

Nuffield Council on Bioethics

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Mr C Shaw
Clerk of the Science and Technology Committee
Science and Technology Committee
7 Millbank
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Dear Mr Shaw

Director
Dr Sandy Thomas

Assistant Director
Mr Harald Schmidt

The use of science in UK international development policy

Thank you for giving the Nuffield Council on Bioethics the opportunity to contribute to the Science and Technology Committee's inquiry into the use of science and technology in UK international development policy. We welcome the opportunity to submit evidence to the inquiry.

As you may be aware, the Nuffield Council has recently considered the potential contribution of genetically modified (GM) crops to agriculture in developing countries. I have pleasure in enclosing copies of the Council's publications on the topic: *Genetically modified crops: the ethical and social issues* (published in 1999) and a new Discussion Paper, *The use of genetically modified crops in developing countries*, published in January 2004.

We are aware that achieving food security and reducing poverty in developing countries are highly complex issues. We do not claim that GM crops will eliminate the need for economic, political or social change, or that they will feed the world. However, we do believe that GM technology could make a useful contribution, in appropriate circumstances, to improving agriculture and the livelihood of poor farmers in developing countries. We should like to draw your attention to recommendations that specifically relate to UK international development policy:

- In particular cases, GM crops can contribute to substantial progress in improving agriculture, in parallel to the (usually slow) changes at the socio-political level. GM crops have demonstrated the potential to reduce environmental degradation and to address specific health, ecological and agricultural problems which have proved less responsive to the standard tools of plant breeding and organic or conventional agricultural practices. **There is an ethical obligation to explore these potential benefits responsibly, in order to contribute to the reduction of poverty, and to improve food security and profitable agriculture in developing countries** (paragraph 4.48).
- Much of the current privately funded research on GM crops serves the interest of large-scale farmers in developed countries. Consequently there is a serious risk that the needs of small-scale farmers in developing countries will be neglected. It appears that research on these crops will have to be supported primarily by the public sector. **We therefore affirm the recommendation made in our 1999 Report that genuinely additional resources be committed by the UK Department for International Development (DFID), the European Commission, national governments and others, to fund a major expansion of public GM-related research into tropical and sub-tropical staple foods, suitable for the needs of small-scale farmers in developing countries. In determining which traits and crops should be developed, funding bodies should be proactive in consulting with national and regional bodies in developing countries to identify relevant priorities** (paragraphs 6.16-6.17).
- It is of particular importance that developing countries improve their capacity to independently review and assess the use of GM crops in specific situations. **Since means for the development of the required expertise are limited in most developing countries, we welcome and endorse the United Nations Environment Programme and the Global Environment Facility (UNEP/GEF) undertaking of promoting the building of capacity in relevant expertise** (paragraph 5.24 – 5.25). We are aware that DFID currently supports this initiative and also seeks to devise guidelines for participation by the public in decision making processes for biosafety frameworks.
- The freedom of choice of farmers in developing countries is being severely challenged by the agricultural policy of the European Union. Developing countries might well be reluctant to approve GM crop varieties because of fears of

jeopardising their current and future export markets. They may also not be able to provide the necessary infrastructure to enable compliance with EU requirements for traceability and labelling. **We recommend that the European Commission (EC), the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and appropriate non governmental organisations which monitor the agricultural policies of developing countries examine the consequences of EU regulatory policies for the use of GM crops in developing countries. We recommend that the European Commission establish a procedure to report on the impact of its regulations accordingly (paragraph 5.50).**

- **Access to plant genetic resources is critically important for the development of GM crops which are suited to the needs of developing countries. We welcome the decision by the UK Government to ratify the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture. Access to resources falling under the Treaty is of crucial importance in the development of crops suited to developing countries. We recommend that in the negotiations regarding the standard Material Transfer Agreement (MTA), the UK Government aims for provisions that exempt users in developing countries from payments, where commercial applications arise from material covered by the MTA. Where exemptions are not appropriate, differentiation of payments should take into account the level of development of the country in question (paragraph 5.15).**

We would be pleased to discuss these issues with you in more detail.

Yours sincerely

Dr Sandy Thomas
Director