

DON'T OPEN PANDORA'S BOX OF GENETIC ENGINEERING OF SMALLPOX 19th May 2014

We, the undersigned civil society organizations from around the world, call on the 67th World Health Assembly (WHA) not to open the door to the genetic engineering of variola (smallpox) virus.

Instead, the WHA should unequivocally terminate research with smallpox virus and fix a prompt and irrevocable date for the destruction of the virus stocks, held only at WHO repositories in the United States and Russia.

By any reasonable measure, all elements of the WHA's authorized research programme requiring smallpox virus are complete. WHO's own public health experts have concluded that no public health reason remains for the continued retention of the virus.

With the smallpox research programme effectively completed, the United States is now proffering the idea that "new threats" from smallpox may exist. These it says relate to biotechnology and, more specifically, synthetic biology. By promoting this discussion, the proponents of retention are seeking political pretext on which to keep the virus.

Linking retention of smallpox virus to vague biotechnology-related "threats" may open the Pandora's Box of genetic engineering of smallpox. A nightmare scenario of new proposals being put forward to manipulate the virus to unsafe ends, including experiments to synthesize large pieces of it, or whole virus, as a perverted "proof of principle", will likely ensue.

While this may sound far-fetched, we need only look at how US biodefense researchers genetically engineered anthrax to make it antibiotic resistant (and hence more dangerous) or how Dutch and US researchers have deliberately created new strains of potentially pandemic influenza.

In fact, the US first proposed to genetically engineer smallpox a decade ago. Remarkably, the WHO committee overseeing research approved. It was only through civil society campaigning and a group of countries led by Africa that the decision was overturned and WHO oversight – at least temporarily – tightened.

WHO has stringent existing rules on synthesis, possession, and use of smallpox DNA that can effectively control any biotechnology-related risk. These rules strictly forbid synthesizing full-length variola virus genomes or infectious variola viruses from smaller DNA fragments and genetic engineering of the virus.

Those rules must not be weakened, and vague assertions of "new threats" related to biotechnology cannot be allowed to provide any new pretext upon which the US and Russia can base refusal to destroy the virus stocks.

Nearly a quarter century ago, in 1986, the WHO's experts first recommended that the viruses be destroyed, so that the risk of a future outbreak would be radically reduced.

Continued retention of smallpox virus samples serves no public health purpose, and the possibility of escape, amplified by the risks of unnecessary research, threatens all countries. Indeed, the last recorded smallpox case, in 1978, was the result of a laboratory accident.

Destroying smallpox virus stocks is not only the last step in the achievement of eradicating the disease; it is the single most important thing that the international community can do to ensure that it never appears again. By making possession of the

virus a crime against humanity, any future attempt to recreate the virus through biotechnology methods would meet international condemnation and sanction.

The time has come for these stocks to be destroyed once and for all. This can only be accomplished through the will of the upcoming World Health Assembly (19th-24th May 2014).

Endorsed by:

1. Abibiman Foundation, Ghana
2. Accion Ecologica, Ecuador
3. African Centre for Biosafety (Acbio), South Africa
4. All India Drug Action Network, India
5. Alliance for Humane Biotechnology, USA
6. Alliance Sud, Switzerland
7. Asociacion Ambiente y Sociedad, Colombia
8. Assistance Plus Togo
9. Beyond Copenhagen Collective, India
10. Centre Public Health and Equity (CPHE), India
11. Centro Ecológico, Brazil
12. Coalition for the Protection of African Genetic Heritage (COPAGEN)
13. COECOCEIBA – Friends of the Earth Costa Rica
14. Committee on Vital Environmental Resource (COVER) Nigeria
15. Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP), Malaysia
16. Cooperation for Peace and Development (CPD), Afghanistan
17. Corporate Europe Observatory
18. Desarrollo Media Ambiental Sustentable (ASDMAS), Peru
19. Earth Open Source, UK
20. Environmental Rights Action/Friends of the Earth Nigeria
21. ETC Group
22. Ever Green Organization (EGO) Pakistan
23. Friends of the Earth Australia
24. Friends of the Earth International
25. Friends of the Environment in Negros Oriental (FENOr)
26. Gene Ethics, Australia
27. GM Watch, UK
28. Green Foundation, India
29. Growth Partners Africa, Kenya
30. Health of Mother Earth Foundation, Nigeria
31. Human Genetics Alert, UK
32. Initiative for Health & Equity in Society, India
33. Institute of Science in Society, UK
34. Instituto del Tercer Mundo, Uruguay
35. JINUKUN, Benin
36. Kamukunji Paralegal Trust (KAPLET)
37. Kenya Biodiversity Network, Kenya
38. Kenya Food Rights Alliance, Kenya
39. MADGE Australia Inc.
40. Malaysian Physicians for Social Responsibility
41. Nabodhara, Bangladesh
42. Network for a GE Free Latin America (RALLT)
43. Nourish Scotland
44. Peoples Health Movement (PHM-grassroots movement with a presence in around 70 countries)
45. Pesticide Action Network – Asia Pacific (PAN AP)
46. RAPAL Uruguay
47. Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) – Friends of the Earth Malaysia
48. Scientists for Global Responsibility, UK
49. SHISUK, Bangladesh
50. Society for Community Health Awareness Research and Action (SOCHARA), Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh

51. South Asian Dialogues on Ecological Democracy
52. Testbiotech, Germany
53. The Bioscience Resource Project, USA
54. The Oakland Institute, USA
55. The Safe Food Foundation, Australia
56. The Young Environmental Network (TYEN), Nigeria
57. Third World Network