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Scientists want inclusion of social economic considerations in risk assessment of GM crops

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The Third World Network (a non-profit international network of organisations and individuals) and European Network of Scientists for Social and Environmental Responsibility (ENSSER) are seeking inclusion of socio-economic considerations in the risk assessment of genetically modified organisms as the Conference of Parties to the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety is meeting here from October 1 to 5. They also want improvements in the existing provisions in the Protocol regarding risk assessment and management.

However, they are not very optimistic that the Parties (nations which are signatories to the Protocol) would agree to their suggestions.

Chairperson of ENSSER Angelika Hilbeck told *The Hindu* that her organisation would be attending the meeting of Parties as an educator and in that capacity would not be making any interventions. However, it stood for a holistic view to risk assessment. “Right now it is very narrow. It should be more rigorous.”

Inclusion of factors such as weeds developing resistance to weedicides (when used in conjunction with crops protected against weedicides through genetic modification), which is currently excluded from the Protocol, was an absolute necessity. There were also other externalised factors such as health effects that needed to be included in the risk assessment. Questions like whether the whole plant or the just the genetically modified protein should be subjected to assessment needed examination. “It is not good enough to just test it like a chemical.”

Dr. Hilbeck noted that the Ad Hoc Technical Expert Group, set up during an earlier meeting, had drafted Guidance on

risk assessment and management. However, several issues were contentious and several of the Parties might not agree to them.

Asked how socio-economic risks like suicide of farmers could be predicted, Dr. Hilbeck said that one could predict whether some segments of the society would not benefit, and the consequences thereof. “The debate (now) is whether such assessments should be made at all.”

She stressed that every country needed institutional mechanisms for risk assessment of genetically modified crops. “If you don’t have one, you should examine whether you should allow such technology.”

She said that a clearance house was already in existence under the Protocol where countries could deposit information on GM crops and other countries could access that. “Thus the means are there and the Cartagena Protocol is better than other (international) protocols.”

However, there was no way round a constituency that did not have the infrastructure. This was the case with some African countries.

However, India had no such constraints and could ensure biosafety. Lim Li Ching of Third World Network told a scientific conference organised here against the background of the upcoming meeting of Parties that the meeting should endorse the Guidance prepared by the expert group. It should be integrated into capacity building activities on risk assessment. The mandate of the group should be extended to develop guidance on new topics of risk assessment and management.

She also suggested that another Ad Hoc Expert Group should be set up to review information on socio-economic impacts of living modified organisms (LMOs) and develop guidelines on socio-economic considerations.

She said that it would also be important for the meeting of Parties to take decision on development of tools and guidance that facilitate implementation provisions of the protocol regarding unintentional transboundary movements of LMOs and assist Parties to detect and take measures to respond to unintentional releases of LMOs.

Keywords: [genetically modified organisms](#), [risk assessment](#)

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