

Report From Parallel Session I
General Issues in Biotechnology
(CGL4~R Mid-Term Meeting - May 27, 1998)

Chair: R S Paroda; Rapporteur; E Kurschner; Secretary: M Lantin

The session was well-attended and participation was wide. The Chair gave a brief introduction and emphasized the need to focus the discussion. The session used the Report of the Panel on General Issues on Biotechnology as the starting point for the discussion. The following is a summary of the comments/recommendations from the participants on the issues examined by the Panel:

Scope of biotechnology research work in the CGLAR '

Consistent with the CGIAR's mission, it was emphasized that the biotechnology research work should primarily address the needs of the poor. There was a broad agreement that CGIAR should consider the application of molecular genetics for a wide range of purposes, i.e. not only in germplasm enhancement but also in other fields (natural resource management, diagnostics, vaccine development, etc.). There is wide opportunity for the Centers to be involved in this area in a partnership or collaborative mode and it should be taken up as an evolutionary approach.

· Strategy

Networking, partnership or alliances with both public sector and private sector organizations are considered essential for the CGIAR to realize both the potential and benefits of biotechnology in achieving its mission. This should also cover building of sophisticated bioinformatics for genome research. Outsourcing part of the Centers' work should be considered as an option, wherever appropriate and cost-effective. Research on biotechnology should be considered as an integral part of the Centers' strategic plan and it must complement what the Centers can do and where they have comparative advantage.

There is a need for building sufficient in-house capacity. The Centers are mandated to address needs which are oftentimes of little or no interest to the private sector. Developing the Centers' capability for biotechnology is critical not only in forging partnerships/alliances with the advanced research institutions but also in enabling them to directly contribute to capacity building of NARS, including human resource development..

· Establishment of a policy framework on biosafety and gene deployment

It was pointed out that the development of a biosafety framework at the global level is already underway. CGIAR should support the development of such international biosafety protocol under the CBD and not duplicate the effort. It was noted that an interim

set of biosafety guidelines have been formulated by the Centers and they may continue providing need-based advice to the participating NARS.

Assessment of benefits and risks through a "duty of care" committee in each center

The participants fully supported the establishment of such committees in the Centres. It was, however, clarified that "duty of care" mechanisms are concerned with biosafety issues related to handling of both transgenic and non-transgenic-organisms.

. Establishment of a central CGIAR biotechnology service unit

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This proposal was fully supported. It was, however, pointed out that the unit should serve as a mechanism for providing professional advice not only on proprietary but also on biosafety and gene deployment issues. In addition to legal advice, its functions could also include public education and communication on biotechnology related issues. It was suggested that the unit be located and managed at one of the Centers. Location, staffing, etc. would, therefore, be the Centers' responsibility.

CGLAR's role in holding a genome summit

The value of a genome summit was recognized. However, in view of the mandate and comparative advantage of other international organizations, the CGIAR should play only a facilitator's role and provide need-based technical backstopping.

. Policy statement on biotechnology

It was felt that in pursuance to above decisions, an attempt should now be made to come out with an agreed policy statement by the CGIAR on biotechnology. This will make the CGLAR's strategy clear to all stakeholders.