

## “I expected a reaction but not such a violent one”

In April 2009 Andrés Carrasco, an Argentinian embryologist, gave an interview to the leading Buenos Aires newspaper *Página 12*, in which he described the alarming results of a research project he is leading into the impact of the herbicide glyphosate on the foetuses of amphibians. Dr Carrasco, who works in the Ministry of Science's Conicet (National Council of Scientific and Technical Investigations), said that their results suggested that the herbicide could cause brain, intestinal and heart defects in the foetuses. Glyphosate is the herbicide used in the cultivation of Monsanto's genetically modified soya, which now covers some 18 million hectares, about half of Argentina's arable land.<sup>1</sup>



*Dr Andrés Carrasco*

Carrasco said that the doses of herbicide used in their study were “much lower than the levels used in the fumigations”. Indeed, as some weeds have become resistant to glyphosate, many farmers are greatly increasing the concentration of the herbicide. According to *Página 12*, this means that, in practice, the herbicide applied in the fields is between 50 and 1,540 times stronger than that used by Carrasco. The results in the study are confirming what peasant and indigenous communities – the people most affected by the spraying – have been denouncing for over a decade. The study also has profound consequences for the USA's anti-narcotics strategy in Colombia, because the planes spray glyphosate, reinforced with additional chemicals, on the coca fields (and the peasants living among them).

Three days after the interview, the

Association of Environmental Lawyers filed a petition with the Argentine Supreme Court, calling for a ban on the use and sale of glyphosate until its impact on health and on the environment had been investigated. Five days later the Ministry of Defence banned the planting of soya in its fields. This sparked a strong reaction from the multinational biotechnology companies and their supporters. Fearful that their most famous product, a symbol of the dominant farming model, would be banned, they mounted an unprecedented attack on Carrasco, ridiculing his research and even issuing personal threats. He was accused of inventing his whole investigation, as his results have not yet been peer-reviewed and published in a prestigious scientific journal.

Carrasco was firm in his response: “When one is dealing with a subject of limited public interest, one can keep the study secret until all the last details have been resolved. But when one uncovers facts that are important for public health, one has an obligation to make an effort to publish the results urgently and with maximum publicity.” Even so, he was clearly taken aback by the strength of the reaction. “It was a violent, disproportionate, dirty reaction”, he said. “I hadn't even discovered anything new, only confirmed conclusions that others had reached. One has to remember, too, that the study originated in contacts with communities that have suffered the impact of agro-chemicals. They are the undeniable proof of the impact.” He is not intimidated: “If I know something, I will not shut my mouth.”

1. See *Seedling* January 2009, “Twelve Years of GM Soya in Argentina – a Disaster for People and the Environment”. <http://www.grain.org/seedling/?id=578>

## Ghana's farmers are in a bad way

Ghana's farmers are among the latest victims of trade liberalisation. According to IRIN, a news service run by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, most of the two million people living in the Upper East Region of Ghana are involved in tomato production, and many have been driven to despair by mounting debts.

Tomato farming used to be profitable, but nowadays, partly because of heavy investments from abroad (particularly Taiwan) in large industrial farms in Burkina Faso, tomatoes are cheaper there. The Ghanaian women, known as “queens”, who control the trade have been crossing the border to buy the cheaper tomatoes. Local farmers have watched their crop rot in the sun.

Tomato farmer Martin Pwayidi told IRIN that the market collapse meant that he has lost the US\$2,000 he had borrowed from a bank and invested in his four-acre tomato farm. “Last year was very terrible for me. I lost everything. There was absolutely no reason to live. I am just lucky to still be alive today”, Pwayidi said. Five of Pwayidi's friends attempted suicide in 2008. “Some tried to hang themselves; others drank insecticides and disinfectants.”

“All over the sub-region there is serious price-undercutting and price fluctuations from country to country for agricultural products,” said Ibrahim Akalbila, coordinator of the local NGO Ghana Trade and Livelihood Coalition. West African trade laws impose no duty on agricultural products crossing borders, so it is easy for buyers to play off producers in one country against those in another. The situation is likely to get worse. European Union Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) are currently being negotiated, which means that West African markets will soon be flooded with heavily subsidised EU products. Buyers are likely to abandon African products in favour of European ones. “Unless ECOWAS [The Economic Community of West African States] introduces a common pricing policy, more farmers will commit suicide”, Akalbila told IRIN. “Sub-regional poverty reduction strategies will be compromised, and more and more families will slide into poverty. The result will be a crisis of unimaginable proportions.”



*Tomatoes in a street market, Togo, West Africa*

## Brazil becomes the world's biggest consumer of pesticides

Brazil's consumption of pesticides and herbicides grew by 25% in 2008 to 734 million tonnes, worth US\$7.1bn. For the first time ever, the country overtook the previous world champion, the USA, which consumed 646 million tonnes, worth US\$6.0bn. In what few would see as a coincidence, that same year Brazil recorded its largest area ever planted with GMOs, almost of all of which are crops that have been genetically modified to be resistant to herbicides. Indeed, 45% of the herbicides and pesticides were used in the cultivation of soya, most of which is genetically modified.



One might have expected the Brazilian authorities to be concerned about the impact on public health of such extensive use of poisonous substances on the country's farming land. After all, Anvisa (Agência Nacional de Vigilância Sanitária), the country's biosafety agency, recently said that 15% of the country's foodstuffs contained excessive chemical residues. According to official figures, 5,300 people were made ill and 162 people were killed by agricultural chemicals in 2007. But, remarkably, the increase has been celebrated, at least by the industry. José Otávio Mentem, a lecturer at the University of São Paulo and the executive director of ANDEF (Associação Nacional de Defesa Vegetal), the body that represents the herbicide manufacturers, said: "the fact that Brazil is leading the world in its use of herbicides shows ... that the country is achieving the much-needed sustainability in the economic, social and environmental fields by generating work in the countryside, by promoting food security and, moreover, by supplying energy from renewable raw materials."

## Biowatch turns the tables

In early June 2009 a Constitutional Court judgement on genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in South Africa brought victory to the NGO Biowatch South Africa in its nine-year struggle for constitutional justice. Initially, the case was about the right of access to information on GM crops grown in South Africa, but, in the wake of a very controversial court ruling, it turned into a much broader struggle against the intensifying oppression of civil and environmental rights worldwide. As a result, this case sets an important precedent about access to justice, not only in South Africa but also internationally.

In its struggle to obtain information, Biowatch not only met with obstructive officials at the Department of Agriculture, but also faced great hostility from Monsanto, Delta Pine and Stoneville Pedigreed Seed Company, all of which joined in the campaign against Biowatch. In the High Court, Biowatch won the right to 8 out of 11 categories of requested information. Despite this, in a clear attempt to silence Biowatch, Monsanto insisted that its costs should be paid by the NGO, citing the "healing balm of costs". It was the only company to adopt such a hard-line attitude. Two different courts concurred with Monsanto and ordered Biowatch to pay Monsanto's costs.<sup>1</sup>

Biowatch was faced with a difficult choice: the risk of collapse through losing even more money in further litigation, against the chance of winning justice in the higher courts. However, given the wide-ranging impact of this judgement on all sectors of civil society, it seemed very important not only to defend the right of access to information, but also to ensure that public interest groups were not discouraged from litigation. If Biowatch had not defended these important principles, a company like Monsanto, notorious for taking farmers to court, would have become even bolder in its oppression of the struggle against GMOs worldwide.

Fortunately, South Africa has a good Constitution and a Constitutional Court with highly regarded judges, many of whom had been very active in the anti-apartheid struggle. They unanimously made the right decision: that the government has the responsibility to ensure that its conduct is consistent with the country's laws and Constitution.

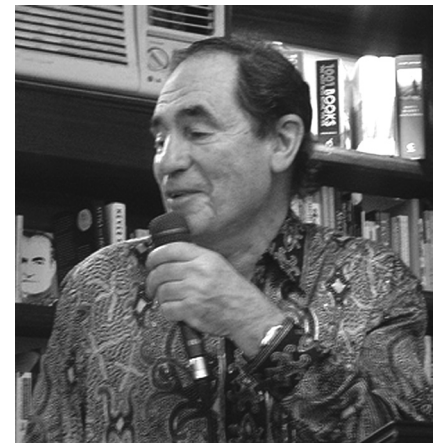


T-shirt, Johannesburg

Justice Albie Sachs ruled that the High Court had "misdirected itself in the whole matter of costs" and its decision was "demonstrably inappropriate on the facts, and unduly chilling to constitutional litigation in its consequences." He continued: "The government's duty was to act as impartial steward, ... the greater the public controversy, the more need for transparency."

This case has highlighted some of the difficulties in campaigning on GMOs: the controversial nature of these crops; the fact that, despite good legislation, the balance of power still lies with the wealthy (in this case the multinationals); and the fact that many governments, like the South African, are complicit in the efforts by companies such as Monsanto to impose GM crops without public oversight. But in the end, it also brings out one hugely important truth: that, with resilience and determination, people can win their struggles for access to information, justice and freedom of choice.

1. For more details, see Biowatch's website, [www.biowatch.org.za](http://www.biowatch.org.za)



Justice Albie Sachs

