

WORK NEEDED ON AGRICULTURAL BIOTECHNOLOGY IN INDIA/ASIA

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The field of agricultural biotechnology has stimulated an animated discussion in many countries of the world but the predominantly agricultural countries of Asia do not fall in this category. Information levels about biotechnology per se and about Ag- Biotechnology is poor and the subject is inadequately taught in colleges and most universities. Most administrators, policy makers, politicians, legislators, bar, and judiciary do not comprehend this technology.

The lack of comprehensible and credible information is leading to poor policy development, skewed priorities for public and private investment and lack of trained manpower. The lacuna in understanding is reflected in the way public policies are being framed. The regulatory process in place is careless and shoddy to the point of being dangerous. Protagonists of biotechnology in the decision-making bodies in government are determining the biotechnology agenda and plunging headlong into it without realizing that their inexperience and inadequacies can lead to disastrous consequences.

For an agricultural country like India, the adoption of an agricultural technology has to be done carefully, keeping the interests of farmers, especially, small farmers, in mind. Decision-making must be inclusive and participatory. Yet, agricultural biotechnology is being imposed from the top, with no consultations with any of the stakeholders and no transparency in the process.

The first ever GM crop in India, Monsanto's Bt cotton is being cultivated and there is controversy about its performance and its suitability. The regulatory system is non-transparent and has been widely criticised, decision-making is ad hoc and arbitrary. In Asia the next five years are likely to see a series of face-offs between the scientific-administrative community and the public over this new technology. It would be prudent to develop a comprehensive understanding of the ground realities and to contribute to raising the level of information and awareness among stakeholders in India and other Asian nations.

It is therefore crucially important that unbiased and comprehensible information about biotechnology and its related social, ethical and economic concerns be made available to focus groups like students, teachers, government officials and policy makers, mass media, the bar and the judiciary, farmers and professionals. There is a great need for such information materials in regional languages for education in rural and semi-urban areas. Credible studies need to be done that measure public perceptions and attitudes to agricultural biotechnology. This exercise is necessary for India to craft its own ag-biotechnology agenda, suited to its needs.

Work needs to be done urgently on:

- **Improving understanding of agricultural biotechnology in India/ Asia**
- **Producing information materials on gm technology and its applications**
- **Holding public debates to elicit the public's views and channel this into policy making**
- **Assessing perceptions & attitudes to agbiotechnology among the major stakeholders**