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PRESS RELEASE

“FAO declares war on farmers, not on hunger”

Through an open letter delivered at noon today to the Director General of FAO in Rome, hundreds of civil society organisations from across the world denounce the recent annual report of the FAO (UN Food and Agriculture Organisation) as a disgraceful public relations tool for the genetic engineering industry

Rome, 16 June 2004.

The FAO report (*“Agricultural biotechnology: meeting the needs of the poor?”*) was publicly presented on the 17th of May, and in the space of a few weeks more than 650 civil society organisations and 800 individuals from more than 80 countries have drafted and signed this open letter which strongly condemns its bias against the poor, against the environment and against food production in general. Amongst the signatories are many peasant and indigenous peoples organisations, social movements and scientists, as well as NGOs.

The 200-plus page document attempts to appear neutral, but in reality is highly biased and ignores available evidence of the adverse impact of genetically engineered crops.

The civil society organisations denounce that, although the FAO report does mention that genetic engineering is dominated by corporations, it overlooks the fact that only one company – Monsanto – controls over 90% of the total world area sown to transgenic seeds. Not surprisingly, the report has been received enthusiastically by the industry and other groups that push this technology with the claim that it will solve world hunger.

With this report, the FAO now appears to support 'Terminator' technology - the production of sterile seeds that stop farmers from saving and re-using seeds from previous harvests. This is a radical departure from its position adopted only four years ago.

“We believe that FAO has broken its commitment to civil society and peasants’ organisations to consult on issues of common concern”, the open letter states. It continues: “Farmers and civil society organizations will meet and consult in the coming months to determine what further actions should be taken regarding FAO and the negative repercussions of this report.”

The open letter was delivered today in the headquarters of the organisation in Rome, and constitutes the start of a process in which civil society organisations will reconsider their relation with the FAO in the future.

“For those of us in civil society organisations and social movements that considered the FAO as an institution that we could relate to and a forum to debate these issues and

possibly move forward, this is a tremendous setback”, states the letter. “The report turns FAO away from food sovereignty and the real needs of the world’s farmers, and is a stab in the back to the farmers and the rural poor FAO is meant to support.”

Contrary to what the FAO proposes, genetically engineered crops do not help fight hunger in the world. The letter clarifies: “History demonstrates that structural changes in access to land, food, and political power - combined with robust, ecological technologies via farmer-led research - reduce hunger and poverty. The 'gene revolution' promises to take us in the opposite direction.”

Genetic contamination is polluting the very heart of the world’s centres of crop diversity. But the FAO brushes aside this tragedy with hardly a comment. Yet, for the very cultures that created agriculture this is an aggression against their life, against the crops they created and nurture, and against their food sovereignty.

The organisations qualify the document as “highly biased”, and being disgraceful public relations tool for the genetic engineering industry and for those countries that seek to export this technology.

At the same time, notes the open letter, the report “sadly, raises serious questions about the independence and intellectual integrity of an important United Nations agency.”

“It is unacceptable that the FAO endorses the need for intellectual property for corporations. This amounts to FAO support for corporate biopiracy since the genetic resources that corporations seek to patent result from the collective breeding work of farmers over thousands of years”, the letter notes.

For additional information:

+ Over 650 organisations and 800 individuals from across the world sign on to an open letter to FAO. The full text of the open letter, and a list of those who have signed onto it, can be downloaded from:

<http://www.grain.org/go/fao-en>

+ The FAO press release about its report, and the report itself can be found at:

<http://www.fao.org/newsroom/en/news/2004/41714/index.html>