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### **Scientists Against the Brave New World**

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World Scientists in US Congress and Special Biotechnology Forum

There was standing room only when Rev. David Beckmann began his introduction and people were still filing in. The educational forum "Can biotechnology help fight world hunger?" (June 29, 2000) attracted a record number of congressional staff as well as members of the public on Capitol Hill. Our World Scientists Open Letter, updated, and signed by 327 scientists from 38 countries (now 452 scientists from 56 countries), was presented to US Congress on the occasion.

The event was sponsored and organized by Representative Tony Hall, well-known and respected for raising the profile of world hunger in Congress. In his opening remarks, he stressed that he was not interested to know if biotechnology could make money, but in how it could do something for hungry kids and how we can share prosperity with the poor.

Senator Richard Lugar, Chair of the Senate Agricultural Committee, a strong supporter of the biotech industry, condemned the opposition as 'emotional' and stressed the 'enormous potential' of GM crops, citing 'golden rice' -- engineered to produce pro-vitamin A -- as a cure for vitamin A deficiency in the Third World. (In anticipation of just this biotech propaganda, ISIS' Sustainable Science Audit #1, "The 'Golden Rice' -- An Exercise in How Not to Do Science" [from [www.i-sis.org.uk](http://www.i-sis.org.uk)] had been circulated in advance, thanks to Consumer Choice Council.)

Representative Robert Ehrlich, who claimed to represent small businesses, answered yes to the question of whether biotechnology can help fight world hunger. "Sound science" ought to be used, he admonished. He had seen what happened in Europe when "ideas get demonized quickly", and it should not happen in the US.

Representative Dennis Kucinich, who has introduced a bill for labelling of GMOs to Congress, reminded everyone that we all have a common interest to feed the hungry. But his answer to the question was no. The world is not short of food, and if people are hungry, then we have to think again, he said. It is financial hardship and poor distribution of food that are the causes of world hunger. Perhaps sustainable agriculture can help, but the Green Revolution did not. Biotechnology should encourage sustainable agriculture that can be compatible with mandatory labelling, which is the right to know.

"No one should have to choose between food inadequately tested and no food at all!" Kucinich stated, "Food standards should be the same all over." He was against food aid dumping. It was an ethical responsibility not to do so. Dr. Vandana Shiva had presented Congress with a memo objecting to GM food being dumped as relief to flood victims in Orissa and elsewhere.

Four scientists were the main presenters. Dr. Martina McGloughlin of UC Davies and Dr. C.S. Prakash of Tuskegee University both argued that biotechnology is needed to combat world hunger. In contrast, Dr. Vandana Shiva, Director of the Foundation for Science, Technology and Natural Resources in India and myself from ISIS argued that biotechnology and corporate monopoly on food through seed patenting and biopiracy can only exacerbate world hunger, while the question of safety is at best unresolved. Furthermore, sustainable agricultural methods are already proving successful all over the world, and introduction of GM crops can only hinder and obstruct the implementation of real solutions to world hunger. I also took the opportunity to explain why genetic engineering, at least in the form it is currently done, is inherently hazardous. (see "Can biotechnology help fight world hunger?" [from [www.i-sis.org.uk](http://www.i-sis.org.uk)]).

After the short presentations, a questions and answers session was led by prominent 'challengers' representing the ngos, the industry and the press. It was notable that although McGloughlin and Prakash were both scientists, neither spoke about science at all. They refused to acknowledge the scientific evidence of actual and potential hazards, and could offer no evidence to back up their claims that GM crops are safe. McGloughlin even went as far as to accuse the European Union of erecting false trade barriers on grounds of safety. Vandana Shiva's objection to the patents on the Indian Neem tree, Basmati rice and other indigenous plants that Indian farmers have developed and used for centuries brought an astonishing outburst from Prakash, who declared, " I am sick and tired of hearing about biopiracy. Thank God for biopiracy . . . "

I emphasized that the debate was not science versus antiscience, but that there is genuine scientific dissent within the scientific community, as evidenced by the hundreds of scientists who have signed our Open Letter, and the FDA's own scientific advisors who warned of new risks associated with genetic engineering of crops. When I reminded the house that the lack of scientific consensus and uncertainty are the conditions for applying the precautionary principle, supporters of the biotech industry predictably scoffed, as many of them have been going around dismissing the precautionary principle recently in mainstream journals such as *Nature* and *Nature Biotechnology*. (For more detailed arguments on why the precautionary principle is part and parcel of sound science see recently posted, "Use and Abuse of the Precautionary Principle" [from [www.i-sis.org.uk](http://www.i-sis.org.uk)].)

The representative from Zeneca spoke, also predictably, about the golden rice, which they have recently acquired the rights for, and have announced that they will offer it 'free' to the Third World. I challenged her on how something that already has 70 patents can be offered free, and hoped that Zeneca will reply in detail to ISIS' Audit. She admitted that the patents issue is very complicated and has to be solved.

Michael Pollan, the *N.Y. Times* journalist who stunned the United States into action on GMOs with his famous article, "Trouble in the garden" about Monsanto's GM potato, confessed to be not at all convinced by the arguments on benefits. "Have the benefits been proven?" He asked, "Have the risks been proven to outweigh the benefits?" He urged the precautionary approach. "Industry is in trouble", he stated, "But why should I eat a GM potato?" Indeed.

In his summing up, Rev. David Beckman, President of Bread for the World, stressed that other tools besides biotechnology must be used to combat world hunger, that it is the imbalance of power that is the cause of world hunger. He also touched on the ethics of science and the fact that people don't quite trust scientists anymore.

The entire three-hour long event was recorded in transcript as well as on video (contact Cameron Griffith of Consumer Choice Council [cameron@attglobal.net](mailto:cameron@attglobal.net))

Our World Scientists Open Letter has been going places! It is currently supporting the call for five-year freeze in South Africa. We are bringing it next to The State of the World Forum in New York this September, not to mention Thailand, Malaysia, Prague and Latin America .

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If you don't yet know about it, our Open Letter from World Scientists (newly posted [www.i-sis.org.uk](http://www.i-sis.org.uk)) states the following:

- We are extremely concerned about the hazards of GMOs to biodiversity, food safety, human and animal health, and demand a moratorium on environmental releases in accordance with the precautionary principle.
- We are opposed to GM crops that will intensify corporate monopoly, exacerbate inequality and prevent the essential shift to sustainable agriculture that can provide food security and health around the world.
- We call for a ban on patents of life-forms and living processes which threaten food security, sanction biopiracy of indigenous knowledge and genetic resources and violate basic human rights and dignity.
- We want more support on research and development of non-corporate, sustainable agriculture that can benefit family farmers and consumers all over the world.

If you agree with these basic points, please sign on! You can make the difference between a sustainable, people-centred, earth-sustaining future and the brave new world of bad science and big business.

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