Resolution of the organic movement in favour of a system-based approach of innovation and sustainability – Keep Organic GMO-free.

Resolution from the European organic food and farming movement, adopted at IFOAM Organics Europe General Assembly on 21.06.2023.

The European organic agricultural movement re-affirms its position that the organic production process should remain free of Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) in the future, including GMOs derived from New Genomic Techniques (NGTs). Organic breeders, farmers, processors, certifiers, traders, and retailers demand the preservation of their freedom of choice to remain GMO-free. To that end, the principle of labelling and traceability enshrined in the current legislation, which allows for the identification of GMOs throughout the supply chain, must be maintained and applied to all NGTs.

Notably, genetic engineering is used to legitimise patents on seeds and animals. Exempting genetic material protected by a patent from traceability would expose all operators in the food supply chain to significant legal uncertainty as to what they can or cannot do with the plants and animals they work with due to patent infringement concerns. The increasing number of patents on specific traits and genetic material is a threat to the innovative European breeding model, which relies on lighter forms of intellectual property rights that allow for the circulation of genetic material. This would lead to a harmful concentration and corporate control in the seed sector connected with business models from the chemical industry.

The European Green Deal, the Farm to Fork, and the EU Biodiversity Strategies rightfully put organic farming at the core of a transition to sustainable food systems, with a target to expand European agricultural land under organic production to 25%. This is a welcome and necessary recognition of the environmental benefits of organic farming, for less dependency on inputs for farmers, and a resilient food supply for our society.

The organic movement strongly condemns the attacks against the Farm to Fork Strategy and the misleading claims that reducing the use of synthetic pesticides and restoring nature would not allow Europe to ensure its food security. With smart changes in land use and agroecological innovation, combined with a shift in diets and types of production, European farmers can produce sufficient food while safeguarding natural resources.

A healthy environment with a prospering flora and fauna above and below the soil is one of humanity's most precious goods and the bedrock of our food system. We are its beneficiaries, tasked with responsible stewardship towards nature. This also includes the application of the precautionary principle, and the principle of care, health, ecology, and fairness rooted in holistic, agroecological approaches.

To make our food systems truly sustainable, we need to transition away from input-intensive, short-term fixes, which include the promotion of specific technologies with unproven benefits and potential unintended effects and risks. Genetic engineering with its currently still empty sustainability promises exhibits a narrow, and short-term view of the complex challenges of food systems. A focus on specific genes or traits does not account for the importance of interactions between crops with their environment and geophysical properties, including soil health, and symbiotic relationship with other species. This understanding of agricultural systems is not the type of innovation that Europe so desperately needs in the face of various environmental challenges.

Contrarily, organic farming consistently delivers resilient agroecological systems, taking into account the complexity of interactions in nature. Organic agriculture has proven benefits for biodiversity, climate change mitigation, animal welfare, and many other environmental and social challenges. The organic movement has been for decades a main driver for nature-based regenerative systems of agroecological innovation. The EU has a leading position in the whole world in the development of an organic agri-food system, with policies enabling competitive practices for organic and GMO-free feed and food. Following the road of GMO exporting countries would entail losing this leading position in organic production and agroecological innovation.

Organic operators want to continue to fulfil their commitment towards consumers to guarantee a GM-free production process. Consumers are largely and rightfully still sceptical of the benefits of new GMOs. A potential deregulation of certain NGTs would threaten consumers' confidence in the integrity of the organic food supply chain, and taking away consumers' right to information on the use of NGTs would undermine confidence in the EU decision-making process.

The Organic movement has severe concerns about the potential exemption from the EU legal framework on GMOs of so-called "conventional-like" NGT crops, which would exempt them from identification and traceability. This would de facto, legally speaking allow the use of these NGTs in organic production, without providing legal and technical means to identify these products. This poses a threat to the right and freedom to farm without these techniques and to the integrity of organic products.

Importantly, the cumbersome burden of ensuring GM-free production must not fall on operators who do not wish to use NGTs, as this would significantly hinder the development of organic agriculture in the European Union.

European Union policies should focus on resilient agroecology with a systemic understanding of sustainability. Promises of expected benefits of NGTs do not justify watering down the successful EU precautionary principle and EU standards on environmental protection and farmer and consumers' choice.

Thus, the organic movement calls for the maintenance of a system of identification and traceability, so that organic and conventional operators have the right and freedom to continue producing GM-free throughout the entire supply chain.