

To the editor:

There is much to applaud about the view of agricultural biotechnology in the U.N.'s report, "Making New Technologies Work for Human Development" (Editorial comment: Technology and Poverty," 10 July), but the U.N.'s repeated insistence upon excessive, unscientific biotechnology regulation will slow agricultural research and development, promote environmental damage and bring famine and death to millions in developing countries.

In Montreal in January 2000, delegates to the U.N.-sponsored Convention on Biological Diversity negotiated a "biosafety protocol" for the regulation of international movement of gene-spliced, or genetically modified (GM), organisms. It was based on the bogus "precautionary principle," which dictates that every new technology -- including, in the case of gene-splicing, a refinement of less precise technologies -- must be proven safe before it can be used. The precautionary principle creates prodigious obstacles to the development of new products. Precaution, in this sense, shifts the burden of proof from the regulator, who once had to demonstrate that a new technology was likely to cause some harm, to the innovator, who now must demonstrate that the technology will not. Under this new standard of evidence, regulatory bodies are free to arbitrarily require any amount and kind of testing they wish.

The biosafety protocol establishes an ill-defined global regulatory process that permits overly risk-averse, incompetent, or corrupt regulators to hide behind the precautionary principle in delaying or deferring approvals. We have already seen many examples of the arbitrary and capricious application of the precautionary principle to agricultural biotechnology that are directly related to the Montreal protocol. One of the most egregious was the decision by the German government to block the commercial-scale cultivation of gene-spliced, insect-resistant corn by the biotechnology company Novartis. This action came only one day before it was expected to be approved for commercial use by the Ministry of Agriculture, which specifically cited the need to respect the precautionary principle and called for more research into the crop plant's potential hazards.

Another recent example of the U.N.'s malign influence is a task force of the 165-member Codex Alimentarius Commission, the joint food standards program of the U.N.'s World Health Organization and Food and Agriculture Organization, which last year began discussions of issues related to biotechnology and food. Since then, the group has moved deliberately toward circumscribing only food products made with gene-splicing for various Draconian and even bizarre regulatory procedures and requirements that will impair the competitiveness of these products in the marketplace. The motivations for this anti-social policy-making vary. The Europeans -- especially the European Commission and France -- want to stop gene-spliced products because they are mostly made by US companies, and the radical environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which are permitted to participate in Codex meetings, are ideologically opposed to new technology.

The Codex task force is en route to codifying various procedures and requirements more appropriate to potentially dangerous prescription drugs or pesticides than to gene-spliced tomatoes, potatoes and strawberries. They include long-term monitoring for adverse health effects and batteries of tests for genetic stability, toxins, allergenicity, and so on -- requirements that foods produced with conventional genetic techniques could not (and should not) meet. Among the most insidious is something called "traceability," an array of technical, labeling and record-keeping mechanisms to keep track of a plant "from dirt to dinner plate", so that consumers will know whom to sue if they get diarrhea from gene-spliced prunes, and providing, in the words of the anti-biotech European Commission delegate, "a tool governments can use to remove products from the market."

The prospect of unscientific, overly burdensome Codex standards for gene-spliced foods is ominous, because members of the World Trade Organization will, in principle, be required to follow them, and they will provide cover for unfair trade practices.

These unscientific regulations and standards actually harm the environment and public health, stifling the development of environmentally friendly innovations that can increase agricultural productivity, clean up toxic wastes, purify water and supplant agricultural chemicals. Developing countries, which can least afford to forgo such products, will suffer disproportionately. Morally, this is no different from permitting the building of an unsafe dam or knowingly administering a contaminated vaccine. The United Nations should be held accountable, and feel-good rhetoric in a report is no substitute for remedial action.

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