Chapter 2
Doing Ethics in Food and Agriculture

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Introduction

In recent years, increasing attention has been paid by national authorities in many countries, by civil society and the general public and by intergovernmental organizations to a variety of ethical questions of relevance to food and agriculture. Major recent changes in the fields of food and agriculture – including accelerating technological development, changes in the resource base, and economic and market developments – have also brought to the fore a number of ethical questions of relevance to food security and sustainable rural development. The technical questions that arise within these fields are frequently very specific to these crucial and complex fields of human endeavour, upon which world food security now and in the future depends. It is therefore clear that ethical reflection upon questions of food and agriculture must be grounded on a clear understanding and appreciation of the specificities of these sectors.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) is the international apex organization dealing with all aspects of food and agriculture, including forestry and fisheries. FAO has therefore taken a number of steps to approach the application of ethical perspectives to food and agriculture in a more systematic way, which I shall first describe below.

I shall then discuss some of the questions with which we have been grappling in developing the FAO ethics programme, and the thinking behind the paper on “Agricultural intensification: an introduction to the ethical issues”, which was the subject of our discussions at the Conference on the Ethics of Sustainable Intensification, hosted by Imperial College, London, at its Wye Campus.

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Development of the FAO Programme on Ethics in Food and Agriculture

Coordination FAO’S Activities on Ethics in Food and Agriculture

Ethics is by its nature crosscutting and multidimensional, and FAO has therefore designated “Ethics in Food and Agriculture” as a Priority Area for Interdisciplinary Action within its Programme of Work (FAO 2000a), and established an internal Committee on Ethics in Food and Agriculture representing all FAO’s technical departments, to guide and coordinate the ethics programme.

The Panel of Eminent Experts on Ethics in Food and Agriculture

The Director-General established a Panel of Eminent Experts on Ethics in Food and Agriculture as of 1 January 2000, for a period of four years, under the terms of Article VI.4 of the FAO Constitution and Rule XXXV of the General Rules of the Organization, and the guidance provided by the FAO Conference, to advise the him on ethical issues in food and agriculture, including forestry and fisheries, in order to better meet country demands for policy advice, and to further global debates on questions related to ethics in food and agriculture (FAO 2000b). The Panel is composed of eight Eminent Experts designated in their personal capacity by the Director-General, in accordance with established procedures and practices.¹ At the time of preparing this note (early 2004) the Panel was being renewed, for a further period of four years and new members appointed.

The Terms of Reference of the Panel of Eminent Experts on Ethics in Food and Agriculture are as follows:

1. The Panel of Eminent Experts shall reflect and promote reflection upon ethical issues arising out of food production and consumption as well as agriculture development, including forestry and fisheries, in the context of food security and sustainable rural development against an environment of rapid global change;

¹The members of the Panel for 2000–2004 were Mr. Francisco J. Ayala, a philosopher and geneticist from the United States of America; Ms. Chen Chumming, a nutritionist from China; Mr. Asbjørn Eide (Chair), a human rights specialist from Norway; Ms. Noëlle Lenoir, a constitutional lawyer from France; Mr. M.N. Salleh, a forest scientist from Malaysia; Mr. Mohammed Rami, a fisheries expert from Morocco; Ms. Lydia Margarita Tablada Romero, a microbiologist from Cuba; and Mr. Melaku Worede, a geneticist from Ethiopia.