Author's response to reviews

Title: How Can Developing Countries Harness Biotechnology to Improve Health?

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Version: 4 Date: 12 September 2007

Author's response to reviews: see over
September 12, 2007

Dear Dr. Jazayeri,

Thank you for sending comments on the manuscript “How Can Developing Countries Harness Biotechnology to Improve Health?”. We have addressed the concerns of the first and second referees below. Please note that the response to the third reviewer was submitted on August 1, 2007.

Response to review by Barbara Starfield

1. Is biotechnology the best alternative for use of funds in resource poor countries? / Failure of World Bank policies etc.

The World Bank’s “Washington Consensus” was a set of macro-economic fiscal and monetary policies. The paper is about harnessing biotechnology for development. Although part of it is indeed related to commercialization, the policies proposed are microeconomic and sectoral. What these two things have in common is that the sectoral, microeconomic policies are likely to work best if the macroeconomy (and indeed the political governance of a country) is stable. The issue of biotechnology being the best alternative, or the forced choice between “high tech” and “low tech” approaches is a false dichotomy and could itself be the subject of a paper. In our paper, we make no claim that biotechnology is the “best” alternative – it is surely, however, one that African nations themselves have chosen to pursue. These matters raised are a long way from the particular focus of our article, which is to report the views of a large number of participants on how biotechnology could be harnessed for health development. Since we make no claims about macroeconomic issues, or that biotechnology is “better” than alternative approaches to development, they require no modifications to the article.

2. No mention is made of the way experts were chosen …

This is true. The paper reports on 5 courses, of which 3 have been published previously in detail and are so cited in the article. These publications specify how participants were chosen for the workshops. However, it is reasonable to reiterate this detail in our current overview paper of the 5 workshops so we have added this to the paper at page 4.

Response to review by Udo Shuklenk

1. How the experts were chosen

Please see point 2 above.
2. [Participants] were briefed by PIs on the basic state of affairs in genomics. How can we be certain this briefing didn’t determine the outcomes ….

Since we are reporting on executive courses, there will of course be some curricular content. However, the vast majority of that was delivered not by the PIs but by local speakers. There was lots of time for discussion, and lots of different views. Please remember that these are adults with accomplishments in their field, and are not likely to just parrot what they hear. Moreover – and this is key – the presentations were all backgrounders and there were no presentations on the main question of how best to harness genomics to improve health in the region. The answer to that question was determined by the participants themselves with no direct input from the organizers. The curriculum is described in greater detail in the cited papers, as above. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to reiterate these points in the overview paper and they have been added at page 5.

3. The issue of novelty

The reviewer states “the content has been produced time and again in too many documents to mention.” The reviewer should mention one addressing the question of how best to harness biotechnology to improve health in the developing world that is based on views of over 200 participants from the developing world. We are not aware of one.

4. Whether a genomics push would be as effective as public health?

As mentioned above, that’s not our question. It’s a different paper. It’s not the one we wrote, and it’s not what we set out to study, so it’s not so fair a critique. We make no claim about the superiority of an approach based on science compared to any other approach. Our view is this is a false dichotomy.

5. Conceptual research vs. empirical research

The reviewer obviously favours conceptual, philosophical research. That is fine. He should pursue it. Our approach is empirical research. Both approaches have their role. We don’t consider this a fair criticism of the paper.

We hope that we have addressed the reviewers’ concerns and suggestions and hope that you would consider this article for publication.

Attached, please find a clean version of the paper, and a version with changes marked, as a supporting information file.

With best wishes,

Dr. Abdallah Daar
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