



PRESS RELEASE SEACON

Consumers call for transparency and access to accurate information on Genetically Engineered Food and Agricultural Products

5th October 2009. A Public Forum on "Genetic Engineering of Rice and Other Crops" was held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia through a collaborative effort of the Southeast Asian Council for Food Security (SEACON), the Federation of Malaysian Consumers Associations (FOMCA), Education and Research Association-Malaysia (ERA-Consumer), Development of Human Resources in Rural Areas Malaysia (DHRRA Malaysia) and Pesticide action Network-Asian and Pacific (PAN-AP) in conjunction with the Year of Rice Action (YORA).



The half-day Public Forum in Kuala Lumpur addressed another threat to rice and agricultural crops regionally and international, with specific focus on Malaysia. In particular, the forum presented the implications of genetically engineered crops from consumer perspectives. With the supports of the consumer groups, issues related to safety, health and religious aspects were discussed in the forum. The President of FOMCA, Datuk Marimuthu Nadason, clearly articulated the concerns of the general public regarding the trend in biotechnology. In his opening remark, Datuk Marimuthu also stressed the importance of clear and accurate labeling of food and food ingredients produced through genetic engineering techniques. The importance of access to vital information that could affect consumer safety and health, as well religious or cultural acceptance must be placed as priority in any policy related to GE food.

Attended by more than one hundred participants from various professions and agencies including embassies, research institutions, universities, ministries, insurance, NGOs, consumers, manufacturers, and breeders, the Forum was also presented with the views and scope of activities related to genetic engineering in food and agriculture in the U.S, as well as other developed and developing countries. Dr. Michael Hansen from the Consumers Union USA, who has a long standing experience in dealing with issues surrounding genetic engineering food and agriculture, expressed various concerns not only from the consumer perspectives, but also from producers, environmental and biodiversity aspects, where most often GE crops were linked to the use of pesticides and other chemical inputs. The profit-driven role of multinational corporations and weak political will were stated as some factors behind the aggressive pursuits for genetic engineered products. Genetically engineered crops such as the Golden Rice, Liberty Link, Monsanto's MON810 and NK603 maize, were mentioned in the discussion.

The Forum also had the pleasure of receiving valuable inputs from Assoc. Prof. Dr. Rosli Omar from Faculty of Engineering, University Malaya was talking about “The Genetic Engineering Industry: Impact and Regulation. Ms Lim Li Ching from Third World Network talked about the direction and future of GE in Malaysia, whether the products and the technology is safe and Sustainable for Malaysia. Pn Shamsinar Abdul Talib, Deputy Director, Food Safety & Quality Division, Ministry of Health addressed “The Need to Label GMF- Information Sharing”. In her presentation, Pn. Shamsinar stressed that important information related to health implications (allergenic effects) must be made available to consumers, consistent with Malaysia’s position on the Codex Committee on Food Labeling where Malaysia supports mandatory labeling of GMF.



Industrial Perspective on GE Food and Agricultural Crops was presented by Mr. Ng Kim Keat from the Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers. Mr. Ng summarized that food safety is paramount to industrial players. He stressed that avoiding any potential risks to consumers is the most critical aspect for manufacturers, as the risk could severely affect future businesses and credibility of a company. From consumers’ perspective, Ms. Ratna Devi Nadarajan reiterated on consumer issues, communication through labeling and stakeholder engagement.

The vibrant discussions and questions and answers sessions were graciously moderated through the cooperative supports of Dr. Rozi Mohamed from the Faculty of Forestry, Dr. Norida Mazlan from Institute Technology of Agriculture, both from Universiti Putra Malaysia, as well as Dr. A. Sivapragasam from Rice & Industrial Crops Research Centre, of the Malaysian Agricultural Research and Development Institute.



At the conclusion of the Forum, it was clear that the public remained wary of the issues surrounding the genetic engineering of rice and agricultural crops. It was agreed that governance and policy mechanisms such as the Biosafety Act 2007 and Food Act 1983 may require revisions and improvements to cover any potential loopholes, and labeling policy that safeguards consumers and provides accurate information needed to be developed. Consumers strongly called for stringent and comprehensive sustainability impact studies and risk communications also to be carried regarding any implementations of genetic engineering activities in food and agriculture.

The Forum was the second YORA event in West Malaysia which continued to highlight the various threats confronting rice production and food security. In the first event earlier in July 2009, from farmer perspectives, the threat of land conversion for activities competing for rice land was highlighted. In the first YORA event, SEACON specifically drew attention to the activity of Arowana fish breeding on converted rice fields in Malaysia with the focus concerns on the abused of irrigation system meant for rice production and detrimental impact of water discharged from the pond on rice yields, as well as safety and of rice products and health of farmers and workers.