

Foundations for GM crops in West Africa are being built – a battle looms ahead

GRAIN

On the surface all appears quiet in West Africa when it comes to GM (genetically modified) crops. In 2004, GRAIN reported about how Bt cotton was being introduced into West Africa, in particular in Mali,¹ and yet since then it would appear that little has changed. Still Burkina Faso continues to support the growing of GM crops, and just recently announced an expansion of the GM planting by Monsanto and Syngenta, growing six strains of GM cotton. This is in addition to the 316 hectares of Bt cotton that has already been planted by 663 farmers.² Benin still has its moratorium on GM products, yet still accepts food aid from the US with the high possibility that the grain itself is GM. Mali still talks of introducing Bt cotton.

Yet, under the surface, the pressure on governments, researchers and farmers' organisations to accept GM crops is huge. Bt cotton is the main contender, mainly because it is one of the biggest cash crops being grown in West Africa. The irony with cotton is that growers in West Africa are having a hard time selling their product at a reasonable price, due mainly to the huge subsidies received by US cotton farmers that are forcing the global price of cotton down. But overall, the pressure on these countries in West Africa is more about getting all GM crops and food accepted – cotton is just the Trojan horse. In the past, biotechnology corporations were more than happy if countries did not have a legal framework to either accept or reject GM crops and food. But now these corporations, with the backing of international bodies such as the World Bank and USAID, have changed tack, and are now keenly pushing for a legal framework to control biotechnology – a legal framework commonly known as biosafety legislation. By taking the initiative, such biosafety legislation can now be steered in a direction that overall will accept the introduction of all GM products. And this is precisely what has been happening in West Africa.

In June 2006, a number of organisations publicised how the World Bank was blatantly pushing forward with its own version of biosafety legislation – the West Africa Regional Biosafety Project. Harmonisation of legislation is the key to success here, in that a few countries with model (pro-GM) laws are used as

a template to be imposed on other countries in the same region, and ultimately globally.

“The World Bank project is the next step forward in this harmonisation process. ECOWAS covers a large market, covering all 15 countries of West Africa, but, according to the World Bank, it doesn't have the authority to force member countries to adopt common legislation; it can only make policy recommendations. The World Bank project, therefore, focuses instead on WAEMU – a smaller grouping of 8 West African states that has the power to impose the ‘fast-track adoption’ of compulsory ‘enabling’ legislation on its members. As stated in the project proposal: ‘If WAEMU is able to harmonise national biosafety legislations and later to enforce a decision taken in one country in the other countries, it will drastically improve the investment climate in biotechnology for cash and food crops in the WAEMU area ... by diminishing the costs of doing business.’ Once adopted within WAEMU, the Bank says it will then look to ‘scale-up’ the project to the much bigger market of ECOWAS.”³

So far, the project has had a complete disregard for public debate. The project proposal itself was available only in English, yet all the countries of the WAEMU are French-speaking. And public consultations have been organised on an invitation-only basis with the introduction of GM crops seemingly a foregone conclusion.

With all of this, resistance is building up, both within each country and also in a large network of activists and farmers across Africa. COPAGEN (Coalition for the Protection of African Genetic Heritage) is one example of a broad coalition of national and regional organisations which is helping to resist the imposition of these biosafety laws and the introduction of GM crops and food. To do this, COPAGEN's members provide information on what is really happening in Francophone Africa through educational materials and information on the rights of local communities and farmers and laws on access to biological resources (see their news release on the opposite page). Farmers are also resisting, and this is



particularly evident in Mali, with regular demonstrations against the introduction of GM crops.

It is also in Mali that an interesting event, called a Citizen's Jury, was held in January 2006. Here farmers (from around the Sikasso district) were asked to attend a series of debates and discussions on GM technology. The objectives of the Citizen's Jury were to allow farmers of the region to: 1) better understand what GMOs are and what risks and advantages they carry; 2) confront viewpoints and cross-examine expert witnesses, both in favour of and against GMOs and the industrialisation of agriculture; 3) formulate recommendations for policies on GMOs and the future of farming in Mali.⁴ The final verdict was very clear – a condemnation of the introduction of GMOs in Mali. Furthermore, in February 2007 Mali will host the Nyéléni World Forum for Food Sovereignty – a conference to step up the struggle for the adoption of food sovereignty.

So the foundations are being laid on each side in this highly polarised topic: on the one hand pro-GM legislation and a fistful of cash; and on the other hand information and activism. All may appear quiet at the moment, but a large battle looms in the future as the momentum in West Africa to resist GM crops increases rapidly.

1 - See: GRAIN, Bt cotton on Mali's doorstep, *Seedling*, April 2004, <http://www.grain.org/seedling/?id=283>; GRAIN, GM cotton set to invade West Africa, *GRAIN Briefing*, June 2004, <http://www.grain.org/briefings/?id=184>

2 - EIU Viewswire, Monsanto and Syngenta to expand testing of GM cotton in Burkina Faso, 22 September 2006, <http://tinyurl.com/y9anky>

3 - African Centre for Biosafety, ETC group, GRAIN, Red por una América Latina Libre de Transgénicos, "Groups in Africa, Latin America condemn World Bank biosafety projects", <http://www.grain.org/front/?id=92>. [WAEMU – West African Economic and Monetary Union, ECOWAS – Economic Community Of West African States]

4 - IIED, "Citizens' Space for Democratic Deliberation on GMOs and the future of farming in Mali: What were the Objectives of the Citizens' Jury?", January 2006, <http://tinyurl.com/y4bums>





JINUKUN

RESEAU NATIONAL POUR UNE GESTION DURABLE DES RESSOURCES GENETIQUES
POINT FOCAL DE LA COALITION POUR LA PROTECTION DU PATRIMOINE GENETIQUE AFRICAIN

06 B. P. 2083 Cotonou, République du Bénin

Tél. : (229) 33 79 50 / 40 20 21 – Fax (229) 33 79 15 – E-mail : reseaujinkun@yahoo.fr

PRESS CONFERENCE: 20 SEPTEMBER 2006 - Opening remarks

A meeting of great importance to the WAEMU (West African Economic and Monetary Union) countries will be held on 21 and 22 September 2006, i.e. tomorrow and the day after tomorrow, on what is known as the "REGIONAL PROJECT FOR BIOSAFETY IN WEST AFRICA". This is nothing less than a Trojan Horse that will bring genetically modified organisms (GMOs) into West Africa. The stated aims of the meeting say little about what is to happen. In fact, for some months now, the World Bank and the Global Environment Facility (GEF) have been putting pressure on the WAEMU to endorse a regional project that aims to introduce GMOs into West African agriculture. The project has two stated aims:

- A global environmental objective aiming to "protect regional biodiversity from the potential risks associated with the introduction of GMOs into West Africa"
- A development objective aiming to "put in place a biosafety framework for field trials, trials in contained environments and commercial production of transgenic plants and their derivatives, starting with cotton".

The fact that cotton is identified as the prime target reveals the stratagem being used. In 2003, Burkina Faso, under combined pressure from Monsanto, Syngenta, USAID and the US Federal Department of Agriculture, decided to begin trials of Bt cotton without any regulatory controls being put in place, which is a serious breach of the Cartagena Protocol. Bt cotton was therefore introduced into the country without any public debate. It was only after trials had begun that Burkina set up provisional regulations to ratify what had already taken place.

Civil society in the sub-region, in particular the Coalition for the Protection of African Genetic Heritage (COPAGEN) expressed great concern at this situation. As the whole of West Africa can be targeted from Burkina Faso, there is now a rush to legalise a de facto situation, in order to catch the sub-region in the trap of Bt cotton. The problems of cotton in the sub-region today have nothing to do with seeds, or productivity, or yields. They are:

- The subsidies that the USA and Europe grant to their own cotton producers, disregarding the rules of the WTO, which they contributed to making, thus acting according to double standards. The USA and Europe brandish the rules of the WTO in order to force African countries to sell off their agricultural products at low prices, but they scorn these same rules when they do not serve their own interests.
- The inadequate organisation of the sector in almost all the African countries concerned, which acts as a disincentive to producers. We only have to look at how the cotton industry has been mismanaged in Benin over the last ten or fifteen years: growing seasons are poorly organised; inputs arrive late on farms; when they do arrive, they are often of poor quality; and when farmers finally harvest and deliver their cotton after all their hard work, they are not paid on time. And so on.

- Our cotton is not processed within the sub-region to provide added value.

Whilst these three problems remain, any other solutions will be futile, in particular the adoption of Bt cotton.

In general terms, GMOs are not a solution for Africa. The major problems that agriculture faces in our countries include incompetent water management, low soil fertility in many regions, lack of access to the means of production, in particular around issues related to land, lack of access to loans at acceptable interest rates, and the processing of our raw materials on our own continent. Faced with these problems, there are a number of solutions other than GMOs, solutions that are scientifically controllable, economically profitable and socially sustainable. Instead of this, the World Bank, which has already contributed significantly to the destabilisation of our countries' economies through structural adjustment programmes, now wants to trap farmers in a situation that will be irredeemably prejudicial to the production of cotton in the sub-region.

In the first place, WAEMU should concern itself with resolving the serious problems confronting our currency, problems that the President of Mali, as quoted by Erik Orsenna, describes as follows: "As a result of our membership of the franc zone, we are tied hand and foot to the euro. As soon as it increases in value, our cotton is worth less, because it is purchased in dollars. Does that seem right to you? One of the poorest countries locked in to one of the highest currencies? The higher it climbs, the further we fall. And no one protests. Least of all the World Bank." (E Orsenna, *Voyage aux pays du coton, Petit précis de mondialisation*, Paris: Fayard, 2006, page 47).

This is why the JINUKUN network and the Coalition for the Protection of African Genetic Heritage (COPAGEN), which are active in all the WAEMU member countries and Guinea, are launching a solemn appeal:

To the leaders of the sub-region, to urge them not to lend their support to the regional biosafety project, which in reality serves only to pave the way for the Bt cotton that Monsanto, Syngenta and others, supported by the USA, want to impose on our agriculture. To adopt Bt cotton is to open the door to the introduction of all genetically modified seeds in agriculture and food.

To farming organisations, consumers' associations, development organisations and trades unions in the sub-region, to urge them to:

- resist the current attempts to introduce GMOs into agriculture,
- demand information so that they are better able to understand the issues around GMOs, so that they can act in full possession of the facts.