



Is the future of the banana really dependent on genetic engineering?

By Everard Smith

According to the New Scientist (18/1/03) and Dr. Emile Frison of the International Network for the Improvement of Banana and Plantain, the answer would be a resounding 'Yes'.

In a neat, well-reasoned, cleverly worded and well-timed article, the New Scientist (18/1/03) argues that not only would the use of genetic engineering in banana 'save the world's favourite fruit,' but such a philosophical and methodological transformation in the breeding of bananas would

- Save millions in Africa from the likelihood of starvation;
- Preserve supplies of the fruit in Western supermarkets;
- Rescue consumers from excessive exposure to pesticides since currently banana is "the most heavily sprayed major food crop in the world";
- Protect female employees in the banana supply chain from "double the average rate of leukaemia and birth defects"; and men, from record levels of sterility; as well as
- Assuring economic concerns about yields and incomes.

In other words, according to 'Going Bananas', by allowing GMOs into banana breeding the three lofty aims of the Brundtland definition of sustainable development would become a reality. A very convincing argument especially if readers fail to separate scientific arguments from rank speculations about the future of the, so far, remarkably durable banana considering that it "is genetically old and decrepit." If the overall argument being put forward by the New Scientist is credible, then perhaps the authors would explain why the results of biotechnology advances in drugs to treat HIV/AIDS are so slow to reach the hundreds of thousands suffering with HIV/AIDS in Africa. In this case, will the commercially exploitable benefits of genetic engineering in bananas, the cost of which would have been discretely borne, be scattered benevolently across the globe or will they be protected by patents and licences?

Whilst the threat that banana faces from the Black Sigatoka and other similar diseases should not be underestimated, one should not dismiss as a lucky, one-off success the transition from the Gros Michel variety to the Cavendish –when the threat was the Panama disease. For even though the New Scientist recognises the development of new, disease resistant strains

of the banana, these are virtually dismissed as not offering a viable solution to the current problem; and according to Dr. Frison 'biotechnology is the only hope for the banana.' Is this really so? Could the failure to commercially explore new varieties of the banana have more to do with preserving predictably profitable market relationships rather than the likelihood, for instance, that yields may be lower or that consumers may reject new varieties because of slightly differences in visual aesthetics or taste? For that matter, how can we be sure that genetically engineered bananas will look or taste exactly like the Cavendish that we purchased at the cornerstore yesterday? The New Scientist and the benevolent Dr. Frison fail to tell us. We are simply left to trust the advocates of GMOs!