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UN International Year of Rice: Pushing GMOs?

The year 2004 has been the United Nations' International Year of Rice, which follows 2003's International Year of Water.

The first move towards this designation was made through a resolution drafted and presented to the UN Food and Agriculture (FAO) by 44 UN member nations. They are deeply concerned about rice development, and predict a pending crisis.

In response, the FAO's Director - General Dr. Jacques Diouf, promoted the cause of rice, calling it "a symbol of cultural identity." He pointed out that rice is the staple food for more than half the world's population. "Almost a billion households in Asia, Africa and the Americas depend on rice systems for their source of employment and livelihood." Dr. Diouf further told the UN delegates: "About four-fifths

of the world's rice is produced by small-scale farmers and is consumed locally. Rice systems support a wide variety of plants and animals, which also help supplement rural diets and incomes. Rice is therefore on the front line in the fight against world hunger and poverty."

On October 31, 2003, the United Nations General Assembly, responding to this urgent warning by the FAO, decided for the first time to set aside an entire year to a single crop. In its Declaration the UN states that land and water resources for rice production are diminishing even as the world population continues to grow.

However, there is another side to the FAO's promotion of rice that gives cause for concern: "We aim to engage the entire community of stakeholders, from rural farmers to the scientific institutions that mapped the rice genome, in the mission to increase rice production in a manner that promotes sustainability and equity." This statement opens up serious questions:

- Does the International Year of the Rice mean that the energies generated by this UN focus will be aimed down the path of more agrochemicals and genetically modified crops?
- Will the new strategies used truly result in less

hunger or in creation of new profit systems?

● If the poor do not have the power to buy food or seeds, how can the single focus of increased production help them? (India's "Green Revolution," from 1967 to 1978, raised wheat and rice production in India, where granaries are now overflowing. Yet, 5,000 children die each day of malnutrition because 1/3 of their population cannot afford to buy what has been produced.)

During 2004, the FAO will lead a number of international agricultural organizations in organizing a campaign under the motto of "Rice is Life." There is a need for NGOs and civil society to closely monitor the activities of agribusiness, petro-chemical industries, as well as "agricultural organizations" around the world. Individuals and groups can start with following the activities of the UN and the FAO during the International Year of Rice and by learning more about the original "Green Revolution" and its effects. Also, a continued study and discussion of the genetic interference of GMOs, their ethical implications and effect on nature is called for. Parish communities can link with sister-parishes in countries targeted by the FAO to learn first hand about what is happening. Become "partners" with groups

already involved in monitoring agriculture, and work together so that the International Year of Rice truly will result in alleviation of poverty and hunger of those who rely on rice, or on any other staple, to sustain life.

For more information on the establishment of the 2004 International Year, check the FAO's website at www.fao.org Also visit the website of the Asia Rice Foundation at www.asiarice.org

To learn more about the Green Revolution, read Lessons from the Green Revolution, Tikkun Magazine (March-April 2000), written by Peter Rosset, Joseph Collins and Frances Moore Lappe, available at Food First's website, www.foodfirst.org and the The Real Green Revolution, written by Nicholas Parrot & Terry Marsden and published in London by the Greenpeace Environment Trust February, 2002; ISBN 1 90 3907-020. Article is taken from News Notes, Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns / January/February 2004/ Volume 29, Number 1

Excerpts from CHURCH'S SOCIAL TEACHING AND THE ETHICS OF GMOS by Roland Lesseps, SJ and Peter Henriot, SJ presented at Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (PCJP) at the study seminar entitled, "GMOS in Agriculture" at the Vatican, Nov. 10-11, 2003.

Our theological perspective stressed the respect due to all of God's creation, a respect that recognizes the

sacredness and inherent value of the cosmic order. As a consequence, genetic modification can never be viewed simply as a technological or economic tool in the hands of humans. This enables us to see that the so-called "precautionary principle" invoked, for example, by Zambia, is more than a temporary scientific safeguard. It is a fundamental call to humility before the awesome goodness of God's creation.

Our Catholic Social Teaching perspective demonstrated the value-added dimension given to GMO discussions by the principles of the common good, option for the poor, subsidiarity, and solidarity. These principles provide the fundamental challenges to the geo-political and neo-liberal forces that are promoting GMOs in agriculture today. Certainly they should guide any church responses to GMO policies.

We feel that these two perspectives both broaden our vision and deepen our compassion when we look at the way the question of GMOs is frequently – and mistakenly – put: an either-or choice of feeding a hungry world. There are other and more suitable ways to feed a hungry world than adopting genetic engineering of crops. These are the ways that are revealed when we seriously, as Pontifical Council and as concerned members of the

human community, at the issues of "justice and peace, the development of peoples and violations of human rights."

This is all the more obvious when we remember that food is not merely another economic commodity governed in its production and distribution by the laws of the market. Since it is essential to life, it is both a sacred entity and a global common good.

For the full text of Church's Social Teaching and the Ethics of Genetic Modified Organisms (GMOs) by Roland Lesseps, SJ and Peter Henriot, SJ, visit www.loyno.edu/twomey/blueprint
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