautionary Principle as long term risks are unknown
- The total banning of terminator and genetic use restriction technologies

During the course of the Global Forum, several groups also developed positions on biotechnology, GMOs and their impact on farmers and communities. These included:

1. 300 Small-holder farmers, mostly from Africa, who held a Small Farmers Convergence, stated as the outcome of their meeting, that;
   - the rich knowledge, best practices and technologies developed by farmers should never be alienated from them as it forms the core of their existence and livelihood and that research should focus and build on this knowledge and practice and must respond to farmers` needs.
   - small-scale farmers have evolved systems of seed exchange and multiplication for future seasons and generations. This is key to food sovereignty at family and national levels.
   - they say **NO** to genetically modified foods, affirming that farmers do not need genetically modified seeds.and that their indigenous seeds are superior for their style of farming. Small scale farmers farm for people and not for industry;

2. The African Civil Society groups, composed of more than 45 African countries, responded to the GE Aid question in Africa by expressing in a statement their support of the Zambian and Zimbabwean governments and their people in rejecting GE contaminated food. They stated that their response to the crisis is to strengthen solidarity and self reliance within Africa and to reject the dumping of unwanted food and seed that compromises their markets and future generations.

3. At the Second South South Biopiracy Summit, the Johannesburg Declaration on Biopiracy, Biodiversity and Community Rights, called for an environment free of GMOs and a ban on the patenting of biological resources and knowledge It also called for the WTO members to amend TRIPs to reflect that life forms and living processes cannot be patented. It also declared that local communities, indigenous peoples and farmers are the custodians of biodiversity and have the inalienable basic right of access to biological resources from which they derive their livelihoods and that the privatisation of these resources are one of the major threats to food security.

Section 4: Conclusion

There was a diversity of views on the issues, with two main areas of disagreement. The issue of corporate control over agricultural production was raised as a worrying specter that would infringe on Farmers' Rights to save seed and cause dependence on the corporations for seed and chemical inputs. However, there were also views that farmers should have the choice to plant GE seeds and crops even if produced by MNCs. The majority were not convinced that MNCs such as Monsanto had any other purpose other than profit and would not necessarily take the interests of the African farmers at heart. The need for good independent research and risk assessment was strongly advocated, given the conflicting interests of MNCs.

The threat to Farmers' Rights and their freedom to choose is fundamental to food security. While a select few, supported by Monsanto and the biotechnology industry, called for the rights of farmers to choose to plant GE seeds and crops, this should not compromise the rights of farmers who choose to remain GE-free. The latter position was reinforced by the majority of participants, who again emphasized Farmers' Rights to save seed.

Other than these areas of contention, there was general agreement on the priority issues and specific recommendations, as outlined in Sections 2 and 3.