INFO CENTER
The Golden Rice Project

**Biofortification to complement traditional interventions**

In developing countries 500,000 people, mainly children, become blind every year, 50% of whom die within a year of becoming blind. Nearly nine million children die of malnutrion every year. Vitamin A deficiency (VAD) severely affects the immune system, hence it is involved in many of these children's deaths in the guise of multiple diseases. Recently, malaria deaths in children under five years of age has been linked with deficiencies in intake of protein, vitamin A and zinc. Various public and international programmes for supplementation, fortification and diet diversification have achieved substantial improvements but have difficulty in attaining full coverage and above all, sustainability. Biofortification, involving conventional breeding of genetically improved basic staple crops, offers an opportunity to obtain a more inclusive coverage, especially of the poorest sectors of society.

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The major micronutrient deficiencies in the world are iron, zinc, and vitamin A. VAD is prevalent among the poor who depend mainly on rice for their daily energy uptake, because rice does not contain any beta-carotene (pro-vitamin A), which our body in turn converts into vitamin A. Dependence on rice as the predominant food source, therefore, necessarily leads to VAD, most severely affecting children and pregnant women. For the 400 million rice consuming poor, the medical consequences are severe: impaired vision ?in the extreme case irreversible blindness, impaired epithelial integrity, exposing the affected individuals to infections, reduced immune response, impaired haemopoiesis and skeletal growth, among other debilitating afflictions. Rice containing pro-vitamin A could substantially reduce the problem. This can only be achieved using genetic engineering because, although there is pro-vitamin A in the leaves of rice plants there is none the endosperm, the starch storage tissue of the seed. No variability for this trait has been detected in the world?s most important rice germplasm collections.

**Scientific breakthrough**

Golden Rice has been engineered to contain the genes necessary to make up the biochemical pathway for pro-vitamin A production. Moreover, the genetic construct was designed to be expressed exclusively in the rice endosperm, ie in the edible part of the seed. The intensity of the golden colour is an indicator of the concentration of beta-carotene in the grain. A number of lines with different concentrations of beta- carotene have resulted from the work done in the laboratories of Ingo Potrykus and Peter Beyer, in Switzerland and Germany, respectively, with newer developments coming from the company Syngenta. The target of the research is to produce enough beta-carotene in these rice lines to cover the recommended daily requirements.

The Golden trait could in **principle** be introduced into many different rice varieties, but because of the stringent regulatory requirements imposed in the end only one regulatory clean event will be used as the starter seed in multiple breeding programmes.

**Reaching out**

Golden Rice will be made available to developing countries within the framework of a humanitarian project. This was, from the onset, a public research project designed to reduce malnutrition in developing countries. Thanks to strong support from the private sector and free licences for humanitarian use, the hurdle of extensive intellectual property rights attached to the technologies used in the production of Golden Rice could be overcome. This opened the way to collaborations with public rice research institutions in developing countries with freedom-to-operate to develop locally adapted Golden Rice varieties.

Once locally developed varieties containing the Golden trait have been cleared at the national level for biosafety, they will be made available to subsistence farmers free of charge. The seed will become their property and they will also be able to use part of their harvest for the next sowing, free of cost. Golden Rice is compatible with farmers using traditional farming systems, without the need for additional agronomic inputs. Therefore, no new dependencies will be created. Furthermore, the Golden trait does not pose any conceivable risk to the environment which would justify delaying its widespread use.

The progress achieved since the scientific initial breakthrough in 1999 would not have been possible without a novel type of public-private- partnership (PPP). Thanks to an agreement with Syngenta and other agbiotech industries, Golden Rice is royalty-free for humanitarian use, which is defined as ?an annual income generated from the commercialisation of Golden Rice below US$10'000 per farmer, while income beyond that value would require a commercial licence from Syngenta.? Royalty-free humanitarian sublicences are granted by the Golden Rice Humanitarian Board to public rice research institutions. These sublicence agreements ensure that the material is handled according to established biosafety guidelines and regulations, and that the target population ? subsistence farmers and the urban poor? receive the material free of charge for the pro- vitamin A trait.

**Tailored for local consumption**

Development of locally adapted Golden Rice varieties and application to national bioregulatory authorities for field testing and deregulation is in the hands of national and international public rice research institutions. To date, the Humanitarian Golden Rice Network includes 16 national institutions in Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, South Africa, The Philippines, and Vietnam. The Network is under the strategic guidance of the Golden Rice Humanitarian Board and under the management of a network coordinator based at the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI), in the Philippines. The Humanitarian Board, an ad honorem body, benefits from the expertise of international authorities, such as Dr Gurdev Khush, retired rice breeder from IRRI (rice breeding); Prof Robert Russell, Laboratory for Human Nutrition, Tufts University Boston (vitaminA malnutrition); Dr Howarth Bouis, Director of HarvestPlus, International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) Washington (biofortification); Dr Gary Toenniessen, The Rockefeller Foundation (food security in developing countries); Dr Robert Bertram, USAID Washington (development in Third World agriculture); Dr Katharina Jenny, Swiss Development Cooperation Berne (technology transfer and trans-sectorial issues); Dr Adrian Dubock, Syngenta (product development and intellectual property rights); Dr Ren Wang and Dr William Padolina IRRI (international cooperation in rice research); Professor Ingo Potrykus (co-inventor), professor emeritus from ETH Zurich, chairman (public relations and information); Prof Peter Beyer (co-inventor) Univ of Freiburg (scientificic advancement in the areas of biofortification for pro-vitamin A and other micronutrients); Jackie Paine, Syngenta UK (new technical developments of Golden Rice); and the ex officio members Dr Gerard Barry, IRRI (Golden Rice Network Coordinator) and Dr Jorge Mayer, Univ of Freiburg (Golden Rice Project Manager).

Golden Rice in the field

**Biofortified seeds, a sustainable solution**

Biofortification—the complementation for missing micronutrients—of basic staple crops with the help of genetic engineering is, most probably, the most sustainable and cost-effective approach to reduce micronutrient malnutrition among poor populations in developing countries. Golden Rice is the first example of such an approach. Research investment in this project has been relatively modest so far (US$2,4 million over nine years) and financed from funds allocated to basic research. Product development, however, is time-consuming and requires substantial additional funding.

While expenses increase even more dramatically when it comes to biosafety assessment, as required for deregulation

purposes, once a novel, biofortified variety has been deregulated and handed over to farmers, the system can develop its full potential. From this point on, the technology is built into each and every seed and does not require any additional investment. Let?s consider the potential of a single Golden Rice seed: a single plant will produce in the order of 1,000 seeds; within four generations or less than two years, that one plant will have generated more than 1012 seeds. This represents up to 28-thousand metric tons of rice, which would be already sufficient to feed a 100-thousand poor people for one year, and if they were eating Golden Rice they would have been automatically supplemented with pro-vitamin A, reducing VAD. This gained protection is cost-free and sustainable. All a farmer needs to benefit from the technology is contained in one seed!

**Ignoring the benefits**

It took 10 years ?from 1980 to 1990? to develop the necessary technology to introduce genes into rice. It took another nine years—from 1990 to 1999—to introduce the genes that make up the pathway for pro-vitamin A biosynthesis into the seed. And it took further five years—from 1999 to 2004—to develop Golden Rice. It is taking several more years to advance the first Golden Rice product through the deregulatory process. Considering that Golden Rice could substantially reduce blindness (500?000 children per year) and deaths (2-3 million per year) 20 years is a very long period of time. If it were possible to shorten the time it takes to get to the deregulated product, we could prevent blindness for hundreds of thousands of children!

Notwithstanding the fact that during the last 20 years a vast knowledge base has been accumulated on the production and commercialisation of transgenic plants, the next years will have to be spent on the conduction of the required biosafety assessments to exclude any putative harm from Golden Rice for the environment and the consumer.

Thr present regulatory practice in a number of countries is based on an overzealous interpretation of the **precautionary principle**, with little room left for risk management. The position at present is that even the slightest hypothetical risk must be tested and might lead to rejection of a registration application. At the same time, potential benefits are being disregarded. Recognised ecologists, including opposers of the technology, have not been able to come up with a realistic hypothetical risk to any agricultural or wild environment stemming from the production and accumulation of beta-carotene in the endosperm of plants which otherwise produce high amounts of the same compound in other organs of the plant, and thus will not provide any additional selection advantage to the crop. This shows a substantial level of irrationality in the present system of environmental risk assessment. Despite this fact, the first small-scale field trial with Golden Rice took place in the USA, and not in South East Asia, where it should have taken place, the reason being red tape caused by a misunderstood **precautionary principle**.

**An unbearable financial burden**

What are those regulatory requirements? First of all, the application should be for a carefully selected, regulatory clean transgenic event. Criteria are not necessarily based no scientifc grounds; they include a number of requirements, eg the inserted DNA fragment should not have undergone multiple integrations or rearrangements, there should be no read-through across T-DNA borders nor microbial origins of replication and ballast DNA. This in turn requires the production of many hundreds of transgenic events using the same DNA construct, from which the regulatory clean event is then selected. The makeup of the construct itself must have been conceived taking into account the requirements imposed by the regulatory authorities. The carefully selected event can then be used to start a series of required biosafety assessment experiments expected to prove or disprove any putative biosafety hazard. The consequence of this approach is that nearly 99% of transgenic events, and often those with the highest levels of expression, must be discarded. Already this first step of mass production of many hundreds of similar events and the subsequent destruction of most of them is beyond reach for most public research institutions, in developing as well as in developed countries, and funding agencies are not prepared to take over the costs.

The biosafety assessment starts with event-independent studies. These are related to the introduced genes and their function, and are valid for all events produced with these genes. These studies are followed by exposure evaluation tests for the novel trait, its intended use and bioavailability, as would be the case for a product like pro-vitamin A. This study alone takes about three years, because without a field trial permit the material has to be produced in dedicated plant growth chambers. Next in line are protein production and equivalence analyses for the proteins encoded by the introduced genes. For this purpose the proteins have to be isolated from the plant, biochemically characterised, and their function confirmed. Further studies include, demonstration of lack of homology to known toxins and allergens, gastric degradation studies, heat lability, acute toxicity tests in a rodent feeding experiment. Screening for putative allergens and toxins is assumed to ensure that no unintended toxin or allergen will be consumed with Golden Rice.

This all would seem reasonable if it were not for the fact that most people have been eating these genes and their products from a number of other food sources throughout their lives. At one point it was even proposed to analyse whether known daffodil toxins had been introduced into Golden Rice along with the daffodil gene involved in pro-vitamin A biosynthesis, which totally lacks scientific basis: what has been transferred is one defined piece of DNA which is analogous to genes in other organisms, performing the same function, and these have no relation to any toxin or allergen. These studies take at least two years of intensive work in a well equipped biochemistry laboratory.

The event-dependent studies are even more cumbersome; they include:

Molecular characterization and genetic stability: data on single-copy effect; marker gene at same locus; simple integration;

Mendelian inheritance, including phenotypic and biochemical evidence for stability over at least three generations; no potential gene disruption; no unknown open reading frames; no DNA transfer beyond borders; no antibiotic resistance gene or origin of replication; insert size limited to the minimum necessary; insert plus flanking regions sequenced.

Expression profiling: gene expression levels at key growth stages; evidence for seed-specific expression.

Phenotypic analysis: field performance, typical agronomic traits, yield compared to isogenic lines; pest and disease status must be same as parent.

Compositional analysis: data from growing the event over two seasons at six locations in three replicates on proximates, macro and micronutrients, antinutrients, toxins, allergens; data must be generated on modified and isogenic background.

Environmental risk assessment: this type of analysis takes 4-5 years of work by an entire research team.

It is obvious that no scientist nor scientific institution in the public domain has the potential, funding or motivation to perform such lengthy, expensive biosafety experiments. It comes as no surprise then, that virtually all transgenic events that have been carried through the deregulatory process are—directly or indirectly—in the private sector and are restricted to high-value crops. Humanitarian projects do not fall into this category, even though they would benefit millions of people.v There is a lot of goodwill in the public and in the private sectors worldwide to exploit the potential of green biotechnology for the benefit of the poor. However, without a realistic risk assessment approach, funds for public research will not be capable of doing the trick. Scientific progress would become detached from product development and the population at large would not benefit from progress.

**No justification for extreme precaution**

There are historic reasons for the present regulatory framework. In the 1970s, when gene technology was still incipient, taking a **precautionary** approach was sensible, and it was the scientists themselves—who at the time were not working with plants but with human-pathogenic micro- organisms—established regulations based on the premise that the technology could lead to unpredictable genome alterations. More than 20 years of accumulated experience with transgenic plants, their widespread use on over 60 million hectares planted in a number of countries, and many hundreds of carefully conducted biosafety experiments by prestigious institutions, has led to the conclusion that there is no specific risk associated with the technology beyond that inherent to traditional plant breeding or natural evolution.vi And yet, we are still facing hard to justify calls for further moratoria.

The fact that regulation of transgenic crops has become more strict lately is counter-intuitive. Some people claim that we have to do so to build up trust in the technology with the consumer. However, experience with this strategy over the last 10 years has demonstrated that this approach did not work in Europe and in many developing countries. One reason is that in the general public?s perception a highly stringent regulation by the government must be associated with an inherently risky technology.

The guidelines pretend to apply a predictable, risk-based evaluation system based on objective empirical science. The **precautionary principle** then turns the process into a subjective framework in which the assessment is based on pretend cultural and moral values guided by fear perceptions by the consumer. The EU has endeavoured to change the current framework by embedding the **precautionary principle** into overly stringent health and safety and environment regulations and technical product standards (in excess of international standards), and then exporting those regulations and standards abroad down supply chains via international treaties, international standardisation bodies and bilateral technical capacity building intiatives. Examples of this include the recently enacted EU biotech labeling and traceability regulations implemented by the EU obligations under the Cartagena Protocol to the UN Biodiversity Convention, and the proposed EU REACH regulation, which is intended to serve as a template for global chemicals management.vii

Ideally, we should be able to free the regulatory process from all scientifically unjustified ballast to end up with a set of rational regulatory guidelines. Such a move would require the involvement of institutions and governments, which at the moment lack the will to do so or are under undue pressures—many time commercial in nature—that don't allow them to proceed along these lines. Developing countries are put under undue pressure when making decision about the adoption of transgenic technologies, being caught in the middle of a conundrum between the urgent need to adopt this technology and possible commercial implications by doing so. In essence, the EU exports the high regulatory and standardisation costs abroad, resulting in the buildup of de facto trade barriers.

Gene technology has been endorsed by international agencies, such as FAO and UNIDO, to help solve food security problems in developing countries, but yet we are threading at a very low pace. The highest price for the non-adoption of green gene tehnology is being paid by those voiceless persons who most need it. The great potential of gene technology to reduce hunger and malnutrition and to help protect the environment will only by attained once regulatory frameworks are based on scientific evidence and a proper risk-benefit analysis. Until then the technology will be restricted to "luxury projects", with safe financial returns for the private sector and mostly located in developed countries.

Every there are more countries in the developing world that don't give in to fuzzy arguments and who have starting embracing the technology based on hard facts. Positive, highly encouraging reports on increased harvests, reduced use of pesticides, a decrease in the number of people intoxicated from using those pesticides and increase in the number of beneficial insects in the fields are now coming from countries like South Africa and India. For Golden Rice, the latest World

Bank report presenting an ex ante analysis on the potential socioeconomic impact is particularly encouraging.viii

**Traditional genome meddling**

Green gene technology has the potential to support and complement traditional plant breeding. One criticism frequently brought up in relation with genetic engineering is that the insertion of genes can lead to unpredictable genome alterations. In traditional plant breeding, agronomic traits are combined or eliminated by crossing, followed by selection. Starting materials are selected varieties and landraces of crop plants. Differences between landraces were originally identified and selected by indigenous farmers, and are based on spontaneous, unpredictable mutations. In the course of traditional breeding, which may include wild relatives of crop plants, many unpredictable genome alterations, such as recombinations, translocations, deletions, inversions and horizontal gene transfer, are combined into a new cultivar. These unpredictable, significant genome alterations accumulate at every breeding step and each new, traditionally bred variety is the result of an increasing array of such genome alterations. This statement is valid for all modern crop varieties, including those used in organic farming. Nevertheless, while none of these [genetically modified] varieties has ever been assessed for biosafety, mankind has consumed them unharmed and the environment has not been affected by them either. The fact is that actually nobody could survive without eating food from these genetically modified crops.

By comparison, the creation of Golden Rice -involving the insertion of two precisely defined genes into a genome that contains fifty-thousand-odd- genes- is by several orders of magnitude more precise than traditional breeding. Why should now this variety, despite the fact that the modification is extremely small and accurately defined, be the subject of a comparatively over-the-top scrutiny?

**Assuming responsibility**

Green biotechnology has the potential to provide solutions to pest and disease control, improve phtosynthetic efficiency, nutritional content, furnish plants with adaptation mechanisms for heat, cold and salt tolerance and other things to come. The benefits of Golden Rice are clear at face value, yet opposers of the technology are posing as saviors of humanity. The blind and the dead are not at risk, they are a reality; will any of the opponents take the responsibility for this preventable tragedy that is being laid upon them?

The Nuffield Council on Bioethicsix concluded that ?[t]he European Union is ignoring a moral imperative to promote genetically modified crops for their great potential for helping the developing world?, and ?[w]e believe EU regulators have not paid enough attention to the impact of EU regulations on agriculture in developing countries.?


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Rice terraces