### Agricultural Biotechnology, Poverty Reduction and Food Security in Ghana

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In recent weeks one aspect of science that has echoed through the media is biotechnology. To the non-scientist it all looks very confusing. The misconception of biotechnology is a problem the whole world over. Although biotechnology as a discipline has been in existence for many years, in Africa, perhaps with the exception of South Africa and Kenya, we are now fully awakening to the brave new world of biotechnology. To date, South Africa continues to be the only African country that has approved transgenic crops for commercial purposes and is the leader in agricultural biotechnology research and development on the continent.

#### Biotechnology

Biotechnology in broad terms covers all studies and techniques that combine the ideas and needs of biology and medicine with engineering. It is also referred to as molecular biology or genetic engineering. In traditional forms of breeding, variety has been achieved by selecting from the multitude of genetic traits that already exist within a species' gene pool. In nature, genetic diversity is created within certain limits. A rose can cross with a different kind of rose, but a rose will never cross with a mouse. Even when species that may seem to be closely related do succeed in breeding, the offspring are usually infertile. For example, a horse can mate with an ass, but the offspring, a mule, is sterile. These boundaries are essential to the integrity of any species.

In contrast to traditional breeding, biotechnology involves taking genes from one species and inserting them into another in an attempt to transfer a desired trait or character. For example, you could select a gene, which leads to the production of a chemical with antifreeze properties from a fish and putting it into a tomato to make it frost-resistant. It is now possible for scientists to introduce genes taken from bacteria, viruses, insects, animals or even humans, into plants.

It has been suggested that, because we have been modifying the genes of plants and animals for thousands of years, biotechnology is simply an extension of traditional breeding practices. While it is true that the food crops we are eating today bear little resemblance to the wild plants from which they originated, it is clear that through this new technology, organisms are being manipulated in a fundamentally different way. However, if current trends continue, within a few years most of the foods we eat could be genetically engineered (GE).

#### Moral Dilemmas

The moral dilemmas now enveloping biotechnology would not be so botly debated if the technology itself were not so remarkable and effective. Thanks to its successes so far; in making possible, for instance, the cheap and plentiful production of such disease-fighting agents as insulin and interferon; numerous people have been able to live longer and healthier lives. Its promise in improved agricultural production is exciting. And even without considering the practical consequences, we have the prospect of a new world of knowledge about life itself and the essential components of our own humanity, our own individuality, as revealed in our distinctive genetic codes.

#### Poverty Reduction

Agricultural biotechnology will contribute to poverty reduction and food security if scientists can develop technologies to increase quality and yields of food crops and the technologies are adopted by small farmers. For this to happen, biotechnology R&D will have to meet four conditions:

- It must address both the problems of small farmers in rainfed areas where most of the poor live, and those farmers in irrigated areas, who provide the bulk of food grain supply in the country.
- 2. It must focus on crops, livestock, and fish commonly grown by small farmers. Major crops are rice, maire, sorghum, millet, plantain, caosava, groundrut, yam, and sweetpotato. Biotechnology R&D should also focus on high value cash crops (e.g., cotton, soybean, and vegetables) that can increase the incomes of small farmers through crop diversification. The prospect for improving these crops is bright due to the large demand for them in urban areas and in international markets. Fish and livestock (cattle, sheep, goats, pigs, and poultry) are also important.
- 3. The technology to be developed and delivered to small farmers must be simple, low cost, and carry little or no risks to human health and the environment. The most effective strategy to increase food production is through improved seeds that possess high yield potential, fertilizer responsiveness, resistance to pests and diseases, good agronomic characteristics, and good nutritional quality.
- Biotechnology development should be accompanied by favourable policy environment; good governance; investments in rural infrastructure; agricultural research and extension; and credit and marketing.

# **Agricultural Biotechnology Poverty Reduc**

Sachin Chaturvedi, S. R. Rao



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