

NGO LETTER TO THE FAO

NGOs in support of [FAO report](#), "Agricultural biotechnology: meeting the needs of the poor?"

An open letter to Mr. Jacques Diouf, Director General of UN Food and Agriculture Organization

July 16, 2004

Mr. Jacques Diouf
Director General
UN Food and Agriculture Organization
Geneva, Switzerland

Dear Mr. Diouf,

We, the undersigned NGOs and civil society stakeholders involved in farming and agricultural issues, wish to express our support and agreement with the FAO report released Monday, May 17 ("Agricultural biotechnology: meeting the needs of the poor?").

We applaud the FAO for moving the discussion about agricultural biotechnology away from polarizing political rhetoric and either/or debates toward how best to utilize and apply agricultural biotechnology to the needs of the world's poor and undernourished. This is a most welcome advancement of the international discussion.

The FAO is to be commended for its balanced, well-reasoned approach. The report acknowledges that while there are potential risks from the use of agricultural biotechnology, the potential benefits are both large and greatly needed given the challenges humanity faces in feeding a larger, more affluent population from an already limited land and resource base.

Far from proposing a "technological fix" to food security problems, the report acknowledges that biotechnology alone cannot solve the problems of the poor and that a multifaceted approach is needed to address systemic poverty and malnutrition in developing regions. The report also stresses the need to carefully assess the socio-economic, food safety, and environmental impacts of biotechnology on a case-by-case basis, considering both the opportunities and risks.

Importantly, the report acknowledges that biotechnology offers tremendous promise in increasing food security, food safety, and economic opportunities for smallholder farmers in developing countries. Biotechnology can speed up conventional breeding, address intractable disease problems, create crops that resist disease and insect pests and displace toxic chemicals that harm the environment and human health, help combat difficult endemic livestock diseases, and improve the nutritional quality of dietary staples heavily relied upon by the poor. Because the technology is embodied in the seed, these may be

easier for small-scale, resource-poor farmers to utilize than the technologies of the previous and successful Green Revolution.

While currently led by the private sector and focused on developed countries in the West, the report notes that there are critical opportunities ahead for biotechnology to address the particular needs of the poor and that cooperation and adequate funding are needed to ensure that the needs of the poor are not neglected and barriers to access are overcome.

Noted in the report are public-private partnerships, increased funding for public-sector transgenic crop research, and technical and regulatory capacity-building in developing countries to ensure they have the skills and knowledge necessary to make their own decisions about the use of biotechnology.

The report notes that the emerging evidence on the economic impacts of transgenic crops for smallholders is positive, with enhanced incomes and reduced pesticide exposure.

Finally, the report highlights some of the difficult agricultural and nutritional problems faced by smallholders in developing countries, and the unique and powerful ways that agricultural biotechnology can address these issues.

Perhaps most importantly, this FAO report acknowledges the food safety of transgenic products currently on the market. The report stresses that regulation should be science-based and noted the critical role of the Codex Alimentarius Commission and International Plant Protection Convention in easing international tensions in trade and food aid.

We commend the FAO and your office for weighing in on this important yet still contentious area and offering reasoned optimism about the role that agricultural biotechnology should play in meeting the needs of the poor and humanity in the 21st century.

Sincerely,

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