

Your Excellency, Bishop Marcello Sanchez Sorondo,  
Pontifical Academy of Sciences,  
Casina Pius IV,  
V- 00120 Vatican City  
Rome  
ITALY

Brussels, 27/04/2009

Your Excellency,

It was with great interest that we noted that the Pontifical Academy of Science is preparing a study week on the issues of “Transgenic Plants for Food Security” from 15th to 19th May 2009. In this letter CIDSE, representing a network of 16 European and North American Catholic development organisations with longstanding experience in the fight against hunger and for food security, wishes to highlight its concerns relating to GMOs and hunger. At this stage the governments in several developing countries are deciding whether or not to open their agricultural sectors to genetically engineered plants (GE plants). They are faced with a powerful campaign from providers of the GE technology. We regret that the Pontifical Academy of Science gives open preference to these protagonists and excludes at the same time important stakeholders including the voice of the Catholic Church in Africa. The publication of the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the Synod on Africa on March 19th 2009 notes:

*“The seeding campaign of proponents of Genetically Modified Food, which purports to give assurances for food safety, should not overlook the true problems of agriculture in Africa: the lack of cultivatable land, water, energy, access to credit, agricultural training, local markets, road infrastructures, etc. This campaign runs the risk of ruining small landholders, abolishing traditional methods of seeding and making farmers dependent on the production companies of OGM.” (Announced by Vatican City 2009).*

We acknowledge that the planned speakers have high expertise regarding the benefits of genetic engineering. However, from our point of view, the diversity of analyses and opinions envisaged in the study week should be reviewed. As the title of the week indicates, the tone, the objectives and content of the study week appear to reflect the views of only the proponents of Genetically Engineered seeds, inspired by supposed ‘misinformation and myths’.

We disagree furthermore with the objective of the study week, ‘to free the technology from the unhealthy constraints of ‘extreme precautionary regulation’, which we interpret to mean the aim is to reduce the current regulatory regime for GE plant in countries across the world. On the contrary, we support the precautionary approach set out in the United Nations framework as the keystone in the international legal context of bio safety. This is the only instrument governments can use to govern imports. If a government has concern about the

impacts of transgenic seed on biodiversity, public health or the environment, we respect its right to refuse the import of GE seeds. This option is crucial for least developed countries with less laboratory capacities.

CIDSE is concerned that the comprehensive documentation about the negative impact on the livelihood of rural poor by GE seeds is not reflected in the program of the study week. Several of our partner organisations in Africa, Asia and Latin America have reported about the negative impact of GE seeds. For example, in China, India, and the Philippines the incomes of small-scale farmers with GE cotton is lower in comparison to those using conventional seeds.

CIDSE published already in 2000 a position paper that emphasised the ethical concerns regarding ownership of life forms resulting from patent protection and excessive plant variety protection on living organisms and seeds. It also describes the impact of Trade-related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPs) on food security in developing countries, if strong and enforceable multilateral IPR rules are extended also to genetic resources in food and agriculture.

Respecting the integrity of creation, our focus must be kept on eradicating poverty and unjust social structures, the root causes of hunger, through a multiple options approach. In this context, we note with great interest many of the recommendations and analyses of the recently published International Assessment of Agricultural Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD) and share in the general welcome extended to it by civil society organisations. It argues that the most pressing agricultural need is to support small-scale farmers who operate in diverse ecosystems. The IAASTD is a major global initiative, developed out of a consultative process involving 900 participants and 110 countries from all regions of the world; initiated by FAO, UNDP, World Bank and other international organizations

As currently constituted the out-come of the advertised Study-Week will draw unnecessary criticism on itself.

CIDSE and its Member Organisation are willing to contribute to a Study Week where the real needs of poor people are aired. This will mean involving experts from Aid and Development agencies including those within the Church, farmers associations, appropriate United Nations agencies, business, science and representatives from civil society organizations.

Sincerely yours in Christ,



Bernd Nilles  
Secretary General

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