

## Summary of e-discussion about GMOs for smallholder farmers and SDC's new position paper on Genetically Modified Crops

### Background and objectives

The GPFS recently reviewed the SDC's guidelines on green biotechnology, prepared in 2007, in order to consolidate and refresh its position regarding genetically modified organisms (GMOs). As a result, the GPFS formulated its position in a short briefing note which updates and complements the above-mentioned guidelines. The e-discussion summarised here was organised to help disseminate the briefing note and generate feedback from network members. The aim was to provide space for collecting inputs on experiences from projects and programmes, as well as network members' personal views and reflections on the issue.

*Network members contributed 17 comments during the e-discussion.*

### General comments on the briefing paper

The briefing paper was generally well received. It was welcomed as relevant, timely, and useful by several contributors. Some network members missed more explicit references to alternative approaches for sustainably increasing smallholder farmers' production and would have liked to see greater emphasis on such approaches.

Overall, and not surprisingly, the reactions reflected **contrasting perspectives** regarding GMOs and their consequences for smallholder agriculture. Within the network, there are both very critical views and highly supportive positions on GMOs. However, members also called for a differentiated picture and pointed out that there is not only pro and contra GMO but that there is a large grey area particularly with the continuous progress in technologies for genetic engineering.

Some comments depicted the difference in opinions as one between the rich North that can afford to be critical, versus the South that has pressing needs to meet, necessitating the application of GM technologies. But a considerable number of statements from the South – for example from Tanzania, India, Colombia, and Nepal – testify that controversial positions are also present in the South.

### Key discussion points and messages from the e-discussion

**Need for a regulatory framework that allows safe use of GMOs:** This is still under development in many countries and needs to be strengthened. Examples were given from Rwanda. It was observed that the state's capacity to regulate the use of GMOs is still low in many cases.

**Coexistence of GMOs with traditional varieties:** This was an issue of concern in many contributions. Contributors pointed out that many countries in the South are centres of genetic diversity for many important crops, and that the risks of gene flow to wild relatives are thus serious. Many consider that

the risks of losing potentially important genetic diversity of important food crops by introducing GM crops are not yet resolved.

**Costs and difficulty of developing parallel value chains:** This was mentioned as an additional challenge for introducing GMOs into the food chain in environments where not everybody is willing to eat food produced from GM crops.

**Potential benefits of the technology up to now:** As of today the benefits for smallholders in marginal areas were seen as low. Some participants perceive a need to use this technology particularly for such target groups.

**Addressing severe malnutrition problems:** The potential contribution of GMOs to reducing malnutrition was mentioned.

**The dominant role of the private sector in developing and marketing GMOs:** Several contributions stressed that GMOs are not just a technical issue but need to be addressed from various angles, including social, economic and political ones, and covering all aspects of food security and food sovereignty. Some viewed GMOs as a solution that serves the private sector (seed companies) only and runs counter to smallholders' interests.

**Contribution of technology development and research to human development:** It was pointed out that technology development and research need to be allowed to contribute to human development.

**Acceptance of GMOs by civil society is low and controversial:** This was shown by contributions from Nepal, India, Tanzania, and Colombia.

**Need for more information:** There were also voices asking for more information about GMOs to be made available for non-specialists. Checklists that help assess the risks of GMOs were suggested as a possible tool, and an example developed by Helvetas in 2003 was circulated.

The question was raised whether respecting Swiss legislation ("GMO moratorium") could conflict with respecting national sovereignty.

**MG, 5 April 2013**

References:

SDC guidelines on Green Biotechnology [https://www.shareweb.ch/site/Agriculture-and-Food-Security/focusareas/Documents/sdc\\_guidelines\\_gbt\\_en.pdf](https://www.shareweb.ch/site/Agriculture-and-Food-Security/focusareas/Documents/sdc_guidelines_gbt_en.pdf)

GPFS – At Work: SDC And Genetically Modified Crops [https://www.shareweb.ch/site/Agriculture-and-Food-Security/focusareas/Documents/sdc\\_gpfs\\_at\\_work\\_gmo\\_en.pdf](https://www.shareweb.ch/site/Agriculture-and-Food-Security/focusareas/Documents/sdc_gpfs_at_work_gmo_en.pdf)