

Sprouting Up...

Towards the adoption of a national framework for biosafety in Senegal

Introduction

Senegal is a country at real risk of being invaded by GMOs (Genetically Modified Organisms), with:

- over 50% of its national cereal consumption requirements being imported,
- limited regulation of the import of plants and plant products, with a phytosanitary certification scheme,
- a lack of legislation on issues related to GMOs,
- the dependence of the country's agriculture on the major seed companies represented in Senegal,
- the political decision taken to incorporate GMOs in food self-sufficiency strategies.

These arguments were set out in more detail in the Ministry of Agriculture's Ministerial Conference of ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) in favour of building national capacity, the acquisition of appropriate equipment and the establishment of conditions that would enable the production of seeds and other genetically modified products, in Bamako (Mali) in June 2005.

What is the current state of affairs?

Within the framework of the implementation of the UNEP/GEF (United Nations Environment Programme/Global Environment Facility) project relating to the development of national biosafety organisations, the determining factors for the establishment of a legal framework for biosafety in Senegal are:

- the major debates on the controversial issues raised by GMOs,
- an awareness of the threats GMOs represent for stakeholders at a grass-roots level, in particular small producers and consumers,
- Senegal's obligation to honour its commitments to the international community, by transposing the provisions of the Cartagena Protocol into national legislation.

Furthermore, the country imports a large amount of maize from Argentina, one of the largest GMO-producing countries. Scientific research carried out in Senegal can claim credit for some successes classified as "clean biotechnologies", with seed potatoes and in-vitro banana plants. As far as regulation is concerned, there is a lack of legislation, and this must be rectified as a matter of urgency.

With regard to the provision of information, the members of the National Committee on Biosafety and the Senegalese public have differing levels of knowledge. The country does not have a dedicated system for communicating information on the biotechnology sector. Brochures and information leaflets have been produced in Senegal's major languages as part of the various workshops organised in the country, for widespread distribution amongst the different target audiences (consumers, farmers, the private sector and so on) to allow them to form an opinion on GMOs.

Presentation of the bill drawn up by the National Committee on Biosafety

The biosafety bill comprises six chapters and two appendices, and can be summarised as follows:

- The scope of the biosafety bill covers the use in a contained environment, deliberate release into the environment, import, export, transit and marketing of living modified organisms for pharmaceutical and veterinary use, governed by other international agreements such as those of the World Health Organization.
- In substance, the bill stipulates that the use, marketing, manipulation for research purposes, import, export and transit of genetically modified organisms within national borders should be subject to prior authorisation granted by a competent National Authority in full possession of the facts, under the responsibility of the Ministry in charge of the environment.

Anyone seeking to engage in one of these activities must submit an application to the competent National Authority, providing as much information as possible for assessment purposes and giving an undertaking as to the accuracy of the information included with the application.

The decision-making process of the competent National Authority is based on an assessment of the risks (health, environmental, socio-economic, ethical and so on) of the Living Modified Organisms (LMOs), carried out by the National Committee on Biosafety, which is made up of biosafety experts, or any other body with the appropriate expertise. This assessment must be carried out in accordance with scientifically proven methods.

In reaching its decision, the competent National Authority must also take account of the opinions of the general public, which must have been given the means to participate in the decision-making process by appropriate methods (through the media, for example). The creation of a Public Committee on Biosafety



made up of representatives from all socio-economic groups in society is provided for in the bill for this purpose.

The process was reasonably participative, although some sections of society felt that their views had been disregarded at the end of the process. This bill has been assessed by the Centre for International Sustainable Development Law based in Canada.

Some concerns

However the framework set out above is drafted in legislative terms, its effectiveness remains questionable, given the major offensive carried out by the multinationals and demonstrated by:

- the actions of bilateral cooperation agencies (such as USAID and the Catholic Relief Service) to increase the pressure on research institutes in Africa and those of multilateral cooperation agencies as methods for introducing GMOs into the continent, with food aid (FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization), WFP (World Food Programme), and so on);
- the control of national scientific research by multinational seed companies;
- the financing of trials on GMOs in Africa and/or the promise of financing for research programmes;
- the recruitment of African researchers into the companies;
- the pressure on African governments, which are increasingly adopting positions in favour of GMOs;
- the conduct of visible or hidden trials in certain countries, in the absence of appropriate regulation;
- the financing of the development of regulatory frameworks that are favourable to them, to legitimise trials that are already underway.

Conclusion

In some countries, draft regulations for the introduction of genetically modified products have been developed before a national biosafety framework has been implemented in practice. Our support for independent scientific research, which fosters the use of local biological resources and traditional, endogenous skills is therefore unwavering, in the best interests of African consumers and small farmers. Let us therefore demonstrate our opposition to any strategy that seeks to patent the living.



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Biosafety legislation is needed to get Bt cotton introduced into West Africa (above), as has happened in South Africa where biosafety legislation has been very supportive of GM crops (below).



Extract from the ASDEC (Senegalese Environmental and Consumer Protection Association) submission to the Regional Seminar on capacity building in relation to food security and biotechnologies in Africa: the need for an effective regulatory framework. Organised by the African Delegation of Consumers International, 15-18 October 2005, Accra (Ghana).