

**A Response to Sustainable Rural Development:
The Role of Agriculture in Canada's International
Assistance Program**



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A RESPONSE TO
SUSTAINABLE RURAL DEVELOPMENT: THE ROLE OF AGRICULTURE IN
CANADA'S INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

A DISCUSSION PAPER PREPARED
BY THE CANADIAN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AGENCY (CIDA),
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The Canadian Institute for Environmental Law and Policy (CIELAP) would like to thank the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) for preparing this discussion paper and for giving us the opportunity to respond to it.

Founded in 1970 CIELAP's mission is to provide leadership in the research and development of environmental law and policy that promotes the public interest and sustainability.

Most recently, through funding from CIDA, CIELAP has been working with Fundacion Ambio, an environmental law organization in Costa Rica, on the role that sustainable agriculture has in alleviating poverty. This work has included research into the agricultural products of biotechnology, their introduction into the market place and obstacles to the transition to organic agriculture. Our comments on this discussion paper are based in part, on work undertaken through this partnership.ⁱ

CIELAP has considerable expertise and interest in this area, and has been involved in research on sustainable agriculture and the agricultural products of biotechnology since the mid-80's. CIELAP has published several reports and citizens' guide and participated in many consultations on this topic.ⁱⁱ As well, I have studied international development, worked in a developing country, and have experienced first hand issues related to food production in developing countries, particularly southern Africa.

As the discussion paper outlines, agriculture is central to poverty reduction, food security, broad-based development and environmental sustainability. Agriculture is in transition within many developing countries, from subsistence orientation to dynamic commercialization through transnational corporations. At the same time, increasing numbers of people lack access to affordable nutritious food. This is true in both the so-called developed and developing world. The paper, however fails to emphasise that agriculture is a complex system with economic, social and ecological dimensions, and not just a simple chain linking food producers to consumers. The Doha Declaration of the WTO recognizes the non-trade aspects of agriculture including landscape protection and animal welfare.

The food system is a complex web involving living processes used to produce food and ecological sustainability. The current drivers of change in the food system internationally come from the industrialized countries where our food system is being globalized in an increasingly urban world. Food production in the industrialized world is being determined and controlled by fewer and fewer people, most of whom are connected to a handful of multinational corporations. Control of food production also means control of what foods are brought to market, and increased competition for the money that is spent on food in the industrialized world. This in turn has resulted in an increased use of technology to generate greater returns on investment in food production. With increased globalization there is also an increase in the distance from where food is produced and where it is consumed.

As with the agricultural revolution and the 'enclosures' in the 17th century, the green revolution of the 1960's and 70's meant that many people lost their right to subsistence farming. Farms were consolidated so that those proponents of the green revolution, influenced from industrialized countries, could take advantage of economies of scale. Subsistence farmers sold their land to these new ventures and became labourers on these larger farms or moved to the nearest city, initially as squatters, and contributing to the phenomena of mega-cities.

We are now faced with the next 'revolution' in food production, the biotechnology revolution. A handful of mostly pharmaceutical companies are claiming that the promotion of genetically modified crops and foods to the public has had widespread farm and societal benefit, particularly increased yields, significant reductions in pesticide use and associated environmental benefits, improved financial performance and hunger alleviation in the developing world. When all these benefits are bundled together, the economic benefit has been described as huge. One claim of benefit is that two million farmers worldwide received economic benefits of \$900 million in 1999 with consumers receiving additional benefits of one billion dollars US. But industry has provided little evidence to support these kinds of numbers. Critics claim that when performance of GE crops is examined more closely, few real benefits accrue to society or to the environment. As of January 2001 there is no publicly available survey or data on how individual farmers have benefited from the adoption of GM crops in Canada.ⁱⁱⁱ Yet organic farmers risk losing their market share when consumers fear cross-contamination.

Proponents who see genetically modified crops as the answer to world hunger are assuming that the world population will rise dramatically and that the underlying problem of hunger and food insecurity is production, rather than distribution and equitable access to food resources. Although the popular view is that the world has a food production problem, in a 1994 report on food insecurity, the World Bank stated “had the world’s food supply been distributed evenly in 1994, it would have provided an adequate diet of about 2350 calories a day per person for 6.4 billion people” .

Food insecurity is a situation when people lack access to sufficient amounts of safe and nutritious food for normal growth and development and an active, healthy life. It may be caused by the unavailability of food, insufficient purchasing power or inadequate distribution. Food security, on the other hand, is a situation when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.^{iv}

Therefore, the role of agriculture in Canada’s international assistance program should be how to best to minimize food insecurity and to promote food security. In the developing world, as the discussion paper points out, subsistence agriculture is the ultimate safety net for many of the poorest rural people – and therefore, the ultimate form of food security. However, the industrialized world seeks new markets to promote its genetically modified food products. What does this mean to food security in developing countries?

Many non-government organizations are calling for a broader concept of food security – food sovereignty – to be used to guarantee the rights of small producers to provide, and poor consumers to eat, food. At the World Food Summit in Rome in June 2002, the NGOs proposed a plan of action which included an international, legally binding right to food.

As developing countries seek to modernise their agriculture, some developed countries seek to promote biotechnologies. How do we ensure that the rural communities and subsistence farmers in the developing world have a voice and retain their right to accessible, nutritious food? At the recent World Summit on Sustainable Development, small scale farmers from various countries in Africa were clear that they want to maintain their own seed banks and crops and are not interested in the biotechnology strains from the developed world. As well, at one of the sessions during the WSSD, representative from country after country in the developing world stated categorically that they did not want genetically modified seeds from the developed world. This is particularly poignant when at the same time UN and US Aid going into southern Africa to assist those who are starving was in the form of genetically modified corn.^v

How, then, can CIDA’s international assistance program best contribute to sustainable rural development? Assistance needs to be in four main areas:

- 1) Assistance to developing countries to guarantee the rights of small farmers to farm and grow food. This may include support for the transition from resource intensive agriculture to agroecology. This will include support for women who grow over

70% of the food in the developing world, support for the participation of rural and local farming communities in policy discussions on food production. It will also include support for community development and strengthening rural communities through education, health care, water and sanitation.

- 2) Provide assistance for long term studies and sustainability impact assessments on the environmental and social implications of food biotechnologies.
- 3) Provide funding to ensure that the needs of the poor, rural communities and small farmers are heard in the policy making process around biotechnologies and intellectual property issues. This may include resources to preserve the biological diversity of regions in the developing world and to promote alternatives to genetically modified seed crops. As well as resources are needed to enable NGOs, rural communities and small farmers to participate in the process.
- 4) Provide assistance to NGO's, community and farmers groups to participate in international negotiations on biosafety, intellectual property rights, sustainable agriculture and trade issues, particularly on non-trade aspects.

Should CIDA decide to increase its emphasis on the role of agriculture in Canada's international assistance program, in ways described above, CIDA will be able to make a real contribution to social, ecological and economic sustainability.

CIELAP is already working with CIDA in this area. CIELAP has embarked on a partnership with Fundacion Ambio in Costa Rica to support the transition to organic agriculture and develop a comprehensive policy framework for biotechnologies in that country. We are developing a second partnership with an environmental law organization in Uganda. The lessons learned from our work with Fundacion Ambio will inform our work in this new partnership. We hope that rural communities and small farmers in both Costa Rica and Uganda will be strengthened and empowered to ensure that access to food remains a fundamental human right. As well, we hope that these initiatives in Costa Rica and Uganda will act as catalysts in other countries in Africa and Central America. With CIDA's support, this is one way, we believe, that Canada's International Assistance Program can make a meaningful contribution to sustainable rural development.

ⁱ To see the research which has come from this partnership go to www.cielap.org

ⁱⁱ See website www.cielap.org

ⁱⁱⁱ Furtan, H. and Holzman, J. 2001. Chapter 4. Agronomic costs and benefits of GMO crops: what do we know In: Richard Gray et al (ed). Transforming Agriculture: The Benefits and Costs of Genetically Modified Crops. Report Commissioned by the Canadian Biotechnology Advisory Committee. [Http://www.cbac.gc.ca/documents/Richard_Gray_English.pdf](http://www.cbac.gc.ca/documents/Richard_Gray_English.pdf).

^{iv} United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

^v Personal observation at the WSSD