

UN CSTD

Background Guide

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Topic 1

GMOs and Rights Over Organisms

Key Terms

Genetically Modified Organism (GMO): Any sort of organism, plant or animal, that has been modified using genetic engineering to produce desirable traits or remove unwanted ones.¹

Genetic Engineering: The process of changing the genetic material of an organism through adding another organism's genetic material to it or removing certain aspects of its' own DNA.²

Biotechnology: Technology based on biology that makes use of cellular, molecular, or genetic processes.³

¹ Evanega et al. "The State of the 'GMO' Debate"

² CFSAN, "Science and History of Gmos and Other Food Modification Processes."

³ BIO, "What is Biotechnology?"

Introduction

Since their introduction to society, GMOs, or genetically modified organisms, have been a topic of debate among the public. Although scientists have established that GMOs pose no significant risk to human health or the environment, the general public remains skeptical.¹ In this context, GMOs refer to the modification of any organism—plant or animal—using genetic engineering where its DNA has been altered in some way, shape, or form.

GMOs are typically used in farming, and some of the most common “alterations” that are performed on crops are increasing resistance against harmful insects, enhancing disease and virus-resistance, and raising tolerance levels for weed-killing herbicides. These changes make it easier on farmers who want to increase crop yield—they need to use fewer pesticides, do not need to till their fields as much to prevent weeds, and can reduce the amount of overall labor that is needed to tend to their crops.⁴ When applied to farm animals, similar benefits have been observed, such as increased resistance to disease and faster growth rates. Currently, research is even being done to reduce the pain sensation in animals, allowing for more humane slaughter.⁵

Furthermore, GMOs enable developing countries to increase their crop yield, allowing for upward economic mobility in the form of increased exports, new products, and enhanced nutritional content. This allows for the development of new opportunities across nearly all sectors, since food production is a basic necessity for countries. This technology has shown to have the potential to reduce poverty and increase food security, helping take these nations one step closer to alleviating hunger.⁶

Despite these production-side benefits, consumers, corporations, and some farmers have concerns regarding the widespread use and adoption of GMOs. These concerns include potential harm to human health deriving from altered genes and interaction with the human body, environmental damage, and the negative changes coming to conventional farming. Additionally, people are concerned about corporate dominance and motives within the food industry and the overall unnaturalness of this technology and what it means for the future and for the human body as a whole.⁶ Other concerns regarding genetically modified animals include reduced genetic diversity, increased suffering from test subjects, and overall moral debates regarding animals’ rights to their genetic code.⁵ These issues have been raised by international governments, companies, and the public—proving that it is a topic that needs to be formally addressed by weighing the different pros and

⁴ Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition, “Why Do Farmers in the U.S. Grow GMO Crops?”

⁵ Andrew Berzigian, “Detailed Discussion of Genetic Engineering and Animal Rights”

⁵ Albert Weale, “Ethical Arguments Relevant to the Use of GM Crops.”

cons.

The purpose of this committee is to reach an agreement regarding the aforementioned ethical concerns of genetically modified organisms as well as the legislation that governs them.

History

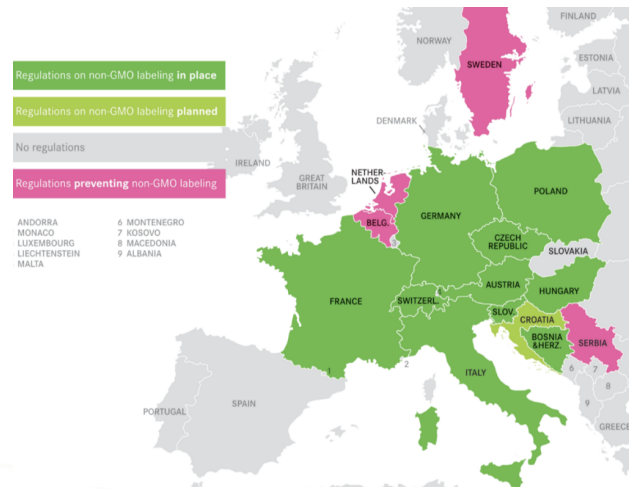
Genetic modification is a tool humans have been using for thousands of years through farming. Even in ancient times, humans selectively grew and farmed certain breeds of crops and animals, letting ones that were not profitable or useful die out. In the 1800s and 1900s, advancements in geneticism allowed scientists to discover basic hybridization and cross-breeding techniques, enabling them to harness nature's power by crossing certain types of plants to select desired genes. Gregor Mendel, often known as the "Father of Genetics" was able to conduct experiments using pea plants to discover genes and their role in portraying differences in plants in the late 1800s.² In 1973, genetic engineering was developed by Herbert Boyer and Stanley Cohen in an experiment where DNA was inserted and injected between different bacteria. This paved the way for further developments, eventually leading to the first, official genetically modified product being created and released to the public: human insulin.²

Over the course of the 1980s and 90s, more advancements in GMOs began to emerge, and with this came regulations from the government to dictate and control how they were being produced. In 1986, the Coordinated Framework for the Regulation of Biotechnology was founded, and was used to help set guidelines for GMO development and safety.² Six years later, the FDA also introduced an important rule—GMO plants and produce *must* meet the same quality and safety requirements as regular, non-modified produce. The EU shared these views and expanded on them, saying that modified foods were "novel," meaning that they required a separate set of legislation. In the 1990s, the EU deemed that these "novel foods" can be patented but also must follow all the same regulations for safety as "normal" food. This meant that now, all products that were genetically modified would essentially be equal to their normal counterparts. Finally, in 1994, the first genetically modified food—a tomato—was released to the public.²

The 2001/18 directive was also passed and modified in the early 2000s, which stated that a full assessment of risks must take place on all GMOs. This assessment was now changed to be a major requirement for nations in the EU. Additionally, the UN Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety was passed in the year 2000, which established international guidelines regarding the safe transport and use of GMOs to prevent adverse effects on biological diversity.⁷ Essentially, this regulation was to ensure genetically modified organisms did not have negative effects on the natural processes on unmodified organisms, to prevent irreversible genetic damage to survival or overall environmental maintenance (this regulation extended to animals as well.⁷

⁷ Hilbeck et al., "GMO Regulations and Their Interpretation"

In 2003, international guidelines for GMOs were established. The World Health Organization and Food and Agriculture Organization met to develop these guidelines, as well as different safety standards overall to determine how GMOs would be safely distributed for widespread consumption. This only increased the adoption of genetic modification in crops, spreading to more and more farmed produce. However, in other parts of the world, namely Africa, widespread fear of GMOs continued. In 2012, Kenya imposed a ban to which the majority of the continent also followed in order to protect smaller farmers and to address the public's fears over what the potential negative effects could be. In 2015 however, the first genetically modified animal for consumption was released in the US, a genetically modified salmon.²



GMO labelling requirements across Europe¹¹

Current

GMOs have been widely adopted by many nations and are considered the fastest growing and adopted crop technology in the world.⁸ In fact, every single country in the EU currently imports and consumes some kind of genetically modified product, despite not producing many GMOs themselves. Africa, a continent that historically has completely opposed GMOs, is beginning to loosen restrictions.¹⁰

In the past, many African nations had concerns over the safety of modified crops, environmental and biodiversity-related issues, as well as regulation of these crops. However, as research on them progressed and the potential for economic gain increased, the benefits began to overtake the potential risks¹⁰. In 2022, Kenya lifted the ban on GMOs they had placed in 2012, paving the way for imports of genetically modified products and even cultivation on Kenyan soil.



African nations and GMO crops grown¹²

⁹ Joan Conrow, "A Developing Nations Lead Growth of GMO Crop"

¹⁰ Kim Thewell, "Pros and Cons of Gmos in Africa"

¹¹ European Non-GMO Industry Association. (n.d.). Non-GMO production in Europe.

¹² Akimbo et al, "Commercial release of genetically modified crops in Africa" Systems and Varietal Release Systems

Senegal, Zambia, Ghana, Malawi, Ethiopia, and South Africa have also begun to do the same.⁸ Despite this, there is still skepticism around the safety of GMOs among the public, with specific concerns rising in Europe.

In 2015, the European Commission passed a major ruling that allowed nations to “opt out of growing GMO crops even though many countries already had a de facto ban in place. Nineteen countries chose not to grow GMOs, with the major ones being Austria, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland and Scotland” (DTN). This ruling changed the shape of direct human consumption of GMOs, since now, most of the products the EU imports are for livestock feed in the form of soy.¹³ In Russia, this figure only grows, as it is one of the most hostile European countries to GMOs. This is because modified crops from overseas—namely the US—threaten Russian agriculture, and the ban was created as a way to promote Russian farming and local production.¹⁴ As of this year, Russia has a temporary ban on GMOs, with questions about other gene-editing technologies and whether they should also be grouped under GMOs, such as CRISPR, coming into the debate.¹³

Much of this negative feedback to GMOs stems from public uncertainty—most people simply do not know what GMOs are and how they are different from unmodified produce. Due to this lack of information, people often default to having a negative view and refuse to support GMOs: “In Japan, 51% of those surveyed said they didn't know enough to determine whether GMO foods were safe to eat. The percentages were similarly high in the Netherlands (50%), the UK (46%), Singapore (44%), and Spain (39%)” (DTN).¹³ As the debate on the consumption of GMOs rages on, farmers must still continue to make a living, even as the prices of livestock maintenance and farming continue to grow. While GMOs may enable farmers to fight conventional problems, like pests and disease, that would normally ruin an entire year's worth of growth, resources, and farming, public dissent may force them to revert back to unmodified produce.¹³

¹³ Des Keller, “Why Does Europe Oppose Gmos?”

¹⁴ Dan Vergano, “The World's Largest GMO Study Was Launched by Russians in 2014. Then It Disappeared.”

Directives

Now, it is up to you to research and determine where you and your country stand on the ethical debate regarding genetically modified organisms. You and your fellow delegates must consider the consumer producer-side arguments and concerns to produce directives and resolutions to address this growing debate. Here are some guiding questions to help you plan your approach to deliberation:

- What sort of legislation does your country currently have in place against GMOs (if any)?
- What stance does the public in your country take on GMOs and what sort of actions have they taken to support/fight against legislation (protests, etc.)?
- How will you plan to address both sides of the debate? If your country is unsupporting of GMOs, how will you address farmers' and agricultural companies' concerns? If your country supports GMOs, how will you convince the public or other nations that they are safe and should be used?
- Are any educational or outreach-related initiatives underway to address this?
- What are some alternative solutions that could be implemented if GMOs were no longer a plausible option?
- What history has your country had with GMO legislation? Were there any changes throughout history? Why did those changes occur?
- What are solutions that can address both sides of the debate?
- Please remember to be respectful, and ensure that you are accurately representing your country's views and perspectives in the context of this delegation/issue.

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Figure 1: Assorted Antibiotic Capsules. Fahrni. iStock/Getty Images Plus

Topic 2

Fast Fashion and the Modern Silk Road

Key Terms

Fast Fashion: Poorly made, cheap clothing items that are based on current trends that are quickly produced, sold, and often, disposed of.¹⁵

Overconsumption: Excessively consuming something, in this context, clothing, to the point where there is too much of it.

Sweatshop: A small building or factory that employs workers to create products in unhygienic and unsafe conditions.¹⁶

Globalization: The connection shared by different nations around the world—in this context, the ability to access fashion from around the world through culture, the media, and shopping.

Introduction

Fashion is a topic that surrounds us: in the media, the people we interact with, and our daily lives. However, while it does allow for personal expression, a major issue exists with a lot of today's fashion: there is a dark side, and it can be very unethical, manifesting as fast fashion. Fast fashion is meant to be cheap, and often, only to be worn a few times before it is either unfashionable or unwearable.¹⁵ Oftentimes, it is directly in response to seasonal trends, where clothes are mass-manufactured for a short period of time, several people purchase them, and then a new type of clothing is ushered in. But what happens to these clothes once they're no longer trendy or wearable? The majority of the time it is poorly made, so it either gets damaged and is deemed unwearable, or is no longer considered trendy, so is disposed of.¹⁵

Fast fashion is typically designed to emulate styles that are currently on brand at a certain time of year, except with cheaper materials to make them more accessible to a wider range of people. However, these cheaper materials come at a cost—they usually last for a very small window of time before they get damaged or show signs of wear. Another main reason why fast fashion is so cheap is because of international labor sourcing—retailers outsource the labor of creating these clothes from developing countries, where work conditions are often very poor and wages are low.¹⁷ In fact, workers are often paid unlivable wages to the point where they cannot even afford basic necessities to support their families. In terms of production, to manufacture clothes at the rate at which fast fashion moves, workers are often forced to work extremely long shifts in unventilated and cramped spaces. The workers themselves are often under the age of 18, and due to limited workers' rights in these developing countries, laws that are made to protect underage workers and laborers overall are usually never enforced. As a result, incidents involving personal injury and accidents are common, and often workers are not given the medical support they need by the retailers they work for.¹⁷

Another major issue surrounding fast fashion is the massive negative environmental impact it has. Not only does overconsumption of clothing lead to excessive waste and landfill use, but the synthetic fibers and chemicals used to create this clothing can leach harmful toxins into the area around where it is dumped, or worse, incinerated, where it will pollute the air people living nearby breathe. The dyes used to color this clothing are also dangerous—often, clothing needs to be repeatedly dyed to ensure vibrant colors, and since fast fashion is based on quantity over quality, dyes are produced and used in large quantities.¹⁷

¹⁵ Rashmila Maiti "Fast Fashion: Its Detrimental Effect on the Environment.

¹⁶ Ngan Le, "The Impact of Fast Fashion on the Environment - PSCI."

¹⁷ Lei Nguyen, "Fast Fashion: The Danger of Sweatshops."

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Once they have served their purpose, they are typically dumped in rivers and lakes due to poor environmental regulations in developing countries. As a result, local wildlife dies out due to the toxicity of the chemicals in the water, which, in turn, also affect the drinking water of surrounding towns. Additionally, fast fashion requires enormous quantities of water—from growing the cotton or other material to make the clothing, to dyeing it several times—all of these actions require large quantities of fresh water, which is then typically dumped due to pollution. Furthermore, the synthetic fibers used to create the clothing are typically made of microplastics, and due to the tendency of these fibers to be low quality and break easily, they are discarded, where they can end up in waterways and the ocean. This wreaks havoc on the local marine life and can even leach into drinking water. Since marine life are forced to consume these plastics, when humans farm them (i.e. fishing), they inadvertently also end up consuming the plastic.¹⁶

History

The globalization of fashion within the last few decades has often been referred to as the “Modern Silk Road,” as it has had similar, if not more global, effects as was with the Silk Road in ancient times. The Silk Road was a network of different trade routes that connected East Asia to Europe, allowing for widespread trade of goods, religion, ideology, and culture between 130 B.C.E to 1453 C.E.¹⁸ Similarly, globalization and modernization of the world has allowed fast fashion to provide a similar route for the sale of goods, however, it has led to poor conditions and immoral practices.

The modern silk road can be traced to approximately the end of World War II, when the advent of new technology allowed for faster transportation of goods, such as planes and trains. Since the war was over, a new wave of international trade relations was formed between the EU, US and other nations.¹⁹ Additionally, the introduction of faster sewing machines meant that retailers could now produce clothes much quicker, leading to the rise of garment factories and early sweatshops. Over-

¹⁸ National Geographic Society, “The Silk Road.”

¹⁹ Lisa Wolfe “The Rise of Fast Fashion: Globalization and Waste.”

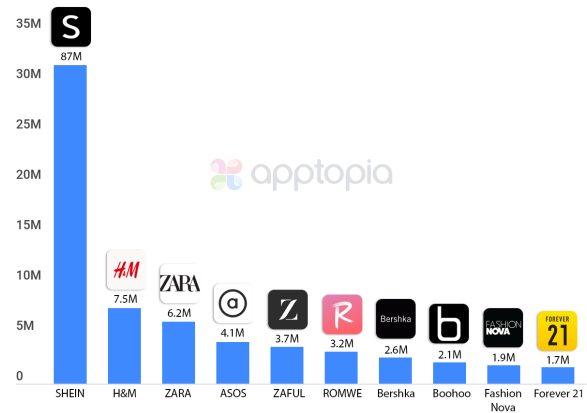
-all, the mid-1900s (1940s-60s) were the true beginning of fast fashion, at least in terms of the practices we associate with it today.²⁰

Around the 1960s and 70s, the concept of “trendiness” came into play, with people beginning to associate certain types of clothing with trends that came and went. These trends were still rather in their infancy, and did not run their course nearly as fast as trends do today. The late 1980s, 90s, and 2000s were truly when fast fashion took its form and became what we associate it with today. At this time, many of the modern retailers we associate with fast fashion—cheap prices, low quality—began to appear and appeal to the masses. These retailers include Zara and H&M, and they began to replicate high fashion and couture in a cheaper way as a means to make them available to the middle-class, who often could not afford the higher end versions sold by designer brands.²⁰ They also began to implement massive overseas sweatshops, targeting countries like China, India, and Bangladesh.¹⁷ These nations gave them an avenue for extremely cheap labor, allowing them to keep prices low and continue attracting massive customer bases.

The introduction of the internet and online shopping around this time (2000s) also led to the popularity of these retailers to skyrocket. Now, consumers could buy cheap clothing in large amounts from the comfort of their homes, encouraging retailers to bolster production and put money towards new trends rather than building brick-and-mortar stores. Once social media was introduced, fully online retailers, such as Boohoo, Shein, and FashionNova took the world by storm, targeting youth and supporting fast-moving trends. In fact, these retailers—who typically do not have *any* in-person stores—are referred to as ultra fast fashion, due to the fact that they play solely on rapidly-changing social media trends.²¹

Top Fast Fashion Apps by Q3 Installs

Q3 2020 installs, worldwide



Current

Currently, fast fashion has a very strong hold on consumers, with online retailers dominating the fashion space, specifically towards young customers.²¹ In fact, *ultra* fast fashion is beginning to dominate over what was conventionally thought of as fast fashion, as trends can last for as little as *one*

²⁰ Rauturier, “What Is Fast Fashion and Why Is It so Bad?”

²¹ Elizabeth Paton, “Why You Should Care That Boohoo Is Making Headlines This Week”

week, at which point clothes are often bought, delivered, worn, and discarded all within the span of a few days. Ultra fast fashion is also characterized by even lower prices, with consumers getting clothes for as little as five dollars.²¹

Social media has also enabled these retailers to promote their products on an entirely new level—consumers now see them every few posts as they scroll through their feeds, and with the rise of influencers, they only attract more and more attention as time goes on. Data collection on the internet also allows companies to predict trends and develop sub categories of fashion, and since many are fully online, they can test inventory without needing to spend additional money maintaining stores.²² This sort of technology is known as predictive analytics, and it uses machine learning and AI to analyze what consumers’ buying habits are like. Additionally, it analyzes how consumers interact with suggested products—do they ignore a certain group of products of companies, or is the product/company starting to get more clicks? Using this data, companies can predict which products will become trendy and adjust inventory accordingly.²² Consumers are being targeted with advertising nearly every second they are on social media, and this only fuels these retailers to continue mass producing inexpensive, low quality clothing.²³



Crowded conditions in a sweatshop²⁶

On the legal side of things, little is being done to improve working conditions for sweatshop workers. This is mainly due to political motives, as countries like Bangladesh rely on sweatshops, the companies they are associated with, and the investors they are backed by for economic gain. As a result, the government is unsupportive of improving working conditions, as they risk losing money if regulations are made and enforced. Overall, there is also “government opposition to freedom of association and unionization, and the brutal crackdown on protesting garment workers is still happening”.²⁴ This leaves garment workers in a very difficult position—they are forced to adhere to the grueling work conditions to make a living, and cannot fight for their rights. Wage theft is also an all-too-common issue, as workers in nations like India, Bangladesh, and China usually face delays in getting paid for their—or are never paid at all. Due to poor enforcement of workers’ laws, factories can get away with withholding or stealing wages, where the retailer may pay—albeit well below the nation’s minimum wage—but does not see to it that the money goes into the workers’ hands.²⁵ This lack of

²² Epicore US, “4 Ways Predictive Analytics in Retail Can Take It to the Next Level.”

²³ Rachel Monroe, “Ultra-Fast Fashion Is Eating the World.”

²⁴ Miko Takama, “Political Reasons Why Sweatshops Still Exist in Bangladesh”

²⁵ Annie Kelly, “Worst Fashion Wage Theft”

²⁶ Frankie Leach, “It’s Time to Dismantle Fast Fashion and Its Exploitative Practices”

accountability and responsibility only enhances the poverty faced by garment workers, as they are unable to support themselves and their families. If they try to voice their concerns, they are told to leave.

Another pressing legal matter is the issue of child labor, which is an overwhelmingly rampant issue in fast fashion production. Oftentimes, rural families predominantly in India and Bangladesh are targeted, and they are promised that if they allow their children to work at the factory, they will be treated and paid well with the promise of a brighter future. Since the work is also low-skill and does not require complex knowledge of machinery or technology, children are targeted as they are obedient and can work unaccounted for, leading to overall cost reduction for the garment factory. Sometimes, they are even better for the job as they have smaller bodies and hands, making it easier for some aspects of putting clothes together such as threading.²⁶ Due to little to no regulation, children fill factories and are forced to work extremely long hours, being underfed and underpaid.²⁴ Once again, retailers do not work to change this issue as they do not care enough to see to it that their products are ethically made.

Despite these blatant problems with fast fashion and production of low-quality clothing, retailers are more successful than ever, making growing profits year-after-year. Some companies have even been fully exposed by news outlets for their unethical practices—for example, Shein was exposed by Channel 4 in the UK via an undercover worker that filmed working conditions inside their factories.²⁷ Many other companies have been similarly exposed consumers continue to support them as they keep prices low and maintain pace with trends.

²⁶ Josephine Moulds. "Child Labour in the Fashion Supply Chain."

²⁷ Sangeeta Singh-Kurtz, "Shein Is Even Worse Than You Thought."

Directives

The responsibility of determining the future of fast fashion is now shared between you and your fellow delegates. You must consider the multiple ethical issues plaguing fast fashion and the globalization of garment production, and how they can be resolved. You must work as a group to develop directives and resolutions to address this growing problem. Here are some guiding questions to help you plan your approach:

- What role does your country play in this dilemma: the consumer or the producer? Are there any retailers based in your country?
- What legislation does your country have to protect workers' rights? How well is it enforced?
- How can garment workers' rights be protected while still ensuring that retailers do not go bankrupt? What sort of shift may be required in consumer attitude to achieve this? How can this be accomplished?
- How can retailers be required to take accountability for the production of their clothing? What steps can be taken to achieve this?
- How will the council manage corporate demands from retailers?
- *Please* remember to be respectful, and ensure that you are accurately representing your country's views and perspectives in the context of this delegation/issue.

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