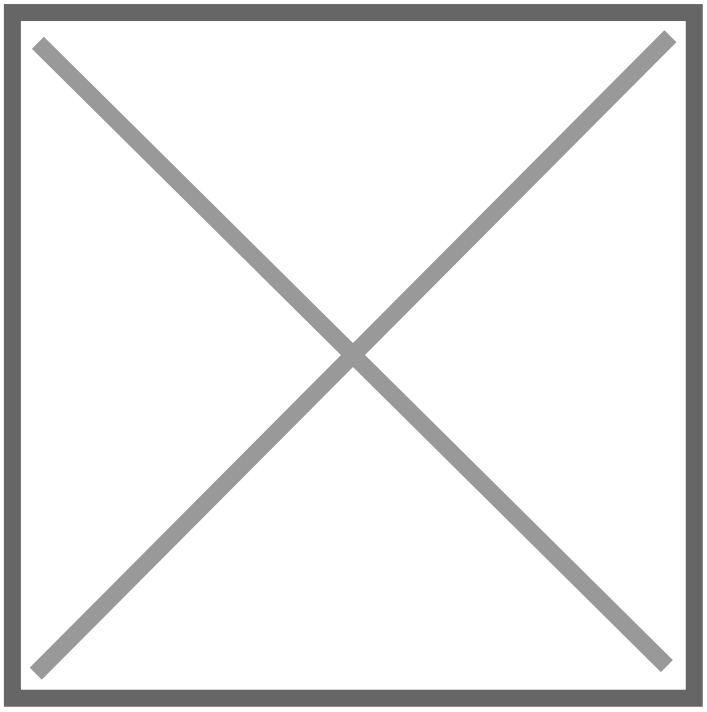
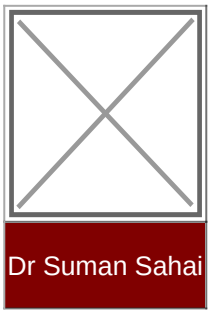
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The Agbiotech Task Force Report

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Dr Suman Sahai



The Agbiotech Task Force Report

The government had appointed a Task Force to examine agri-biotechnology and make recommendations for its implementation. The Task Force headed by Dr MS Swaminathan was given the mandate to formulate a long-term policy on applications of biotechnology in agriculture; make suggestions for harmonizing decision making; recommend a role for the Agriculture Ministry and generate awareness.

The importance of the recommendations of the Task Force lies in the fact that this is the first effort to formulate a policy. Civil society organizations have been frustrated in the past by the refusal of the Department of Biotechnology (DBT) to engage them in any dialogue on public concerns or be receptive to any suggestions for improving a clearly unsatisfactory system. The former head of DBT is famously on record for doggedly insisting that India did not need a biotechnology policy when all around her, from the most vocal protagonists to the most determined opponents, were demanding a national policy.

The report's basic recommendation is that the national policy should seek the "economic well-being of farm families, food security of the nation, health security of the consumer, protection of the environment and the security of our national and international trade". If the recommendations of this Task Force are upheld, no policy implementation can deviate from these goals.

The report highlights the need to link transgenic research in India to the international market. Transgenic research should not be done on crops that we sell in the international market, like soybean, Basmati rice and Darjeeling tea. Readers will recall the hare brained schemes of the DBT to promote Bt Basmati and introduce the beta-carotene construct of Golden Rice into Basmati rice. Nobody seemed to be thinking that we are exporters of Basmati (and other) rice as well as soybean (to special niche markets) and that our major trading partners are all rejecting GM foods. So who would buy our Bt Basmati or our GM

Soya?

The report is critical of the prevailing gung-ho climate when any proposal for research on a GM crop, however nonsensical the goal, is likely to get sanctioned, often at the cost of conventional research which is more likely to yield results of relevance. It recommends that all alternatives to GM technology should be examined and the GM route used only when other options are not available. There is an explicit injunction against using negative GM traits like herbicide tolerance that can reduce employment (by taking away the opportunity to earn wages by weeding) and impinge on rural livelihoods (by destroying vegetation that is used as nutritious leafy greens or fodder to support livestock).

The report says that our policy on transgenics should be sensitive to biodiversity conservation and the socio-economic context of our composite agrarian system. In other words, small farmer interests have to be protected. In recommending the breeding of both varieties and hybrids and supporting apomixis as a strategy, the recommendation is clearly in favor of the farmers' right to save seed from previous harvests.

The recommendation that Centers of Origin and diversity like the Jeypore tract for rice must be protected is an important one. However, the proposed mechanism for earmarking GM and non-GM zones does not appear to be feasible. If the cultivation of GM rice is permitted in certain areas but not in the diversity rich areas of Orissa, Jharkhand and Chattisgarh, there is no way of preventing GM rice landing up there. Foreign genes in that case are bound to move to wild relatives of rice in its center of origin. We have seen the speed with which the illegal Bt cotton originally put out by Navbharat seed company has spread to almost all cotton growing areas, despite the fact that its planting is illegal. Similarly, contamination of native corn in Mexico has taken place in spite of the ban on the cultivation of GM corn in the country. Zoning or segregation is unlikely to work. The only way of protecting native germplasm from foreign genes with likely negative impacts is to disallow the GM version of that particular crop.

I have a disagreement on the edible vaccine strategy that forms part of the report. I do not believe India should invest in edible vaccines since it will be impossible to keep vaccine- bearing fruit separate from ordinary fruits. Mixture with the food chain is inevitable since one bunch of bananas looks like another. It would be even harder to segregate grains. In the US, Starlink corn, which was not allowed as food but only animal feed, was found mixed up with food corn. In the Prodigene case in the US, a GM corn carrying pig vaccine was found mixed up with soybean for human use, showing segregation is not possible even in the highly regulated conditions of US agriculture. India should have a strict policy of allowing the expression of pharmaceutical molecules like vaccines only in non-edible plants.

With respect to regulation, the report has suggested much needed technical competence and transparency. I would have liked to see a greater role for civil society, as is the case in the Philippines and other ASEAN nations. The structure of the regulatory authority would benefit from greater autonomy. The regulatory structure should be demonstrably competent and independent to inspire confidence. It should be able not just to assess biosafety, environmental and long term ecological impact but also other aspects like social and economic impacts, particularly the impact on small farmers, of the introduction of a particular GM crop. In my view, it would be best to divide the regulatory function into two parts, one Advisory, the other Statutory.

Advisory body: It should have a broad based multidisciplinary membership that includes all relevant scientific disciplines, social scientists, environmentalists, civil society groups, members of farming and adivasi communities, representatives of panchayati raj institutions and legal experts. A person of the highest technical caliber who has experience in the regulation of GM crops should head the body

Overhauling the regulatory system from its currently appalling state should be high priority. Hopefully the process begun by the Task Force will help to establish a competent and participatory system and a more responsible way of evaluating which GM crops could be relevant for Indian farmers.

Dr Suman Sahai has a Ph.D in Genetics and has several years of research and teaching experie nce in the Universities of Alberta, Chicago and Heidelberg. Dr Sahai is a member of several national policy forums on environment, biotechnology and Intellectual Property Rights as well as education and health. She is also the convenor of Gene Campaign, New Delhi. Suman Sahai can be reached at: genecamp@vsnl.com