

# Report on Sterile Seed Deliberative Dialogue Meetings

## April 2006

By Dan Wiens

A total of 5 deliberative dialogue meetings were conducted in April, 2006 on the issue of Sterile Seed Technology. The meetings were held in Taber and Medicine Hat AB, Kindersley and Hague SK and Boissevian MB. Foodgrains Bank supporters eagerly helped with local coordination and planning of these events. Very little explanation was required when describing why the Foodgrains Bank would be involved in this issue, indicating that many supporters understand the connection between the sterile seed issue and global hunger. The meetings were well attended and most participants expressed an appreciation for both the style and content of the meetings. A deliberative dialogue guide was prepared by staff for use at these meetings and is available at <http://www.foodgrainsbank.ca/global/papers>.

Public deliberation involves bringing together people from a variety of backgrounds to discuss and work through different approaches to an issue. In 2003 the Foodgrains Bank conducted several dozen deliberative dialogues on the issue of the international trade of food and has since used this style of participatory dialogue to educate about and to consult on other food related issues. The emphasis is on mutual respect, sharing of views and building on the views of others. By working through the trade-offs associated with an issue, people begin to clarify what is most important to them, and may find common ground on some issues. Common ground describes the values, principles or shared understandings that members of a group have in common.

### Themes that Emerged in Common Ground on Sterile Seed Technology

In a majority of the deliberations, the issue of **public versus private ownership** of seed became a major point of discussion. The common ground of all groups reflected the view that increased public funding on research and development of new seed varieties would help protect the livelihoods of developing country farmers.

Related to this was the strong area of common ground concerning the importance of maintaining and increasing the level of control farmers have in all matters related to their livelihoods. There were differences of opinion about how best to achieve this, but the common ground of many groups noted a high value placed on **protecting farmers' autonomy**.

Another frequent theme was that of **the ineffectiveness of bans**. Essentially all groups agreed that a ban on Sterile Seed Technology will not work in the long run. Finding positive alternatives to this technology such as increased public investment in seed variety trials was sited as being more realistic than a ban.

Most groups agreed that society should strive to find a **balance between adopting new technologies and achieving social justice**. The general underlying principle was that new technologies should be viewed with some suspicion if they increase economic disparity or further the concentration of power into fewer hands.

The common ground of a number of groups included references to **access to seed as a basic human right**. Concern was expressed that seed should not be treated simply as a commodity.

Some groups raised concerns about the **concentration power in the hands of transnational corporations**. Large corporations were seen as being the major beneficiaries' of sterile seed technology.

### **Shifting Opinions, Core Values**

Most deliberation participants completed questionnaires before and after the deliberation forums. The questionnaires were designed primarily to track changes in opinion that followed deliberation: questions were essentially the same on the pre-forum and post-forum questionnaires. The post forum questionnaire asked if participation in the forum increased the participant's knowledge of the issue. 63% said the forum was "very useful" while 27% said it was "somewhat useful". No respondent said the forum was "not useful". In comments and questionnaire responses, participants revealed that although they did not always change their minds, deliberating with fellow citizens gave them a better understanding and appreciation of the issue. The process was highly appreciated.

Responses to pre-forum and post-forum questionnaires were analyzed to determine total opinion shift. This is an indication of the extent to which people questioned and rethought their views.

- One set of questions tested concern about our Federal Government's policies on sterile seed technology. 23% of respondents shifted from "somewhat" to "very" concerned about how our Government's policies affect people overseas. This is by far the largest shift in attitude that showed up in the questionnaire and is an indication of how forums like this can be effective educational tools about international issues. It is interesting to note that concern for domestic implications of Canada's policies on sterile seed did not shift over the course of the meeting. This suggests that respondents had already given considerable thought to the domestic implications of this issue.
- Very little shift occurred in question of what "principle" respondents think should underlie Canada's approach to sterile seed technology. The choices given were: 1) ensure farmer control of seed, 2) embrace new technology and 3) encourage environmental stewardship. 69% of respondents chose ensure farmer control of seed.
- A third set of questions measured agreement or disagreement with various statements about trade-offs inherent in different courses of action. Agreement was highest (56%) that "we should consider the long term environmental impacts and follow the precautionary principle until more is known about sterile seed.

### **After the Deliberations**

At the end of each deliberation, participants were generally asked to consider Foodgrains Bank involvement in issues like sterile seed technology. A high degree of support was expressed for this type of involvement, especially if any kind of political action or advocacy is based on consultations such as the deliberative dialogue meetings. The connection between the sterile seed issue and the Foodgrains Bank mission to end hunger was readily apparent to most participants.

Below is a list of “next steps” or recommendations given in response to the question, “What should the Foodgrains Bank do next regarding the sterile seed issue?”

- Encourage supporters to meet with their local MP’s on the issue and organize a letter writing campaign to MPs and Ministers when a decision needs to be taken by the Federal Government.
- Use the official opposition to get to the Minister(s) responsible
- Use the Senate to influence decisions (Senators are looking for causes)
- Partner with producer groups to strengthen all advocacy actions.
- Partner with the Catholic Church because they are doing good work on this issue.
- Push back to seed companies directly
- Team up with celebrities in any advocacy campaign.
- Do more public education like the deliberative dialogue meetings and written materials.
- Use our website to inform and engage Canadians
- Engage the media on the issue (approach CBC’s *Tapestry* for example).
- Advocate for the program that would have 1% of seed purchase costs going back to public research and development (of new seed varieties).
- Don’t get stuck on this issue, concentrate on farmer’s livelihoods in general
- Write position papers and make them available online.
- Create political lobbies to developing country farmers.
- Create a video/DVD on the issue

In general, participants responded positively to deliberation. In qualitative comments, many participants expressed enthusiasm about the process and about Foodgrains Bank involvement. Participants in the deliberations recognized that there are no easy solutions to issues like sterile seed technology. It is hoped that the forums and this report provide a starting point for Board discussion on this complex issue and perhaps continued citizen learning, reflection and action.