

**Third Meeting of the CGIAR Task Force
on Biotechnology (BIOTASK)
20 May 1990, The Hague**

Summary of Discussions

1. Role of BIOTASK

BIOTASK confirmed its objective to raise awareness and inform the different components of the CGIAR on issues involved in the integration of modern biotechnology in the center's programmes and the possible effects on NARS. It will not take over responsibilities that other activities within the CGIAR could take up. Its aim is to stimulate interest, to raise awareness of issues, and to provide services not able to be provided by other elements of the Group.

Against this background, the members of BIOTASK agreed to the actions detailed below in relation to the current and planned activities of the Task Force.

2. Information Activities

- FAO would explore further the potential of the AGRIS and CARIS databases as a source of information on biotechnology and how this might be useful to the NARS, the IARCs and the members of the CGIAR.
- CABI is in the process of adopting a new strategy by which developing countries will be supplied at marginal costs. This requires readers from industrialized countries to meet full costs and to establish partnerships whereby development agencies will sponsor the purchase of CABI journals and services for clients in developing countries. CABI is receptive towards BIOTASK. CABI is conducting in depth studies on information needs in developing countries, which will include assessment of information needs in biotechnology.
- The BIOTASK Chairman would investigate the possibility of obtaining from donors additional financial sponsorship for the provision of copies of the CABI journal 'Agbiotech News and Information' to potential users in the CGIAR system and NARS.

3. Inventory of Biotechnology Activities at the IARCs

The CGIAR Secretariat has obtained figures for the estimated expenditures on biotechnology at the IARCs. The figures would appear to be broad approximations; it is difficult to obtain precise estimates of expenditure, due to the varying definition given to biotechnology. The present estimates suggest approximately US\$4 million is being spent on plant biotechnology, and US\$8 million is being spent on animal biotechnology by the IARCs annually.

It was agreed that BIOTASK should concentrate its inventory on the qualitative descriptions of the current research programs at the IARCs, rather than placing too much emphasis on the quantitative estimates of expenditure. An inventory of activities is available for 1990, in a paper prepared by Drs. Plucknett, Cohen and Horne in 1989.

4. BIOTASK Seminar: RFLP Mapping and Plant Breeding

The group noted the seminar to be held in Canberra for senior plant breeders from some IARCs and NARS on the use of RFLP mapping techniques in plant breeding. The emphasis on the course is on the introduction of the potential use of the technology in plant breeding programs, rather than a technical course on the methodology. There may be other occasions where it would be appropriate for BIOTASK to sponsor the participation of CGIAR participants in such formal courses on RFLP mapping (such as one at Cornell University).

5. Cassava and Biotechnology Workshop

A small workshop was held in Amsterdam in March 1990, sponsored by the Government of The Netherlands. It was attended by representatives of several development agencies, IITA, CIAT and ISNAR. One important step was to formulate joint criteria for selecting targets for the application of biotechnology to cassava.

6. Biosafety Seminars

Three forthcoming USDA/APHIS seminars on risk assessment on rice, wheat and maize, and rapeseed were noted, together with the request for BIOTASK donor members to consider sponsorship of participants from LDCs at these meetings.

The need for all commodity centres to have institutional biosafety committees and/or guidelines on the experimental use and environmental release of genetically engineered organisms was reiterated. USAID and the Government of the Netherlands expressed a particular interest in co-sponsoring a cross-centre seminar on the formulation of biosafety guidelines.

7. Public/Private Sector Collaboration

There are several activities in progress within the CGIAR system related to public/private sector collaboration. These include the analysis of the attitude of the IARCs to intellectual property rights and patent issues requested by the Chairman of the CGIAR; a strategy paper being prepared for the Centre Directors and the TAC working group on genetic resources. These initiatives underline the needs of the IARCs for information on these issues.

It was agreed that BIOTASK would continue with its plan to sponsor a cross-centre seminar on public/private sector issues, to enable interested centres to discuss issues such as intellectual property management, and technology acquisition from the private sector. Those involved in the CGIAR initiatives above, and other groups (such as the Dutch Working Group, Cornell University, Max Planck, FAO et al.), and resource persons knowledgeable of the American and European initiatives on this issue should be invited. Because of the urgency of the topic (GATT conference, EEG proposals) the seminar should preferably take place in late 1990.

8. Biotechnology Country Studies

Several country studies are either in progress or due to commence shortly in the Middle East, Africa and in Asia, with support principally from UNDP, the World Bank and the Government of the Netherlands. A workshop will be held in late 1990 to compare the experience and the needs of different countries in relation to biotechnology, both on identification of opportunities for the use of biotechnology, and the related policy and management issues.

The need for advice and information on both policy and management issues, and technology acquisition related to agricultural biotechnology are being explored in relation to the country studies. Possible mechanisms as to how such advice might best be made available to many countries are also being investigated. This need was discussed at the May 1989 biotechnology seminar in Canberra. The options being considered include the establishment of an agricultural biotechnology unit for a short period to stimulate biotechnology developments, and encourage its incorporation into the regular programs of the IARCs, NARS and international development agencies. A preliminary paper on this subject is available for discussion purposes. Some initial reactions from the BIOTASK members were that if such a small unit was established, it should be functional and facilitating, rather than coordinating (it should not be a mini-SPAAR); it should have a clearly defined, limited life span, with a sunset clause; and that in assessing needs and opportunities for biotechnology, these should be seen in the overall context of science policy and technology assessment in individual countries.

9. Centre Directors' Paper on Biotechnology

The group discussed the Centre Directors' paper on biotechnology. The group commended the collective initiative of the Centre Directors in taking up system-wide issues such as biotechnology, and contributing to their substantive discussion.

10. Membership of BIOTASK

The present membership of BIOTASK includes representatives of bilateral and multilateral development agencies, TAC, the CGIAR Secretariat, and the Centre Directors.

The Centre Directors' representative noted that the Centre Directors were likely to nominate one of their members as their representative, rather than have the Chairman of the Centre Directors attend, as the former would give more continuity of membership for the group.

At an earlier meeting it had been agreed that it would be desirable to have some members from national agricultural research systems. The Chairman of BIOTASK would invite a few NARS representatives from the Consultative Group to join BIOTASK. In addition, any member of CGIAR who has a particular interest in the work of BIOTASK, he/she is welcome to attend the meetings as an observer.

11. Distribution of BIOTASK Documents

One of the main responsibilities of BIOTASK is to raise the awareness on biotechnology within the CGIAR system. In order to achieve this, it was agreed that the reports on the BIOTASK meetings, plus a list of the working documents contained in the agenda papers would be given wide circulation in the CGIAR, being distributed to all CGIAR members, the IARCs, Boards of Trustees and TACs. Individual documents listed in the report would be made available on request to BIOTASK. ISNAR would also be encouraged to circulate the BIOTASK reports to policy makers and research managers in NARS with responsibility for biotechnology.

12. Next Meeting

The fourth meeting of BIOTASK will take place at ICW , in Washington in October 1990.

BIOTASK: CGIAR Task Force on Biotechnology
Third Meeting, 13:00-15:00 hrs, Sunday 20 May 1990

Location: Hotel Sofitel, The Hague

AGENDA

1. Opening
2. Adoption of agenda of 3rd meeting, and report of 2nd meeting of BIOTASK
3. Update on Initiatives
 - 3.1 RFLP Seminar
 - 3.2 Cassava and Biotechnology Seminar
 - 3.3 Information Services
 - 3.4 Inventory of Activities at IARCs
4. Planned Activities
 - 4.1 Seminar on biosafety aspects
 - 4.2 Seminar on public/private sector collaboration
 - 4.3 Country Studies (World Bank/ISNAR/Australian Government, the Netherlands, UNDP)
5. Statement on Biotechnology by the Centre Directors
6. Other Issues
 - 6.1 Membership of BIOTASK
 - 6.2 Distribution of BIOTASK material
7. Next Meeting
8. Close