



Seeking a Common Path: Structuring Multistakeholder Dialogue on Agricultural Biotechnology in Africa

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In southern Africa, as in other parts of the world, agricultural biotechnology—particularly the production, consumption, trade, and transport of genetically modified (GM) foods—has been steeped in controversy. The divergent and sometimes contradictory positions are grounded in deep-seated beliefs about technology, the environment, the global order, and the meaning of development among the various stakeholders. This paper seeks to explain the arguments that underlie the different positions taken by national and regional stakeholders, including representatives of public bodies, the private sector, and civil society, on the role of biotechnology. It describes efforts to develop a common process for discussion of the issues. The aim of the dialogue is to agree on the process, rather than to develop consensus.

Efforts to Stimulate Dialogue

Answers to profound questions about biotechnology are urgently needed: Who will benefit and who will lose? Will there be unforeseen consequences, and how long will it be before they become apparent? How will rights to resources be distributed? And who should and will make decisions? These questions are not just an academic exercise; the answers are the foundation for government policies that affect traders, farmers, and the food insecure. For example, in 2002–03, in the face of food shortages in southern Africa, several governments blocked distribution of tons of food aid because some of the maize had a GM component. The logistics of transporting the food aid through these areas to the countries that wanted it, with no safety guidelines, became impossibly complicated. This crisis underscored the necessity for each government to have in place a comprehensive biosafety system to scientifically evaluate and monitor the risks of GM products in the context of their own country.

In 2003, as the difficulty of moving both food and nonfood items across borders in southern Africa deepened, the Southern African Development Community's Council of Ministers for Food, Agriculture, and Natural Resources formed an advisory committee to develop guidelines; other groups also worked to develop a consensus. The International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) and the Food, Agriculture, and Natural Resources Policy Analysis Network (FANRPAN), later joined by the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), embarked on an effort to engage stakeholders in a series of roundtable discussions. All of these attempts at dialogue have encouraged communication, information sharing, and a sense of trust among the participants.

The IFPRI-FANRPAN-NEPAD initiative has held two interlinked roundtable discussions to date. This highly participatory process draws on a method known as technology assessment. It involves 40–50 participants, divided among 30–40 stakeholders (high-level policymakers, senior representatives of agencies, and scientific leaders), 5–10 technical specialists, and 5–10 organizers who are brought together for a series of roundtable discussions, in this case on biotechnology, agriculture, and food security in southern Africa. The purpose of these discussions is to increase

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understanding of the technology and awareness of the benefits, risks, and trade-offs associated with the use of agricultural biotechnology in the region. The hoped-for outcome is identification of recommendations (ideally in the form of a resolution or

declaration) and an action plan for strengthening the institutions and policies governing biotechnology in southern Africa.

Key Issues to be Resolved

The key issues to be discussed include biosafety policies and frameworks, trade, protection of intellectual property rights, risk–benefit assessments, information and resource needs, and policy formulation processes.

Developing biosafety policies. As each country develops a framework for biosafety and attempts to harmonize its policies with those of other countries in the region, policymakers need to be familiar with the approaches adopted by other countries, such as the European Community and the United States, keeping in mind differences in food habits and economic and health conditions. For example, while the United States assumes that GM foods are safe for everyone, this may not be so where foods and processing methods are different and where the prevalence of HIV has compromised the immunity systems of large numbers of people. To feel safe, people in the region need assurance that their safety, health, and beliefs have been taken into account.

Facilitating trade. Biosafety issues are closely linked to trade because an increasing portion of world exports and imports are GM goods. The World Trade Organization is pressuring countries to harmonize their policies with its own regulations. On the one hand, adoption of agricultural biotechnology may enable poor countries to increase their yields and lower production costs, increasing their ability to compete. On the other hand, access to key markets, especially in Europe, may be blocked.

Protecting intellectual property rights (IPR). Since few African countries have the resources to develop large biotechnology programs, they tend not to see the importance of IPRs. Few countries have clear-cut policies, although they have acceded to international agreements.

Assessing risks and benefits. Although the region's policymakers are uncertain about the possibility of food safety and environmental problems resulting from GM products, they do know that food insecurity is a major problem. To what extent can GM crops alleviate hunger and malnutrition, compared with non-GM methods? With the advent of GM crops, will successful conventional policies be neglected? Improved household food security will not reduce child malnutrition unless governments also invest in programs for child health, care, and feeding. Risk–benefit assessment is further complicated by the lack of long-term studies and verifiable data.

Information and resource needs. Because of the existence of much false and conflicting information, two general types of information are vitally important: information on the technology itself and on how to increase awareness and improve information sharing. A dialogue at the national and regional level on major developments in agricultural biotechnology and their applications is critical. Only long-term scientific research can provide definitive answers on the benefits and risks. However, action to address hunger is needed now. By addressing these questions to the research community, dialogue participants can generate the information they need to reach a consensus.

Formulating policy. Having found the will to address biotechnology issues, policymakers must take steps to strengthen national and regional research capacity, design and implement policies, assess the risks and benefits, and manage institutional processes that support these activities. Governments must develop mechanisms for collaboration with each other and with private and nonprofit organizations to facilitate the pooling of resources, transfer of technologies, and sharing of expertise, so that informed decisions can be made.

Conclusions

For a multistakeholder dialogue on the issues surrounding adoption of agricultural biotechnology in southern Africa to be successful, it must include everyone: representatives of national and regional governments, research and donor communities, as well as organizations of farmers, the poor, women, consumers, and environmentalists. With viewpoints so divergent, strong conflicts are to be expected, but if stakeholders focus on the process, these obstacles can be overcome.

Keywords: biotechnology, consensus-building, conflict resolution, Africa

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