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Sweet Sorghum an alternative energy Crop



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Case study in India

Marcel Bursztyn – consultant for ethical issues

Composition of the consortium

CIRAD
ICRISAT
EMBRAPA
KWS
IFEU
UniBO
UCSC
ARC-GCI
UANL
WIP



Sweet Sorghum an alternative energy Crop

Sweetfuel project – India mission report

Hyderabad, India

(ICRISAT's headquarter, Patancheru)

17-19 October 2011

Report

Marcel Bursztyn – consultant for ethical issues
November 5, 2011

Day 1 – participation as observer in the activities of the agenda.

In the afternoon, explanation of the main aspects of the ethical issues concerning the Project and its implications, considering the presence of members of the ICRISAT team.

Questions raised on possible risks (economical, social, ecological), which are directly or indirectly related to the ethical dimension have been discussed and doubts were clarified.

As to explain the local team about the range of what can be considered as ethical implications, some examples were presented:

- in economic terms (risks of a negative cost-benefit balance not only for the research institutions, but mainly for users of the knowledge generated by Sweetfuel);
- for the farmers, increase in their costs by the payment of royalties included in the acquisition of new technological standards. Up to what extent they are partners, as they are providing their traditional knowledge and seeds? As partners, which rights do they have?
- in environmental terms, questions involving soil, water or the use of chemicals were mentioned;
- in cultural terms, changes in lifestyles as consequence of a deeper integration to market rules were mentioned. How can we be sure about the risks of this process, considering the traditional pattern of peasants economic decisions? The case of 200,000 suicides of farmers in India, due to their default in paying back debts in the microcredit system is a reference to be considered;
- doubts about informed consent were also discussed.

From the institutional point of view, the discussion considered issues such as:

- the relation among partners within the Sweetfuel project (asymmetries? imbalances?). The fact that partners work in a rather autonomous way has been presented as a key reason for the good relation among them: institutional differences can be minimised in the daily activities of Sweetfuel;
- the share of credits related to authorship;
- propriety rights
- conflict of interests (such as open access to the results vs. payment of royalties vs. commercialisation of the outcomes of Sweetfuel).

Other issues were discussed, in a very productive and friendly manner.

The idea of applying a questionnaire on ethical issues to the ICRISAT researchers has been proposed, in order to provide a substantial view of their overall understanding of the matter. The same query has already been presented do Embrapa's researchers, in Brazil: 325 responses have been received so far. Dr. Belum and Dr. Riera-Lizarazu suggested that the questionnaire could be presented to the whole CGIAR system. Further contacts will be made in this direction.

The local team provided a very clarifying view about the way they are implementing their strategies in the Sweetfuel project, as well as about the involvement of 400 farmers in the process. Those farmers constitute a rather solid sample for the understanding and follow-up, as they were previously involved with the ethanol industry for 3 years. In the scheme, which is in practice, the industry provides seeds and inputs (with costs included in the deal). Such a deal obviously have risks, as the harvest can be bad, for several reasons. But as explained by the ICRISAT team, and confirmed in the visit to the field, the price paid by the industry is independent of the final quality of the material provided. The payment is strictly based on quantity.

Days 2 and 3 – field trip and visit to local communities, in Nander and Ibrahimadab.

An aspect that deserves to be mentioned is the interface of Sweetfuel activities with other projects carried on by ICRISAT. In the field trip, the experiences two communities of farmers were presented. Not all of what they are doing is due to the EU project. It is difficult to separate the outcomes of each initiative. Such feature is not to be considered as negative, but rather as a source of positive synergies.

However, some risks, which do not necessarily derive strictly from Sweetfuel, can be mentioned here:

- what is the guarantee that those initiatives will be “sustainable” in terms of continuity, after the end of the “incubation”?
- how is the training of local leaderships to carry on the experiences, after the end of the projects?
- is there a sociological/anthropological follow-up, so that the sense of “ownership” and “responsiveness” can be assured?
- what are the possibilities of disseminating those experiences in a larger scale?
- how to involve more industries in the process?
- is there a capacity building strategy so that the peasants involved can run their own management of the initiative?
- is there a scheme for the deployment an *ex post* assessment (for instance 3years

- after the end of this initial “incubation”), so that the overall sustainability can be effectively checked?

Questions like these may seem obvious, but they are usual causes of failure in other cases.

A final comment: since the kick-of meeting of the Sweetfuel project, in Montpellier, my perception is that the researchers involved have now a better understanding of what are in fact the ethical issues, which were somehow quite strange to them in the beginning. My opinion is that from an initial reaction of misunderstanding or rather mistrustfulness about the inclusion of such issues as part of the process, our interaction is now very positive and didactic.

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