

PRESS RELEASE – 02/06/2005

Key Voices Missing from GM Crops Debate in Developing Countries

Key stakeholders in developing countries are being left out of the decision-making process about whether or not to grow GM crops according to a new report from the Panos Institute, London.

The report, 'The GM Debate – Who Decides?', found that consumer groups and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in developing countries tended to have good access to environment and health ministries but less contact with the more influential government departments of agriculture, science and trade. Biotech companies, international donors and groups representing large-scale farmers on the other hand, had access to all government departments. Scientists' views and advice were being used to support all sides of the debate.

The report drew on current research, case studies in five countries – Brazil, India, Kenya, Thailand and Zambia – and interviews with more than 100 people from a range of interest groups.

It also found that NGOs who were opposed to their government's approach to GM technology tended to have better access to policy-makers in those countries with well-established, multi-party systems of government, and where the media was relatively free to report the inner workings of government – as in Brazil, India and Thailand. By comparison, the governments in Zambia and Kenya, which differ sharply in their approach to GM, have yet to see the full-scale emergence of NGOs and journalists critical of government policy.

"Most governments say they listen to a wide range of opinions before making policy," says Ehsan Masood, author of the report. "Though, in practice, this varies considerably between different countries."

Currently, three of the world's top five nations growing GM crops are developing countries – Argentina, Brazil and China. In addition, India and South Africa have large GM research

programmes and are preparing to commercialise GM crops on a greater scale. In all, more than two dozen developing countries are now actively pursuing research into the commercial growing of GM crops.

The report goes on to argue that given that the far-reaching consequences of GM crops remain inconclusive, and that decisions made by developing countries now will profoundly affect societies for generations to come, it is crucial that there are full, public debates on the issue, reaching as many local people as possible.

Looking at how the media tended to cover GM crops in the five case study countries, the report found that:

- The views of farmers' organisations (both large and small-scale farming) were under-represented in the media, particularly in India, Zambia and Kenya;
- Many more government representatives and scientists were quoted compared to other sources;
- There was limited coverage of GM issues in languages other than English in some of the countries.

"One of the more worrying findings of the report was the lack of coverage about GM in non-English language media in three of the case study countries, says Masood. "It begs the question – in how many more developing countries is this also the case?"

The media in developing countries often cite several reasons as to why covering GM in a more balanced way can prove difficult. This includes too few journalists with adequate technical knowledge to cover GM stories, the expense of sending journalists to rural areas to interview local farmers and that government sources and biotech companies have more resources to host meetings bringing journalists together.

Whatever the difficulties, Panos London believes it is vital that the views of all interested parties are heard in order to make appropriate decisions about GM crops. Policymakers, large-scale and small-scale farmers, industry, NGOs, international donors and scientists all need to be part of the GM debate, and all their views need to be conveyed to local people in developing countries through appropriate media channels.

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Press information:

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To download a PDF version of the report and for other useful media resources, visit the special GM section on the Panos London website - www.panos.org.uk/gmdebate

Print media:

Any media looking for photographs to accompany this press release should try Panos Pictures, tel +44 (0)20 7234 0010, email pics@panos.co.uk or visit their website www.panos.co.uk

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Notes to editors:

1. Key Facts on GM Crops

- Total worldwide value of GM crops: US\$44 billion
- Total worldwide area of GM crops: 81 million hectares
- Most common crops: canola, cotton, maize, soy
- Top five GM growing nations (by area): US, Argentina, Canada, Brazil, China
- Other countries with commercial GM crops: Paraguay, India, South Africa, Uruguay, Australia, Romania, Mexico, Spain, the Philippines
- Number of farmers of GM crops worldwide: 8.25 million

Source: *International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-Biotech Applications (ISAAA)* - www.isaaa.org

2. The Second meeting of the Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety

30 May-3 June 2005: Montreal, Canada

<http://www.biodiv.org/doc/meeting.aspx?mtg=MOP-02>

3. The Panos Institute (London) stimulates informed and inclusive public debate around key development issues in order to foster sustainable development. Panos works with journalists, information and communication policy makers and other stakeholders to promote an enabling media and communications environment worldwide. Panos believes that the freedom of information and media pluralism are essential attributes of sustainable development. Panos argues that communication must not only reach the poor but also enable them to voice their concerns and participate in debate about development issues. Along with the role of communication in development, HIV/AIDS, Globalisation, Environment and Conflict are Panos' priority issues with Gender being cross-cutting. As a major independent source of Southern oriented news and analysis from developing countries, Panos has offices in Africa, Asia, Caribbean, North America and Europe - www.panos.org.uk