

SERIOUS FLAWS IN A CONFERENCE ON MORAL IMPERATIVE OF BIOTECHNOLOGY

There is certainly a moral imperative to ensure that all in our human family have sufficient food and a well-balanced diet. This is a goal we all desire and which the World Summit on Sustainable Development urged us to make steady progress toward achieving. It is a goal repeatedly emphasised in encyclical letters and statements from Pope John Paul II.

The surest path toward elimination of hunger and malnutrition is to eliminate poverty and the unjust social structures that underlie it. These are the root causes of hunger, not lack of sufficient food production. It is neither equitable nor sustainable to talk of increasing food *production* without addressing food *distribution*.

Failure to realize this appears to us to be a *basic flaw* in the planning of the programme for the conference to be held on 24 September 2004 at The Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, entitled “Feeding a Hungry World: The Moral Imperative of Biotechnology.” The conference is presented by the United States of America Embassy to the Holy See, in cooperation with the Vatican’s Pontifical Academy of Sciences.

The flyer announcing the conference rightly states that “The magnitude of these avoidable deaths [from hunger] should challenge everyone to take steps to alleviate this crisis.” But surely the most important steps to take are those that correct the injustices in the social and economic structures of our human society today. These are the injustices that are the clear subjects of the *moral imperatives found in the social teaching of the church*, e.g., trade, debt, land reform, violation of human rights, degradation of the environment, etc. It is the injustice of these structures that prevent so many of our brothers and sisters to have access to the food produced by farmers, enough for a healthy diet for all six billion of our human family. The world produces enough food, but – shamefully – it is not justly distributed: *while millions suffer from hunger and malnutrition others suffer from obesity*.

A *second flaw* in the plan of this conference is the absence in the programme of consideration of proven methods to improve the nutritional status of the human family, methods that are better, cheaper, more sustainable, and more suitable for resource-poor farmers than are genetic engineered crops. We know this from the lived experience, not theoretical discussions, of our Zambian agricultural scene. When we talk here of *sustainable agriculture*, we know that we rely on methods that Zambian farmers are increasingly putting into place. As a result, we currently enjoy in this country an increased agricultural output, untouched by GMO approaches.

Surely a clear moral imperative for us is to research and develop and promote these methods of sustainable agriculture. Unfortunately for the poor in the world, this is not the kind of research and development that the large seed and chemical corporations appear to be interested in pursuing. And this is a serious moral fault!

A *third flaw* in the programme of the conference is the apparent absence of any mention of the serious scientific problems with genetic engineering. Many researchers are pointing to a fundamental problem in the approach of genetic engineering, namely, that it is based upon an understanding of heredity that can be considered simplistic and outdated. One example of this is that the one-gene-one-protein theory at the basis of genetic engineering has been invalidated by many recent findings, notably by the discovery coming from the human genome project that there are many more proteins than there are genes (approximately 100,000 proteins but only about 30,000 genes).

A *fourth flaw* in the design of the conference seems to be a total absence in the programme of any mention of the many failures of genetically engineered crops to improve yields and to reduce chemical sprayings of the crops, nor of the contamination of other plants (including weeds) by pollen from the GE plants, nor of the effects of GE crops on soil organisms, nor of the effects of patenting GE crops upon farmers' practice of exchanging seeds.

These failures are problems that we in Zambia are trying to avoid. For in all of these matters, it is the resource-poor farmers who are most vulnerable and who will suffer the most. And these, of course, are the very ones who should benefit from any moral imperative to ensure that all in our human family have sufficient food and a well-balanced diet.

A *fifth flaw* in the programme of the conference appears to be a lack of value-oriented socio-economic analysis of the impact of GMO farming on the livelihood of the small-scale farmer. Of major importance in any such discussion – surely of major importance to Zambia -- must be issues such as dependence on outside seed sources, restructuring of farm ownerships, possible curtailment of external trade opportunities for the agricultural sector, etc. One of the strong points of the church's social teaching has been to take seriously the socio-economic context of the poor as a concrete application of the "preferential option for the poor."

Finally, a *sixth flaw* in the conference is, unfortunately, quite obvious. To be honest, how is it possible to examine with full intellectual vigour such an important topic without voices that hold contrary views to those espousing biotechnology as the solution to the world's hunger problems? The November 2003 conference on a similar topic, sponsored solely by the Vatican's Justice and Peace Commission, without the cooperation of the USA Embassy, allowed at least a few dissenting voices to appear on the panels. (We presented a paper critical of GMOs from the perspective of the church's social teaching.)

The panel for the 24 September conference seems to be based on the premise that there is *already* a fair and fully demonstrated conclusion reached, namely, "...genetically modified foods can help the poor" and "...biotechnology can contribute to protecting human life and promoting human dignity". (From the conference flyer.) But these are precisely points of view that need the contributions of representatives, for example, of the Philippines Bishops Conference, the South African Bishops Conference and the USA Bishops Conference, groups that have just recently cautioned about the GMO approach.

In conclusion, we raise these very serious issues because of the importance of this conference to the on-going international debate about GMOs and its impact on the poor of Zambia and other developing countries. We urge that the Vatican should be extremely cautious that it not be seen as somehow compromised through linkage with known promoters of only one position on this issue. When ethical and religious issues such as food security are being discussed, there is no place either for only one scientific view to be heard or only one political force to be recognised.

To make our own point of view quite clear, we state: *there is certainly a moral imperative to feed our hungry world, but there is no moral imperative to do so with biotechnology.*

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