New programme pledged

Biotechnology for the poor

Biotechnology can mean more to agriculture than just herbicide resistant crops in industrial agriculture. A new Wageningen UR programme will investigate how biotechnology can be applied by poor farmers who adapt the technology to their own needs. Illiterate Indian farmers have already set up their own field laboratories.

Biotechnology can indeed be a promising tool to increase food production, also for the poor in developing countries. But so far, this promise is not being fulfilled by industry. Current applications of biotechnology in crops are mostly developed for industrial, large-scale agriculture. Of the 52 million hectares of GM crops worldwide, 77% are used for crops modified to be herbicide resistant. Such crops are offered by multinationals like Monsanto in a pricey package combining the crop with herbicides. This technology is not adapted to the needs of resource-poor farmers. A new programme at Wageningen UR – *Access to food through tailor-made biotechnologies* – wants to take biotechnology out of the framework of industrial agriculture and explore the potential for tailor-made biotechnology that fits the development of poor farmers themselves in developing countries.

The initiator of the programme is Dr Guido Ruivenkamp of the Technology and Agrarian Development Group of Wageningen University. Partners within Wageningen UR have signed a memorandum of understanding pledging to work on the programme. Plant Research International and Rikilt (State Institute for Quality Control of Agricultural Products), and university departments in animal sciences, life sciences and social sciences are part of the programme. The Dutch ministry of development cooperation has granted nearly half a million euros for the start-up phase of the programme. Funds from Wageningen University will be added to that. Ruivenkamp believes that the memorandum of understanding is the first step which will enable Wageningen UR to play a significant role in public research that places biotechnology in a new, non-industrial, context. One example showing that this change from industrial to tailor-made biotechnology is already under way, is poor illiterate Indian farmers who have already set up their own field laboratories.

The programme involves setting up networks of institutions in India, Kenya, Ghana and Cuba with Wageningen UR. Together with these partners, PhD and postdoctoral research subjects will be identified. A series of public debates will also be organised on tailor-made biotechnology, the aim of which is to force a breakthrough in the current polarised debate by discussing practical examples of tailor-made biotechnology developed by poor farmers. | **J.T.**