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General information about biotechnology (GM foods)

The application of modern biotechnology to food production presents new opportunities and challenges for human health. The potential benefits to the public health sector include altering the nutrient content of foods, decreasing their allergenic potential, and improving the efficiency of food production systems. On the other hand, the potential effects on human health of the consumption of food produced through genetic modification must be carefully examined. Modern biotechnology must be thoroughly evaluated if it is to bring about a true improvement in our way of producing food The tendency to explain all concerns in this area as a problem of perceptions originating in the consumers incapacity to understand is simplistic. In stead the consumers right to be concerned as well as to be informed should be acknowledged.

The future developments in this area will focus WHO work in four major areas:

A. Establishing scientific safety assessment frameworks based on sound science

There is a need to facilitate the establishment of sound safety and risk assessment frameworks for foods derived from modern biotechnology. In addition to providing input to the Codex Intergovernmental Task Force on Foods Derived from Biotechnology, WHO will develop the principles and guidelines for addressing emerging issues based on sound science.

B. Standardizing methods for nutritional aspects in safety assessments of food derived from modern biotechnology.

There is a need for an increased focus on nutritional assessments of new foods derived from modern biotechnology and in fact from novel foods in general with specific nutritional traits. These types of considerations are already part of the FAO/WHO Expert Consultations on food derived from modern biotechnology, but a strengthened effort is needed. This effort should be coordinated with efforts in other intergovernmental fora, such as the OECD Task Force on Novel Foods.

C. Linking risk assessments to risk management and communication.

Effective mechanisms and approaches are urgently needed both at national and at international level to bridge the outcomes of risk assessments into risk management and risk communication efforts. New thinking towards involving consumers and other interested parties already at the planning stages of risk communication efforts need to be developed. And the experience gained in this area could be used in other aspects of food safety.

D. The broader perspective of health and development policy

The development of new foods through modern biotechnology has not always been perceived to be guided by a perspective of "public good". New products with potential health or production benefits in developing countries could change this. Such products will need a more holistic assessment, looking into all aspects of such production changes (health benefit, nutrition, safety, development and socioeconomical issues, etc. In preparation of this work there is a need for WHO to strengthen its collaboration with intersectoral partners. Such efforts would entail technical issues related to such areas as production efficiency and safety assessments but also more general issues of how foods derived from modern biotechnology could be made useful in addressing the needs of developing countries.