The United Church of Canada General Council

GC38 Genetically Modified Food - General Principles (2003G255)

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WHEREAS we are called "to live with respect in Creation" (New Creed), taking care that our actions do not seriously harm the greater web of life; and

WHEREAS "God created a magnificent wholeness, a glorious diversity of interacting life beyond human power to comprehend or duplicate" (31st General Council), and

WHEREAS food production, to be truly sustainable, must be ecologically sound, economically viable, socially just, and humane (33rd General Council), and

WHEREAS "there is a partnership between the ecological system" and communities producing food and that balance "can no longer be maintained by 'management through market forces and available technology' but requires 'management by conservation of the ecology and preservation of the society and its culture'" (33rd General Council), and

WHEREAS "the needs of the poor have priority over the wants of the rich" because "the way our society treats the poor and oppressed is, for us, a test of God's redeeming presence and of human justice" (30th General Council), and

WHEREAS "we must ensure that advances in biotechnology respect the integrity of creation, and that such advances do not give power to the few at the expense of the many" (31st General Council), and

WHEREAS The United Church of Canada's Agriculture and Food Resource Committee report to the 30th General Council affirmed that a monopoly over germ plasm and genetic resources "would be contrary to the Christian ethic and not in the best interest of the public,"

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED THAT the 38th General Council of The United Church of Canada affirm the following principles regarding Genetically Modified Food:

Principle #1: Regulation of Genetically Modified Foods and the Precautionary Principle

We are called to live with respect in creation, taking care that our actions do not seriously harm the greater web of life of which humans are a part. The precautionary principle is an important practical way of embodying this attitude of respect. Because of this:

Systems for approving, regulating, and monitoring Genetically Modified foods should clearly embody and practice the precautionary principle.

In particular, this means that:

1. If our best scientific evaluation turns out to be in error, it is better to err on the side of safety and lose potential benefits than to err by downplaying or dismissing real risks and suffering serious consequences as a result. In other words, it is preferable to forgo benefits of a new Genetically Modified (GM) food variety by wrongly predicting health or ecological risks than to experience serious harms by wrongly failing to predict them.
2. In evaluating risks and benefits, a sense of proportionality must come into play- i.e. To the extent that potential harms to health or ecosystems may be irreversible, irremediable, or uncontrollable, there is a greater need to exercise precaution. This is particularly important in the case of GM technologies insofar as they alter the very "code of life" and because genes and modified organisms-once released into the Earth's ecosystems-cannot easily be recalled.

3. While realising that it may be impossible to definitively prove the safety of a new GM food, lack of evidence of harm is not in itself to be considered proof of safety. The burden of proof lies not with those who raise concerns and potential risks, but rather with those who are endeavouring to establish the safety of a new GM food variety. Potential safety risks must be thoroughly investigated to the best of current scientific capabilities before a GM food can be considered safe.

Principle #2: Responsibility, Transparency, Independence, Participation, and Accountability

Assuming our responsibility to care for creation and to care for human health requires clear, accurate, unbiased, and verifiable information produced through independent research. At the same time, clear accountability and public participation enhance our ability to act responsibly and add additional safeguards to any regulatory process. Because of this:

The process of approving, regulating, and monitoring Genetically Modified foods should be based on the principles of independence, transparency, accountability, and participation.

More explicitly:

1. The government agencies regulating GM foods must be clearly independent from the parties developing these foods. In particular, these agencies should have no mandate-implicit or explicit-to promote or protect the biotechnology industry and their employees should be protected from pressures that might threaten their independence (including protections for "whistle blowers").
2. The testing of GM foods must in no way be biased or influenced by the parties seeking their approval; all details and results of testing must be available for independent peer review.
3. The public must have a way to provide input into the regulatory process-particularly when the introduction of a GM food variety has the potential to adversely affect a sector of the public ecologically, economically, or health-wise.
4. Questions of responsibility and liability for any adverse effects resulting from the production or consumption of a GM food variety must be clarified.

5. Consumers must have fair, trustworthy, and understandable tools that enable them to choose whether or not to consume GM foods.

Principle #3: GM Foods, Social Justice, and the Common Good

The principle of justice that is central to our faith requires that we pay special attention to the potential effects of new technologies on the vast majority of human society that is impoverished, exploited, or excluded. Because of this:

The development and dissemination of Genetically Modified food varieties, both in Canada and globally, should not contribute to the growth of injustice, inequality, or poverty, the loss of biodiversity, or the erosion of the common good.

In particular:

1. Measures should be taken to ensure that the risks and benefits of GM food technologies are fairly distributed. In particular, the poor and marginalised must be protected from any negative consequences of employing GM technologies, whether intentional or unintentional.
2. Measures should also be undertaken to ensure that a fair proportion of GM food research focuses on benefiting poorer farmers and consumers. A GM food variety should only be deployed in a specific context if it can be demonstrated that it will not tend to undermine or erode food security.
3. Care must be taken to ensure that GM food technologies are not used as a tool for increasing corporate control over food supplies.

Principle #4: Protecting and Sharing Life, Food, and our Genetic Heritage

Living organisms, and the genetic heritage shared by all life, have an intrinsic value that precedes their utility and commercial value. Living organisms and genes are a gift of God to be cared for and shared for the common good. Therefore, no person or organization should be allowed to claim them as intellectual property.

In the case of food varieties, The United Church of Canada recognises the contribution of countless generations of women and men who have selectively bred and nurtured the diversity we enjoy today. New food varieties being developed build on the efforts and discoveries of others-often of entire communities and cultures. Because of this:

The right of farmers, other food producers, and food conservationists to save seeds, breed livestock, and develop new food varieties should be protected and should not be undermined by any claims of intellectual property nor by the use of new genetic modification technologies or related legal instruments (like technology use agreements). Cultures and nations should also have the right to take measures to protect the traditional genetic heritage of their food from genetic contamination.

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