

in order to allow foreign lumber companies to come in.

What is your view of the procedures and mechanisms established for organic certification and the registration and certification of seeds?

The certification of organic foods is a foreign commercial tool that bureaucratizes organic products, makes them “elite”, and increases their price. It excludes the farmers who cannot pay the exorbitant fees for certification. It is currently the principal parasite of ecological agriculture. It distances consumers who are poor from healthy food.

The registration and certification of seeds are instruments of private appropriation, involving

the exclusion of local seeds, the domination of “improved” varieties, and the impoverishment of farm workers. Seeds are the patrimony of the people. By right, they are free and available to all humanity. They are the result of 10 million years of development, beginning with the earliest cultures. They are not merchandise. They are cultural values. They are natural.

In your opinion, what are the principal challenges today for protecting agricultural biodiversity?

To survive the entrepreneurship of genetic engineering and nanotechnology, and to overcome it.



## Lorenzo Muelas Hurtado

Lorenzo Muelas Hurtado is a member of the indigenous Guambiano people in Colombia. At 68 years old, he has served as governor, senator, and representative to the National Constituent Assembly, which wrote the new Constitution in Colombia. He also attended the Eighth Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (COP8), in Curitiba, Brazil, in March 2006, where he participated in the working group discussions on agricultural diversity, particularly those relating to the debate on terminator technology. Here Lorenzo Muelas Hurtado is interviewed by Oswaldo Braga de Souza from the Instituto Socioambiental, just prior to the COP8 meeting.



Why do you reject the research regarding terminator technology?

These seeds were created to enslave us. The terminator technology was developed to obligate us to buy more and more seeds from the suppliers. On the other hand, the Terminator seeds also threaten our cultural identity. For us, the Guambianos, seeds are not merely our sustenance, providing us with food and clothing. They also play an important role in communicating with our ancestors and the spirit world. They have an important symbolic value as an offering to the spirits who are high in the mountains and in the lakes.

But don't you believe that genetically modified seeds can be a good economic alternative if the traditional varieties are also preserved?

Our seeds have been sufficiently tested over millions of years through innovation and experience. If one wants to consider the issue from merely an economic point of view, I can guarantee that our seeds are very good and resistant. But this kind

of view is for capitalists and our seeds cannot be reduced merely to good economics.

What is your expectation regarding the negotiations of the COP8?

The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) was not created by necessity of the indigenous peoples, but by governments and biotechnology multinationals. These negotiations caused us worry and fear, and made us uneasy. I believe that the decisions made at the COP do not protect or guarantee the rights of indigenous peoples. I don't expect anything good to come of the COP. They are blind, deaf and dumb to our problems and our rights.

What is the solution, then, to protect the biological resources and traditional knowledge associated with the biodiversity of traditional peoples?

The solution is for us indigenous people to form a mass mobilisation, a large organisation on an international level that can advance our struggle.

Ibrahim Ouedraogo

Jack Kloppenburg

Joseph Eve

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Mario Mejia

M Lorenzo Muelas Hurtado





- A** Ferida Akhtar
- B** Benny Haerlin
- C** Carlos Correa
- D** David Quist Johnson
- E** Ekpere
- F** Francisca Rodriguez
- G** German Velez
- H** Hope Shand

How do you view the actions of the International Indigenous Forum for Biodiversity (IIFB), the official auxiliary organ of the secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity?

I don't believe the IIFB is acting correctly. Their perspective is that the CBD is going to find a way to implement mechanisms for a just and equitable distribution of the benefits. I don't believe that's going to happen.

Do you believe the indigenous delegates should remove themselves from the COP8? Could this be an effective political tactic?

Some indigenous people believe in the idea of a just and equitable distribution of the benefits. They are thinking of money. They should not even be here. The representatives of the indigenous people should be fighting against the sale of their resources. Our struggle is to defend our dignity. We have been fighting for it in America for thousands of years.

Don't you believe it is possible to institute an international system of fair distribution of the benefits of biodiversity?

The colonisers of America were responsible for looting the continent. They left us poor, and we were not poor before. Today, the large multinational corporations want to take the last resources. They are never going to divide them in a fair way, but they will want to snatch away the maximum – our water, our land, our biological resources, and even our blood. This was all that our ancestors left us, and it is what we should leave for our sons and daughters. This is our legacy.

Do you believe the resources and knowledge of the indigenous people can be commercialised?

Our fight must be to remain on our original land. Our wisdom tells us that we are the proprietors of our land and our resources. We are their caretakers, and the gods give us guidance how to use them. We also take pride in always repaying the gods with the fruits of these lands and resources. In that way, they continue to bless us.

What would be the alternative to an international system of access to genetic resources and the distribution of the benefits?

We have two cultures: the west and our traditional culture. We accept that there must be exchanges between them. Traditional cultures also develop science and it should be used by western science

for the development of technology. But it should not be done to serve the large multinational biotechnology corporations. It should be done carefully, with devotion, involving people of honesty and dignity – not liars. We indigenous people have ourselves appropriated western technology for our own advantage. We use computers and email for our organisations, for example. This is a positive thing.

In general, how does Colombian legislation deal with this matter? Are the indigenous people of Colombia satisfied with the legislation?

Colombia ratified the CBD, and the Colombian Constitution reproduces various positions of the CBD. In addition, the legislation is very broad, covering microorganisms to material extracted from human beings, such as blood. We are not satisfied with this. We have denounced this legislation, because it liberalised access to our resources and knowledge. A researcher with the law in his hands has free access to our territories and our resources. We are against this free access for bioprospecting – biological research for commercial ends. The researchers will come by whatever means, including force, and we intend to prevent that.

Are there many cases of stealing the knowledge and resources of the indigenous people of Colombia?

In 1992, five hundred years after the arrival of the colonists, for example, Colombian scientists went to many small villages, telling people that they were going to cure or investigate health problems. They took blood from various people, claiming they were going to analyse it to cure illnesses. When we realised what was happening, the material was already in genetics laboratories in the United States. When I was a senator, I fought for the repatriation of this material, but to this day we have not been able to make that happen.

The Lorenzo Muelas Hurtado interview was conducted by Oswaldo Braga de Souza from the Instituto Socioambiental (<http://www.socioambiental.org>)