

UPHOLD THE RIGHTS OF THE CONSUMERS TO SAFE AND HEALTHY FOOD!

ENFORCE MANDATORY LABELLING ON FOOD PRODUCTS WITH GMOs!

## **MAGSASAKA at SIYENTIPIKO para sa PAG-UNLAD NG AGRIKULTURA (MASIPAG)**

The Codex Alimentarius Commission, the highest international body of food quality and safety standards, has recommended that governments test and approve the safety of food stuffs derived from genetically modified organisms before they are put on the market. Yet the Philippine government did not conduct such tests when Monsanto's Bt-corn (Dekalb 818 YG) was approved for commercialization. There were no feeding studies, no tests to check for environmental risks such as genetic contamination and effects on non-target organisms, and no socio-economic risk analyses undertaken.

There has been no thorough independent study done anywhere in the world to determine possible risks associated with the consumption of foodstuffs containing genetically modified ingredients. In fact, there is growing scientific evidence to suggest it is unsafe<sup>1</sup>. GM food can potentially give rise to a range of health problems, including: food allergies; chronic toxic effects; infections from bacteria that have developed resistance to antibiotics; and possible ailments including cancers, some of which are yet difficult or impossible to predict because of the present state of risk assessment and food safety tests<sup>2</sup>.

Here in the country, the small farmers' experience on Bt-corn was not at all positive. First there was the report from Sara, Iloilo where a farmer planted Monsanto's Dekalb 818 YG but then suffered a loss when his crops were affected by stalk rot. Almost 40% of the farmer's crops were damaged due to the fungus which caused the stems and the stalk to dry and rot.

Then on July 2003, the residents of Sityo Kalyong, Polomolok, South Cotabato complained of respiratory illnesses allegedly experienced during the flowering of Monsanto's Bt-corn. The residents, mostly indigenous people from the B'laan tribe, suffered headaches, bouts of dizziness, stomachaches, difficulty in breathing, vomiting and diarrhea. About a year later, at least two more corn-farming communities in the Sultan Kudarat province reported the same illnesses. It is important to note that this could not possibly be a psychological thing, since the farmers were not informed by the technicians and the land owner (the affected persons are mostly tenants) that what they planted was Bt-corn. It is very suspicious and alarming that the residents of three separate communities exhibit almost the same illnesses during the flowering of the Bt-corn.

The cases of illnesses in the farming communities, while not yet conclusive that the cause was the Bt-corn, only demonstrate the possible effects of GMOs among humans. To protect the people from worse cases, products containing GMOs should be labeled properly so as to inform the consumers.

Aside from the possible health effects on farmers and consumers, we believe that it will not economically benefit the Philippines to allow genetically engineered products to be grown. All over the world, markets are closing to genetically engineered products. The gates to Europe and Japan for GM commodities have all but closed and countries such as New Zealand and Australia, Brazil, South Korea, Saudi Arabia and others are following suit. Saudi Arabia has already banned 17 GMO-tainted Philippine Products including popular children's snacks and meat products<sup>3</sup>.

In addition to the health and safety concerns we also see major problems associated with commercialisation of GMOs including:

- genetic privatization (through patenting and plant variety protection);
- genetic contamination (where genes from GMO cross with conventional and traditional varieties as was the case in Mexico);
- possible market rejection of GMOs (GMO-free is increasingly a market advantage);
- threats to farmers' rights through increasing monopolization in agriculture; and,
- consumers' right to know what they are eating.

As a suitable alternative to GMOs, MASIPAG focuses on the promotion of sustainable agriculture. With high yields, low pest infestation, and increased biodiversity, MASIPAG's work proves that even without the use of dangerous GMOs, farmers have a means of producing safe, clean and nutritious food with yields exceeding those of conventional farming in a manner that is profitable for them.

MASIPAG firmly asserts the rights of the farmers and the consumers as well. We should not put into risk the lives of people with uncertain technology that is now being promoted in the country. We should uphold the consumers' rights to know, and most importantly their right to a safe and healthy food by requiring mandatory labeling on food products containing GMOs or processed through genetic engineering.

**(Footnotes)**

<sup>1</sup> Technical report on the Food Standards Agency project G010008, 2002, *Evaluating the risks associated with using GMOs in human foods*, University of Newcastle

<sup>2</sup> Third World Network 2002, *Open letter to the Government of the U.S.A, the World Food Programme, the World Health Organisation, and the Food and Agriculture Organisation*, 20 September 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Greenpeace, 2002, *Press release*, Philippines