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Biotech Crops Could Help Poor Farmers, U.N. Says

Report Cites 'Clear Promise' to Ease Global Hunger, but Pushes for More Funding

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Genetic engineering and other forms of agricultural biotechnology are benefiting poor farmers in a handful of countries and hold "clear promise" to alleviate global hunger and help millions of people achieve better lives, according to a United Nations report released this morning.

But the report, by the U.N.'s Food and Agriculture Organization, said this promise is still more theory than reality, largely because far too little money is being spent to use the new techniques in ways likely to benefit subsistence farmers.

"Barring a few initiatives here and there, there are no major public- or private-sector programs to tackle the critical problems of the poor or targeting crops and animals that they rely on," the report said. "Concerted international efforts are required to ensure that the technology needs of the poor are addressed and that barriers to access are overcome."

The 200-page report is being released this morning in Rome, where the Food and Agriculture Organization is based, and in Washington. The FAO is the world's major body dealing with long-term issues of food supply and is an influential voice in setting global food policy.

The report is the FAO's most detailed analysis to date of the controversy swirling around the use of genetic engineering in agriculture. And it puts that body, for the first time, squarely in the camp of those who believe genetic engineering can benefit the world's poorest people.

The report explicitly rejected as too extreme the position embraced by many environmental and advocacy groups that have called for bans on genetic engineering of plants and animals. Many of these groups are opposed in principle to a technology in which genes are deliberately transferred from one species to another to confer new traits - and those organisms are then released into the environment.

"Thus far, in those countries where transgenic crops have been grown, there have been no verifiable reports of them causing any significant health or environmental harm," the report said. "On the contrary, some important environmental and social benefits are emerging."

The report cited, as examples, the sharply reduced use of chemical pesticides to grow gene-altered pest-resistant cotton, and the improving incomes of small cotton farmers in countries like China and South Africa that have embraced the technology.

The report did not entirely dismiss the risks of the technology, however. While there's broad scientific consensus that current biotech crops are safe to eat, the report said, there's less consensus about their likely environmental effects over the long term, and that issue will require careful, case-by-case analysis and monitoring of each new crop.

But the report added that "science cannot declare any technology completely risk free." It said it was unrealistic to demand perfect certainty about the effects of a technology before deciding whether to use it.

Opposition to genetic engineering in agriculture has been particularly strong in Europe, where many countries have imposed a de facto moratorium on such crops. There are signs that opposition may be weakening, with the European Commission scheduled this week to approve a type of genetically altered corn.

But the corn will be approved only for import, not for growing in Europe, and it remains unclear how many European countries will comply with the European Commission's ruling and lift their bans. The United States has sued Europe in the World Trade Organization, claiming the moratoriums violate trade rules, and is not expected to drop that case on the basis of one limited crop approval.

As the debate between Europe and the United States reached a fever pitch in recent years, many biotechnology companies responded to the controversy by arguing that their technology could be an answer to the food problems of the world's poorest people. Activist groups generally dismissed that claim as unconvincing from companies that weren't doing much for the poor.

With its new report, the FAO is endorsing the premise that the poor could benefit, in theory. But that hasn't happened yet on any broad scale, the report said -- and won't unless additional efforts are made.

The key problem, the report said, is that most of the benefits to date have gone to the Western companies working on the new crops and to farmers in wealthy countries that have had ready access to them. Money and research effort are going mainly into crops like soybeans and corn that are grown in the rich countries, the report said.

Genetic engineering could be used to improve crops like bananas, cassava, sorghum, cowpeas and rice on which billions of poor people depend, the report said. But it added that only scattershot and poorly funded efforts have been organized to date.

Corporations are spending 10 times as much money, about \$3 billion a year, to improve crops for wealthy countries as governments and other donors are spending to improve crops for the poor, the report said.

The report did not particularly fault the corporations for this imbalance, saying it is unrealistic to expect them to spend large sums on crops that offer them little hope of profit. Such research is a public responsibility, the report said -- but public spending on agricultural research meant to benefit the poor has been falling in recent years, despite a fast-rising global population expected to hit 10 billion, up from 6 billion, in a few decades.

Norman Borlaug -- the scientist who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1970 for leading a "Green Revolution" that radically improved crop yields through conventional breeding in some parts of the world, particularly in Asia breeding -- wrote in a companion essay to the report that more investment and a sharper focus are necessary.

"The world has the technology -- already available or well advanced in the research pipeline -- to feed on a sustainable basis a population of 10 billion people," Borlaug wrote. "However, access to such technology is not assured."

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