

**9th International Conference on
Agricultural Biotechnology: Ten Years After**

organized by the:

**International Consortium on Agricultural Biotechnology
Research (ICABR)**

and the:

Catholic University of Leuven

CEIS - University of Rome "Tor Vergata"

Centre of Sustainable Resource Development, University of California at Berkeley

Economic Growth Centre, Yale University

Ravello (Italy), July 6-10, 2005

**“Impact Assessment of ABSP-I: A Case Study of the
Commercialization of Bt Potato in South Africa”**

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ABSTRACT

Through funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the Agricultural Biotechnology Support Project (ABSP-I) at Michigan State University (MSU) was implemented from 1991 to 2003 to build capacity in developing countries in the development, use and management of agricultural biotechnology. Originally emphasizing biotechnology research needed to make transgenic crops suitable for developing countries, it soon became clear that the technical obstacles were easily overcome but the policy obstacles were much less tractable. The project evolved to take an integrated approach to capacity building, including policy, research, networking and management components. Perhaps the most critical theme encountered was intellectual property rights issues, both from the perspective of putting necessary intellectual property rights regimes in place and in terms of accessing the necessary proprietary intellectual properties such as favorable gene sequences, insertion mechanisms, and promoters.

This paper focuses on the second of the intellectual property rights issues, namely the role of intellectual property rights in commercializing transgenic technologies in developing countries. A case study of Bt potato commercialization in South Africa provides the setting.

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ABSP-I and Michigan State University collaborated with the Egyptian agricultural research institute AGERI to develop a Bt potato that was resistant to tuber moth, the biggest potato pest globally. After successful research (99+% reduction in damage in the field), the potato was set to debut in Egypt when the European Union expressed its objections and effectively stalled the project (Makour, Ravello 2002). Undaunted, ABSP-I switched its emphasis to South Africa. This required renegotiating an humanitarian licenses from Syngenta to use the Bt gene (and this was complicated by the issue that small subsistence farmers in South Africa can easily sell the Bt potato to large commercial farmers), proprietary insertion techniques, proprietary markets, Monsanto's 35S promoter, and other proprietary intellectual property. This paper tells the story of the prior and ongoing negotiations over access to these intellectual properties that are necessary if the tuber-moth resistant Bt potato will make its South African commercial and humanitarian debut in 2006 as projected.