INTERNATIONAL FOOD POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

sustainable solutions for ending hunger and poverty

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Biotech and Biosafety Policy

Balancing Biotechnology and Biosafety

Note from the Director General

IFPRI is frequently asked about its position on biotechnology. We are aware that some biotechnologies are controversial. We further know that while these technologies alone cannot solve the complex problems of hunger and poverty, some do have great potential to alleviate hunger and malnutrition and benefit poor populations in developing countries. Because this possibility exists, IFPRI believes it would be irresponsible not to assess the potential of genetically modified crops such as nutrient-enriched or drought-tolerant and disease-resistant crop varieties. At the same time, the Institute fully supports appropriate biosafety regulatory systems that are able to assess the risks.

Therefore, IFPRI is involved in projects such as the HarvestPlus program, a CGIAR initiative that seeks to reduce micronutrient malnutrition among poor populations by breeding staple food crops with superior agronomic properties, and has joined with the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) to conduct policy dialogues to raise awareness, promote dialogue, and build consensus among stakeholder groups regarding the role of biotechnology and biosafety in agricultural development in Africa.

In collaboration with Oxfam-America, national partners, and an advisory committee representing a range of stakeholders, IFPRI is also working to develop a set of 'best practices' for assessing the social and economic impact of genetically engineered crops. Case studies on herbicide-tolerant soybeans, insect-resistant cotton, and maize are in the planning phases in Africa, Asia, and Latin America to test the proposed methodologies. The goal of this set of studies is to create a 'tool kit' that can be used by national researchers to respond to the information needs of the Cartagena Protocol. IFPRI is also completing a round of case studies that assess the potential economic impact of genetically engineered crops, including highland bananas and maize in East Africa, and vegetable crops in Ghana.

IFPRI is actively engaged on the biosafety front as well, and is coordinating a Program on Biosafety Systems (PBS), which is being implemented by a consortium of partner organizations and CGIAR centers. The overall goal of PBS is to facilitate the inclusion of appropriate biosafety regulations within country-led sustainable development strategies. PBS activities include policy analysis and development, risk assessment, capacity building in regulatory systems, and communication and public outreach. The program is active in East Africa, West Africa, Southern Africa, and Southeast Asia. IFPRI's South Asia Biosafety Program, coordinated with Agriculture & Biotechnology Strategies (AGBIOS), is assessing the impact of biosafety and marketing regulations in India and Bangladesh on the adoption and value of crops and traits.

IFPRI management's current thinking about biotechnology and biosafety, discussed with IFPRI's Board of Trustees at its 2006 meeting, appears in the statement below.

Joachim von Braun Director General, IFPRI

IFPRI, Agricultural Biotechnology, and Biosafety

A major theme in IFPRI's strategy is food- and nutrition-related science and technology policy, with a focus on how to make technological innovations relevant, safe, and accessible to poor people. The opportunities and risks that agricultural

biotechnology including genetically modified organisms (GMOs), present for smallholder farming systems, poor consumers, biodiversity, and trade are high on our research agenda, together with biosafety policy issues, which encompass environmental and food safety considerations. IFPRI attempts to connect these fundamental biological and policy regimes to its commitment to improve livelihoods and reduce poverty in developing countries.

IFPRI acknowledges that among the biotechnologies, genetically modified organisms (GMOs) are controversial. In accordance with standard practice in the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), IFPRI therefore favors public dialogue and transparency in conducting research on GMO technology. IFPRI provides concepts for designing such dialogues among all relevant players, including governments, parliaments, civil society, and the private sector. IFPRI takes a holistic approach to biotechnology research, examining aspects from biosafety to social issues, and the functioning of regulatory bodies, all of which shape GMO science and policy.

The development of molecular biology and biosafety is subject to numerous international agreements, intellectual property considerations, and research and regulatory capacities that operate under rapidly changing circumstances. Furthermore, technologies, genetic traits, and new knowledge accumulate at a rapid pace in the fast-growing world of biotechnology. This complex and dynamic environment creates major challenges for decision makers and researchers. IFPRI continually reviews and comments on related bio-policies, especially from the perspective of developing countries and poor people.

Within this context, IFPRI will support developing countries by providing research-based information and capacity development that will increase the accuracy and efficiency of their decision making with respect to biotechnology and biosafety.

IFPRI acknowledges that ultimately the decisions on these topics will be made by sovereign national bodies, consumers, and farmers, weighing risks and benefits of using or not using technologies.

Agricultural biotechnologies are a broad and promising area of science. The use and development of genetically modified (GM) crops is one option that developing countries are considering to meet food needs, reduce poverty, and enhance environmental sustainability through improved productivity. Policy research should address all aspects of this process, from product research to product approval, introduction, and marketing, and should help ensure that all steps are undertaken in a transparent way.

IFPRI does not advocate or take a general position on the utility and safety of GM crops, as these are to a considerable extent context- and technology-specific. It seeks to provide information that will allow others to make informed choices.

http://www.ifpri.org/ourwork/about/biotech-biosafety

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