ACT International
Policy Paper on Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) in Emergency Operations

Policy paper adopted by the ACT Executive Committee, June 27-28, 2006

Genetically Modified Organisms

Genetically modified organisms (GMOs) refer to plants and animals that have been manipulated at the genetic level through a special set of technologies that alter the makeup of living organisms, which is also called biotechnology.

Biotechnology is a set of enabling techniques for bringing about specific human-made changes in DNA, or genetic material, in plants, animals and microbial systems, leading to new or improved products and technologies. Biotechnology focuses on the cell nucleus. The modern genetic manipulations consist of addition, subtraction, substitution, mutation, deactivation or destruction of genes. The trans-genesis is a biotechnology applicable in animals and plants that consists of adding an animal or vegetable gene to a genome to be modified.

Controversy

Genetically modified organisms (GMOs) generate a passionate and emotional debate in contemporary society. There is a polarisation between those groups that promote GMO as a cure for the hunger in the world and a better life for all in the future, and those that are against this new technology, which put the planet in danger. The controversies about GMOs are basically around the food supply and their impact on social, economic, cultural and environmental welfare. Scientific studies are currently insufficient and inconclusive to state categorically that GMOs are harmful or beneficial to human health.

The quality of some studies is also controversial whether they show harmful and harmless impacts on the social, economic, environmental and cultural spheres of the globe.
Guidelines for ACT members regarding Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs)

Action by Churches Together (ACT) International is a global alliance of churches and related agencies working to protect and save lives and support communities in emergencies worldwide.

The ACT alliance is organisationally based in the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and the World Council of Churches (WCC).

As members of ACT we understand that emergency response through humanitarian assistance includes prevention and capacity building, recognising that our assistance is global in scope and is rendered together with, or on behalf of local communities, national and international partners for the benefit of people in need, irrespective of race, sex, creed, nationality or political conviction.

Called to manifest God’s love for all people, the ACT alliance mobilises resources for effective emergency preparedness and response worldwide. Working in cooperation with others, ACT respects human dignity and restores livelihoods and communities affected by disasters and humanitarian crises. ACT gives priority to the role of local expressions of the church and community-based approaches, and provides prophetic leadership in addressing human factors that contribute to emergencies and their disproportionate impact on impoverished and marginalized communities.

ACT International as a global alliance furthermore recognises that the use of GMOs in emergency situations are complex and multidimensional, and that any organisation that distributes and promotes food aid and seeds carries a high responsibility regarding food safety and biodiversity towards its constituency, partners and society in general. Therefore, ACT International establishes the following guidelines for its members in their field operations regarding GMOs:

Considering that:

1) Not enough is known about GMOs to categorically state whether they will be harmful, harmless or beneficial in some aspects to human health in the longer term;

2) Food and life are gifts from God and we are co-workers and stewards with God to sustain creation and life and the abundance thereof.

3) Food and agriculture are fundamental to all peoples, in terms of both production and availability of sufficient quantities of safe and healthy food, and as foundations of healthy communities, cultures and environments;

4) In order to guarantee food security and food sovereignty of all of the world’s peoples, it is essential that food is produced through diversified, community based production systems;

5) Governments and peoples have the right to define their own food and agriculture management policies; to protect and regulate domestic agricultural production and trade in order to achieve sustainable development objectives, and to restrict the dumping of products in their markets.

6) Food shortages are in the first place a result of exclusion from the food market by chronic poverty;
7) The humanitarian imperative can become a double sided sword in the GMO issue, since non-acceptance of GM food can lead to a deepening food crisis, with more mortality as a result, but at the same time the acceptance of GM food can lead to changes in agricultural practices, which exclude farmers from participating in production; can pollute the environment and damage local food grain varieties, both leading to agricultural decline and growing dependency.

8) Patenting of indigenous seeds and plants can be used to create monopolies and make everyday products highly priced;

9) Large transnational corporations have been investing into biotechnology in such a way that patents have been taken out on indigenous plants which have been used for generations by the local people, without their knowledge or consent;

10) The most crucial problem of the GM food aid is related to the risk of elimination of native seeds through the cross-pollination process.

11) Some small farmers and peasants are holding portions of food aid to use as seeds in sowing, which cause the forthcoming harvests to become GM, reducing the capacity of reproduction.

ACT International adopts the following implementing guidelines for field operations (in emergency situations) referring to Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs). The guidelines are an adaptation based on the position paper produced by Lutheran World Federation’s Department for World Service (DWS) on GMOs in Emergency and Development Operations, which was approved by the DWS Standing Committee on May 4, 2005.¹

General principles:

1) "Precautionary Principle"²: People have a duty to take anticipatory action to prevent any possible harm. The burden of proof of harmlessness of a new technology, process, activity, or chemical lies with the proponents, not with the consumer and general public. Before using a new technology, process, or chemical, or starting a new activity, people have an obligation to examine a full range of alternatives including the alternative of doing nothing. Decisions applying the precautionary principle must be open, informed, and democratic and must include affected parties.

2) Right to Food: Everyone has a fundamental right to be free from hunger and undernourished. Realising this right requires not only equitable and sustainable food systems, but also entitlements relating to livelihood security such as the right to work, land and social security. The primary responsibility for guaranteeing these entitlements rests with the states.

¹ LWF/DWS has agreed that ACT International, a global alliance of churches and their related agencies, of which LWF is a founding member, may adopt their policy and guidelines on GMOs in emergencies, to guide alliance members in their field operations in response to humanitarian crises.

² Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety: Articles 10(6) and 11(6): "Lack of scientific certainty due to insufficient relevant scientific information and knowledge regarding the extent of the potential adverse effects of a living modified organism on the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity in the Party of import, taking also into account risks to human health, shall not prevent that Party from taking a decision, as appropriate, with regard to the import of the living modified organism in question as referred to in paragraph 3 above, in order to avoid or minimise such potential adverse effects."
3) Right to Know: Consumers, farmers and the general population have the right to know whether there are genetically modified ingredients in the food they buy or in the seeds they sow. They have the right to have enough information to make responsible decisions.

**Guidelines for Emergency Operations (food aid - food distribution)**

1. Food aid will be bought as much as possible locally, nationally and in the region. Members of ACT International in their field programs will primarily promote that the food aid is based on the production of local or regional native crops, in order to provide culturally acceptable food items and to encourage the local economy and livelihood.

2. Members of ACT International will NOT buy any GM food with the resources administered by it, even if the food comes from the local market.

3. Members of ACT International will request objective information on the origin of the food aid received from the governments and/or World Food Program, especially if they are genetically modified or GM-free.

4. Members of ACT International will comply with the relevant national legislation on biosafety, especially regarding the use of GMOs in food aid, if they are in place.

5. If the distribution of donated GM food aid is unavoidable, in order to alleviate a serious hunger situation, and there is no other alternative and timely solution, the members of ACT International in their field programs will first ensure that:
   - all beneficiaries have a right to know the origin of the food available and if they are genetically modified.
   - all beneficiaries have a right to choose and decide if they want GM food or not.

6. Members of ACT International will not distribute whole kernel GM crops as food aid. GM crops delivered as food aid must be milled. If World Food Program (WFP) and the host government provide members of ACT International with whole kernel crops for food aid, they will be milled before distribution to the beneficiaries. Members of ACT International will allocate financial resources for milling if WFP or host governments do not provide them. Members of ACT International will also support mechanisms for supervision and monitoring of the milling and distribution process.

7. In post-crisis and rehabilitation agricultural recovery projects, members of ACT International will promote the supply of native seeds, tools and other inputs essential to the production of food crops. Food security will focus on linking humanitarian and relief aid and long-term development, by applying the principles of sustainability throughout;

8. Members of ACT International will work in a complementary way with WFP, FAO and governments to explore alternatives for avoiding GM food aid in future emergency situations.