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UN Agency's report incompetent, illogical and ill-willed, say more than 650 civil society organizations in Open Letter

Message to FAO: "Fight Hunger – Not Farmers"

The UN Food and Agriculture Organisation's (FAO) 2003-2004 Report on the State of Food and Agriculture amounts to a declaration of war on the farmers it is pledged to support. Rural organizations contemplate next steps.

More than 650 civil society organisations (NGOs and social movements) and 800 individuals from 83 countries delivered an open letter to Jacques Diouf, Director-General of the Rome-based UN agency today condemning FAO's incompetence in addressing scientific and technical issues related to genetically-engineered crops and questioning the agency's integrity in relating to the world's smallholder farmers. Among the signatories are national and international farmers' organisations, scientists, and literally hundreds of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) some of whom have had formal consultative status with FAO for decades. The letter was hand-delivered to FAO on behalf of its signatories Wednesday morning by Antonio Onorati, who chaired the umbrella body that worked with FAO and its member governments for the World Food Summits of 1996 and 2002.

The open letter comes one month after FAO's May 17th release of "*Agricultural biotechnology: meeting the needs of the poor?*" – the focus of the agency's annual "State of Food and Agriculture" Report.

According to the letter, FAO's 200-plus page document struggles to appear neutral but comes off as a public relations piece for genetically-modified seeds and the biotech industry. Specifically:

- Although it is an intergovernmental body, FAO chose to cite the field trial data of global biotech companies rather than those of independent scientists or of its own member governments. "The report simply lacks scientific rigour and intellectual integrity," notes Jim Thomas of ETC Group's UK office.
- In a stunning reversal of the Director-General's public opposition to Terminator technology – a position shared by FAO's Panel of Eminent Experts on Ethics in Food and Agriculture along with a past recipient of the World Food Prize, the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research, and numerous governments – the agency's report now seems to condone the seed sterilization technology. "First it says that GM seeds can be environmentally safe and beneficial for small farmers, and then it says that, in case they're wrong, Terminator could forestall genetic wipe-out," Hope Shand, ETC's Research Director points out.
- Despite its members' deep-divisions over the patenting of life - and contrary warnings from a recent British government commission – FAO's report, without evidence or rationale, encourages plant patent monopolies to stimulate pro-poor corporate research. "Amid growing recognition that patenting works against the development interests of the South," argues Silvia Ribeiro of ETC's Mexico office, "FAO is siding with the corporations against its own member governments."
- Although genetic contamination is polluting the very heart of the world's centres of crop diversity, FAO brushes aside this tragedy with hardly a comment. Yet, for the very cultures that created agriculture this is an aggression against their life, against the crops they created and nurture, and

- In extolling the entirely theoretical possibilities of GM products for the poor, FAO ignores the successes of its own staff in developing environmentally-friendly agro-ecological and farmer-led research. “It’s as though the organization gave itself a frontal lobotomy,” Pat Mooney notes.

False promises: Of greatest concern to the 1500 organizations and individuals signing the open letter is that Jacques Diouf and his senior staff ignored their written (January 16th, 2003) commitment to discuss such policy issues with them before publishing reports. Following protracted negotiations after the 2002 Food Summit, Mr. Diouf offered to create a new relationship with NGOs and, especially, with smallholder farmers’ organizations and to consult on issues of mutual concern. At that time and in face-to-face meetings since, the Director-General repeatedly assured civil society organizations that agricultural biotechnology and GM contamination concerns would be discussed with them prior to any new policy or programme initiatives. “We were deliberately kept out of the loop,” Pat Mooney insists. “No one ever suggested that ours should be the only voice heard or that FAO – as an intergovernmental organization – might not adopt policies we disagree with, but the promise to dialogue and share information was in writing and it was trashed.” ETC Group (formerly as RAFI) has been attending FAO negotiations since 1979.

World Food Day? In the month since the release of FAO’s report, civil society organizations around the world have been in a constant teleconference and e-mail discussion concerning other steps that should be taken beyond the open letter. Although plans are not finalized, Pat Mooney notes that, “Four months from today, on October 16th, FAO marks World Food Day. Several hundred farmers and other civil society organizations have already agreed to meet near Rome at that time to discuss their future relations with FAO.”

What can be done? ETC Group will be going to the meeting with suggestions. “If FAO can't work with farmers and civil society then they can't work,” explains Mooney. “Without the input of smallholder farmers and rural leaders, policymaking is like one hand clapping. If I were FAO, I would be thinking about what can be done between now and October 16th to renew their handshake with civil society. If not? The strength of social movements and NGOs lies at the grass roots – at the national level. If we can't trust FAO, we will make our views known to our policymakers and to the departments that finance FAO. The organization’s biennial conference will be held in November 2005 when, among other things, the post of Director-General will be up for election. FAO elections are a byzantine affair that should be exposed to public scrutiny. We may well decide to blow some fresh air into FAO.”

For further information:

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The Action Group on Erosion, Technology and Concentration, formerly RAFI, is an international civil society organization headquartered in Canada. The ETC Group is dedicated to the advancement of cultural and ecological diversity and human rights. www.etcgroup.org. The ETC Group is also a member of the Community Biodiversity Development and Conservation Programme (CBDC). The CBDC is a collaborative experimental initiative involving civil society organizations and public research institutions in 14 countries. The CBDC is dedicated to the exploration of community-directed programmes to strengthen the conservation and enhancement of agricultural biodiversity. The CBDC website is www.cbdcprogram.org

+ **Over 650 organisations and 800 individuals from 83 countries sign on to an open letter to FAO.** The full text of the open letter, and a list of those who have signed onto it, can be downloaded from: <http://www.grain.org/go/fao-en>

+ **The FAO press release about its report, and the report itself can be found at:** <http://www.fao.org/newsroom/en/news/2004/41714/index.html>