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FAO PREDICTS FUTURE GLOBAL FOOD CRISES

<http://www.fao.org/newsroom/en/news/2006/1000288/index.html>

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) reports that 39 countries worldwide, with majority in southern and eastern Africa, will face food crises and thus need external food assistance. A slight decrease in world cereal production from last year's level is predicted. If global cereal use in 2006/2007 is similar to recent trends, it would exceed the current forecast for production and lower cereal stocks.

About 24 countries in Africa require food assistance due to adverse weather conditions, conflict, and economic problems. Nearly 8 million people are already suffering from the effects of prolonged drought in Ethiopia, Somalia, Kenya, and Djibouti. Despite good harvests in Sudan and Eritrea, conflicts have affected food availability.

Asian countries on the food crisis radar include Mongolia and Timore-Leste, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Nepal. In Latin America, sharply reduced yields have been noted in Argentina (maize), Brazil (rice), and Paraguay (soybean).

These data are reported in FAO's Crop Prospects and Food Situation, which provides information on the latest developments affecting global cereal supply and demand, as well as regional overviews of the crop prospects and food security situation.

INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY RIGHTS AND DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

<http://web.searca.org/home.asp>

Intellectual Property Rights (IPRs) have a fundamental task to play in achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), as they affect agricultural and rural development in developing countries. The main impact of IPRs is through their relationship with the transfer of traditional and novel agricultural technologies, and IPRs can both support and hinder sustainable development.

A Zakri, from the Institute of Advanced Studies of the United Nations University, explored some of the key policy issues and challenges faced by developing countries in designing IPR regimes that will promote equity. He addressed participants of the Regional Conference on IPR "Pathways to Agricultural and Rural Development: Intellectual Property Rights and Implications", that concluded this week in the Philippines.

About 7.7 million subsistence farmers planted biotech crops in 2005, so, "regardless of what we may feel about the technology, the reality of the increasing use of biotech crops in the developing world and its contribution to the MDGs needs to be taken into account" says Zakri. Existing IPR models need to be adapted to the particular needs of developing countries if they are to support the MDGs, says Zakri.

Key policy challenges include issues regarding:

- bioethics and the limits of IPR regimes;
- the patenting of life forms;
- broad and overlapping patents;
- the role of publicly-funded international germ plasm banks; and
- poor understanding on the socio-economic and environmental impacts of IPRs.

What are the key challenges to the development of effective IPR regimes for developing countries that will protect national biodiversity resources, and promote sustainable agricultural development for the benefit of all? How could these be addressed? This was the task given to participants to the "IPR, Biodiversity and Biotechnology for the MDGs" workshop, scheduled as part of the Conference "Pathways to Agricultural and Rural Development: Intellectual Property Rights and Implications".

The main challenge identified is the lack of institutional capacity for the management and use of IPR in developing countries, including technology transfer; negotiation; IPR assessments and audits; and enforcement mechanisms. Proposed strategies to promote capacity building include identifying and using available resources, institutions and expertise; and designing new appropriate resources to address specific national needs. Equally important is to sensitize and enlist national, regional and international governments to mobilize financial resources for capacity building in this area.

Inadequacies in the professional education of scientists and lawyers on IPR and biotechnology, respectively, also constitute a main challenge. The incorporation of suitable courses in law and science curricula was therefore recommended. Additional issues to address include: the lack of appropriate regulations on access and benefit sharing; the lack of authoritative studies on the effect of IP on the use of biotechnology to address MDGs; misunderstandings on the role of IPR on socio-economic, ethical, and environmental issues; and restrictive IPR regimes. Therefore, resources need to be devoted to commission studies that address these concerns, and the effective information dissemination strategies to target audiences (policy makers, media and general public) need to be developed.

STATEMENT ON GM FOR DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

http://www.akademienunion.de/files/memorandum_gentechnik/memorandum_gruene_gentechnik.pdf.

Green biotechnology offers great prospects for developing countries. The technology should be discussed on the basis of scientifically proven facts rather than on ideological beliefs. This was the

gist of a statement released by delegates to an international workshop in Berlin sponsored by the Union of the German Academies. The document will be presented as a statement on international science to the general assembly of the Inter-academy Panel (IAP) in December in Cairo. The Italy-based IAP is a worldwide network of 92 Academies of Sciences.

In the statement, delegates from China, Egypt, the USA, and Europe stressed, among others that foods from approved genetically modified (GM) crops are safe for humans and animals; and that farmers and consumers should have the freedom to choose crops to plant.

The Berlin workshop is an IAP initiative to evaluate the usefulness of GM plants.

COMESA ENDORSES REGIONAL POLICY ON GMOs

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Regional experts and stakeholders in the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) have agreed to work together towards the adoption of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in the region.

In a communiqué read at the end of a meeting in Nairobi Kenya, the experts recommended that commercial planting, trade and food aid on GMOs be centrally assessed in the region. Commercial trade of GM products should be driven by a directive from a central regional clearing house as a way of sharing information. The communiqué will be presented to relevant ministries in the 20-member states regional block.

Other suggestions include the development of a regional centre of excellence in biotechnology and biosafety, and the formation of an experts' panel to provide technical advice on issues pertaining to the development, handling, and management of GMOs within the region.

COMESA's Senior Agricultural Advisor, Dr. Cris Muyunda, said that guidelines on food aid policy will also be developed at the regional level to help facilitate transit of food aid in neighboring states.

KENYAN MINISTER ASKS JOURNALISTS TO HIGHLIGHT BIOTECH BENEFITS

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The government of Kenya is actively exploring ways of deploying biotechnology into the agricultural system to help boost food production. Hence, media in the region should highlight the importance of biotechnology instead of dwelling on unsubstantiated claims. This was the challenge given to journalists by Deputy Minister for Information and Communications Koigi Wamwere during a media workshop on "Innovative Approaches to Improving Biotechnology Reporting in Eastern Africa", jointly organized by Eastern and Central Africa Biotechnology Information Center (ECABIC) and the African Biotechnology Stakeholders Forum (ABSF).

Wamwere told 40 senior science journalists from Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania who attended the three-day workshop that earlier coverage of the subject has misled others to view it negatively yet it was "a very old science that has been around for many years".

Norah Olembo, Executive Director of ABSF, said that the potential of biotechnology, an evolving science, is yet to be harnessed in Africa. She stressed that while African countries continue to develop their cold feet towards approving the biotechnology policy, many other countries have already embraced this technology after putting biosafety standards in place.

WORLD BANK STUDIES SUGGEST ADOPTION OF GM COTTON

<http://econ.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/EXTDEC/0,,menuPK:577938~pagePK:64165265~piPK:64165423~theSitePK:469372,00.html>

"The gains to developing countries from the Doha Cotton Initiative will be even greater if GM cotton is adopted first, providing yet another reason not to delay approval of this new biotechnology." These were forwarded by two World Bank (WB) reports "The World Trade Organization's Doha cotton initiative: A tales of two issues," and "Recent and prospective adoption of genetically modified cotton: A global computable general equilibrium analysis of economic impacts."

In the first study, authors Kym Anderson and Ernesto Valenzuela of the WB research group note that subsidy reductions rather than tariff cuts would create the largest impact. Such impact would even be doubled if such reform provided the cash for farmers to take advantage of biotechnology.

Similarly, the other WB report by K. Anderson, E. Valenzuela, and Lee Ann Jackson, suggests that adoption of GM cotton varieties by developing countries especially Sub-Saharan Africa could provide larger proportionate gains to farmers and national welfare.

GM MAIZE DOUBLES MARKET SHARE IN 2006

Nufarmer & African Entrepreneur, Vol. 10, No. 12, May 2006

Planting of GM maize increased its market share from 14.6% of the total South African maize market planted in 2005 to 29.4% in 2006. The major unique trait remains insect resistance with 72% of total GM maize while herbicide tolerant maize now stands at 28%. Actual hectares planted increased by 11% to 455 287 ha despite the total maize area having shrunk by 45%. This increase builds upon past trends that amounted to 42% GM maize growth in 2003, 44% in 2004 and 20% in 2005. White maize showed the most dramatic increase from 8.6% of total white maize area in 2005 to 28.8% in 2006. The area planted to yellow GM maize grew from 24% to 30.5% of the total yellow maize area for the same period.

PARTIES URGED TO REFOCUS BIOSAFETY DEBATE

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The process of the Meetings of the Parties (MOPs) to the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety needs to refocus if the Protocol is to serve its role in facilitating international collaboration on modern biotechnology. This issue was raised in a report by the Public Research and Regulation Initiative (PRRI), an organization that offers public researchers a forum through which they can participate in international negotiations that are relevant for modern biotechnology.

The report also urges member governments to refocus the biotech debate, to ensure that the Protocol can "provide for effective participation in biotechnological research activities" as described in Article 19 of the Convention on Biological Diversity, which is the basis for the Cartagena Protocol. The PRRI also strongly objects to repeated attempts to propose bans for scientific research that have no demonstrated scientific basis, since, "Future generations are not served by simply putting bans on possible avenues of scientific research and development if there are no clear indications that those developments will pose actual risks that outweigh the numerous benefits," the PRRI says in its press release.

KENYAN GOVERNMENT URGED TO GIVE MORE RESEARCH FUNDS

<http://www.aercafrica.org/news/newsarticle.asp?newsid=47>.

Norway's ambassador to Kenya, Elizabeth Jacobsen, urged the Kenyan government to commit more funds to research, and said that integrating research into policy making would spur development. Jacobsen chaired the plenary session of a workshop organized by the African Economic Research Consortium (AERC) in Nairobi, Kenya.

"Researchers would assist the Government in making evidence-based decisions," she added. Jacobsen presided over presentations by leading economists on the theme, "Political Economy and African Economic Development." About 200 researchers, academicians, policy makers, and economists from across the African continent attended the workshop.

EFSA RELEASES LATEST OPINION ON GM MAIZE VARIETY

http://www.efsa.eu.int/science/gmo/gmo_opinions/1482/gmo_ov_op5_annexa_en1.pdf

The Scientific Panel on Genetically Modified Organisms (GMO Panel) of the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) recently released its opinion on genetically modified maize 1507 x NK603, which is engineered with protection against specific lepidopteran pests, as well as tolerance to the herbicides glufosinate and glyphosate. The Panel concluded that the maize is "unlikely to have any adverse effect on human and animal health and the environment in the context of its intended uses."

In delivering its opinion, the panel considered the application filed, information provided by the applicant, and scientific comments submitted by the European Union (EU) member states. Scientific assessments included molecular characterization of transgenes and expression of target proteins; as well as comparative analysis of agronomic traits, nutrient composition, potential allergenicity and toxicity, and environmental effects. According to the report, the nutritional properties of maize 1507 x NK603 "would be no different from those of conventional counterparts," and "unintended environmental effects due to the establishment and spread of GM maize will not be different from that of conventionally bred maize."

KENYA MPS TO TABLE BIOTECH FACT FINDING REPORT TO PARLIAMENT

Dr Margaret Karembu (m.karembu@cgiar.org) or Daniel Otunge (dotunge@absfafrica.org)

Kenyan Members of Parliament (MPs), who have just returned from an agricultural biotechnology fact-finding mission to South Africa, have resolved to table the report from this mission in parliament and demand a ministerial statement on biotechnology. The MPs also proposed to seek amendment of the current Agricultural Act to fast track biotechnology legislation in Kenya. The MPs were concerned that after 15 years of research on modern biotechnology, Kenya still does not have a biotechnology policy and biosafety laws that are necessary for commercialization of transgenic products. Kenyan MPs, who were accompanied in the travelling workshop by their counterparts from Malawi, were convinced that Kenyan and Malawian farmers could benefit immensely from the technology if its products were made available to them.

The MPs also challenged researchers to involve policy makers and other stakeholders in their research activities. Currently biotech crop research in Kenya includes genetically engineered (Bt) maize that is resistant to maize stem borers, pest resistant Bt cotton, Bt cassava that is resistant to the Cassava Mosaic Virus, and Bt sweet potato against the Sweet Potato Virus.

FAO PROJECTS TO IMPROVE FOOD SECURITY IN FIVE AFRICAN COUNTRIES

<http://www.fao.org/newsroom/en/news/2006/1000307/index.htm>

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has announced the launch of two new projects focusing on modernizing agricultural systems and on promoting market access to five African countries. The first project will be implemented in Burundi, Rwanda, and Uganda, and will encourage the efficient use of available water resources.

The second project aims to improve cassava production in Malawi and Zambia. Cassava is Africa's fastest growing food crop, and is the staple food for over 30% of Zambia's population. The project seeks to enhance cassava's commercial potential by processing it into starch, which can also be exported.

NOTICEBOARD

6 – 9 August 2006 - The Agriculture Biotechnology Industry Conference (ABIC) will be held at the Melbourne Convention Centre, Victoria, Australia. This year's theme "Unlocking the potential of agricultural biotechnology" will focus on innovation and commercialization. The conference will be spearheaded by AusBiotech, Ltd, the body for the biotechnology and life sciences industry in Australia. Email abic2006@tourhosts.com.au or visit <http://www.abic2006.org> for more details.

12 – 11 August 2006 - Malaysia will host the 3rd International Biotechnology Asia 2006 Conference with the theme "Convergence of biotechnology and nanotechnology." Putra World Trade Center, the conference venue, expects over 150 delegates. comprising corporate leaders, policy makers, academicians, researchers, and entrepreneurs. For more information, visit <http://www.biotechexpo.com.my>.

July – November 2006 - The World Vegetable Center, Regional Center for Africa is offering an intensive course on vegetable crops production and research. The course is open to African professionals who currently undertake the vegetable research and development activities in the African continent. For more information, visit: <http://www.avrdc.org/training.html>

June – July -Michigan State University (MSU) in the United States is offering several short courses in 2006 on various topics related to biotechnology. An International Internship Program in Intellectual Property Rights (IPR): Technology Transfer, Use and Management will be held from July 9-14; An International Short Course in Food Safety from July 23-28; An International Short Course in Agroecology, Integrated Pest Management (IPM), and Sustainable Agriculture from Jun 18-28; and an International Short Course in Environmental Aspects of Agricultural Biotechnology from Jul 30-Aug 4. For more details, visit <http://www.iaa.msu.edu/courses05.htm>.

New website on GM - Agrifood Awareness Australia Limited (AFAA) has a new website. It features, among others, an agricultural biotech resources library of external documents on topics under 20 areas of interest, and a section on gene technology policies of farm associations, and related groups. AFAA is an industry initiative, established to increase public awareness of, and encourage informed debate about gene technology. See their new website at <http://www.afa.com.au>.