

Consumers call for transparency and access to accurate information on genetically engineered food and agricultural products

5th October 2009. ♦ A Public Forum on "Genetic Engineering of Rice and Other Crops" was held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, through a collaborative effort of the Southeast Asian Council for Food Security (SEACON), the Federation of Malaysian Consumers Associations (FOMCA), Education and Research Association-Malaysia (ERA-Consumer), Development of Human Resources in Rural Areas Malaysia (DHRRA Malaysia) and Pesticide Action Network Asia and the Pacific (PAN AP) in conjunction with the People's Year of Rice Action (YORA).

More than one hundred participants from various professions and agencies including embassies, research institutions, universities, ministries, insurance, NGOs, consumers, manufacturers, and breeders attended the forum.

The half-day public forum in Kuala Lumpur addressed the threats to rice and agricultural crops regionally and internationally, with specific focus on Malaysia. ♦ In particular, the forum presented the implications of genetically engineered crops from the consumer's perspective. ♦ With the support of consumer's groups, issues related to safety, health and religion were discussed.

The President of FOMCA, Datuk Marimuthu Nadason, clearly articulated the concerns of the general public regarding biotechnology. ♦ In his opening remark, Datuk Marimuthu stressed the importance of clear and accurate labeling of genetically engineered food and food ingredients. ♦ Access to vital information that could affect consumer safety and health, as well religious or cultural acceptance, must be a priority.

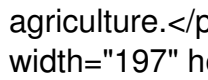
The views and scope of activities related to genetic engineering in food and agriculture in the U.S, as well as other developed and developing countries, was also discussed. ♦ Dr. Michael Hansen from the Consumers Union USA, who has a long standing experience in dealing with issues surrounding genetic engineering food and agriculture, expressed various concerns not only from the consumer's perspective but also from the producers', environmental and biodiversity perspectives, where most often GE crops were linked to the use of pesticides and other chemical inputs. ♦ The profit-driven role of multinational corporations and weak political will were stated as some factors behind the aggressive pursuit for genetic engineered products. ♦ Genetically engineered crops such as the Golden Rice, Liberty Link, Monsanto's MON810 and NK603 maize, were highlighted.

Associate Professor Dr. Rosli Omar from the Faculty of Engineering, University Malaya, spoke on ♦The Genetic Engineering Industry: Impact and Regulation♦ and Ms Lim Li Ching from Third World Network talked about the direction and future of GE in Malaysia. Pn Shamsinar Abdul Talib, Deputy Director, Food Safety & Quality Division, Ministry of Health addressed ♦The Need to Label GMF- Information Sharing.♦♦ In her presentation, Pn. Shamsinar stressed that important information related to health implications (allergenic effects) must be made available to consumers, consistent with Malaysia's position on the Codex Committee on Food Labeling.

The industrial perspective was presented by Mr. Ng Kim Keat from the Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers. Mr. Ng summarized that food safety is paramount to industrial players. He stressed that avoiding any potential risks to consumers is the most critical aspect for manufacturers, as the risk could severely affect future businesses and credibility of a company. ♦ From consumers' perspective, Ms. Ratna Devi Nadarajan reiterated the issues of communication through labeling and stakeholder engagement.

At the

conclusion of the Forum, it was clear that the public remained wary of the issues surrounding the genetic engineering of rice and agricultural crops. ♦ It was agreed that governance and policy mechanisms such as the Biosafety Act 2007 and Food Act 1983 may require revisions and improvements to cover any potential loopholes, and labeling policy that safeguards consumers and provides accurate information needed to be developed. ♦ Consumers strongly called for stringent and comprehensive sustainability impact studies and risk communications also to be carried regarding any implementations of genetic engineering activities in food and agriculture.

The Forum was the second YORA event in West Malaysia. ♦ For information on how you can become involved in YORA, please visit: www.panap.net/yora

♦ YORA is jointly organized by people's organizations in China, Japan, Korea, Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh in collaboration with the Pesticide Action Network Asia and the Pacific (PAN AP). It runs from 4 April 2009 to 4 April 2010.

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♦ Pesticide Action Network Asia and the Pacific (PAN AP) is one of five regional centres of PAN, a global network which aims to eliminate the harm caused by pesticides and promote biodiversity-based ecological agriculture. ♦ It is committed to the empowerment of people especially women, agricultural workers, peasants and indigenous farmers. The Save Our Rice Campaign was launched in 2003 by PAN AP with its network partners in Asia in recognition of the critical role of rice, the world's most important and political crop being the staple food of half its population. The foundation of the Campaign is the "Five Pillars of Rice Wisdom": (1) Rice Culture, (2) Community Wisdom, (3) Biodiversity-based Ecological Agriculture, (4) Safe Food and (5) Food Sovereignty. The Campaign is dedicated to saving traditional local rice, small rice farmers, rice lands and the rice heritage of Asia through defending and advancing the cultural and food sovereignty of the grassroots and opposing the powerful threats to rice.