

*Information and Awareness Raising Workshop on  
GMOs and the Rights of Local Communities in Burkina Faso*

Organised by:

National Federation of Peasant Organisations (FENOP)  
Agroecology Concertation Framework (CCAÉ)  
INADES-Formation (Burkina Faso)

with support from:

Cooperation for Research and Development Group (ACORD-Sahel)  
GRAIN (Francophone Africa)

Ouagadougou, 13-16 April 2004

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**GMO workshop statement**

Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso

16 April 2004

From 13 to 16 April 2004, a workshop was organised in Ouagadougou by INADES-Formation, Agroecology Consultation Framework (CCAÉ) and the National Federation of Peasant Organisations (FENOP), with support from ACORD-Sahel and GRAIN, on the problem of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and community rights in Burkina Faso. The meeting brought together some 40 participants from NGOs and farmers' organisations. Just before the workshop, a round table was organised at the National Assembly in order to update parliamentarians on what is at stake.

This workshop aimed to inform and raise awareness about the issues surrounding GMOs -- organisms created in laboratories. To help meet this aim, a number of experts including Dr Robert Ali Brac de la Perrière (BEDE/Inf'OGM, France), Dr Jeanne Zoundjihékpon (GRAIN, Bénin), Soumayila Bance (Minister for the Environment and Quality of Life, Burkina), Bougnounou Ouétain (retired researcher), Jérémie Ouedraogo (INERA, Burkina), Devlin Kuyek (GRAIN, Canada), Anne Chetaille (GRET, France), Christophe Noisette (Inf'OGM, France) and Souleyman Coulibaly (IPM/FAO, Mali) provided background on the following points:

- GMOs: their definition, advantages and risks
- the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Cartagena Protocol
- what's at stake for agriculture in Burkina Faso and throughout Africa
- the African Union Model Law on biosafety
- GMO field trials

The debates and discussions inspired by these talks were very rewarding. The participants really understood the issues around GMOs and especially raised a lot of questions about field trials of GMOs in Burkina Faso.

Burkina Faso bears the stigma of being the first West African country to have officially authorised, as of 2003, field trials of transgenic cotton belonging to Monsanto (Bt cotton) and Syngenta (VIP cotton). These experiments could spread to other countries in the region, and are therefore pioneers. The workshop participants are worried because these GM crops were released into the field without anyone being informed of the implications of transgenic plants and without Burkina having the necessary biosafety legislation in place. GMOs are extremely controversial worldwide, and questions about their safety and risks, both for the environment and for human health, are far from answered.

These field trials do not mean that Burkina Faso has authorised the commercial planting of GM crops by farmers. That decision has not yet been taken.

At the moment, directives to set up a national legislative framework on biosafety have been developed and are being processed by the government. The participants of the workshop hope that civil society will actively participate in the discussion and adoption of this legislative framework.

Other legal instruments which caught the attention of the participants are the ratification by Burkina Faso of the Convention on Biological Diversity in 1993 and the Biosafety Protocol in 2003. These two international treaties aim, on the one hand, to protect biological resources and, on the other hand, to set up safeguards against environmental and health risks from GMOs. Both of them limit the scope for privatising and commercialising genetic resources, serving as counterweights to other treaties, such as those of the World Trade Organisation and the World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO). For example in Africa, we have the Bangui Agreement, revised in 1999 with help from WIPO, which sets up a common system of intellectual property rights over plant varieties in 16 countries. It was ratified by Burkina Faso in June 2001. The Bangui Agreement does not protect the rights of farmers and local communities -- it facilitates the privatisation of life. So how do we manage these contradictions between the precautionary principle and a 'free market' principle? The workshop wrestled with these questions -- and the answers need to be found.

In relation to the Bt cotton field tests, the participants expressed their fears concerning both the socio-economic and environmental impacts.

Regarding the socio-economic impacts, the Bt cotton variety being field tested is from the US and the Bt gene that it carries is patented. Consequently, even if this gene was transferred into a local burkinabè variety, farmers would not be able to grow it without paying royalties to the company holding the patent. The unfortunate experience of Percy Schmeiser, a Canadian canola farmer whose fields and varieties were contaminated by transgenic pollen from neighbouring farms, illustrates the worries in Burkina Faso. In Schmeiser's case, instead of being compensated for contamination, he was taken to court by the company holding the patent and sentenced to pay the intellectual property rights to Monsanto. The patents, which establish a legal straightjacket, are being used as weapons to subjugate farmers to agro-chemical companies.

Regarding the issue of yield, a film produced in India shows that farmers who grew Monsanto's 'Bollgard' Bt cotton in 2002 were let down: conventional varieties produced more and larger heads. Not only that, the conventional varieties gave a better fibre quality which fetched a better market price. Yet the Indian farmers were completely confused, because the price of the transgenic seeds was so much higher. GRAIN indicated that the GM cotton variety being field tested in Burkina costs more than 50,000 CFA (US\$90) per hectare, while cotton farmers in West Africa presently spend on average 37,000 CFA (US\$67) for pesticides and the conventional cotton seeds are free. It is therefore evident that Bt cotton will not reduce poverty.

Even if this cotton did lead to lower pesticide use, and putting aside all other risks, doubts about the technology remain. The fact that it is US cotton that is being tested in Burkina doesn't achieve any real transfer of the transgenic technology, which is complex and expensive.

As for the environmental risks, one recurring concern expressed by the participants is the possibility that transgenic cotton contaminates related plants, of which there are many in the region. If local or wild varieties acquire the modified genes, they could become unmanageable and invasive 'super weeds'. Another risk of contamination is the likely end of organic agriculture, an approach to farming which categorically refuses GMOs. Finally, since insects and wind do not know boundaries, genetic pollution and seed exchange can cross national borders and spill into neighbouring countries, hence the urgent need to get a common biosafety framework in place. The AU Model Law on Biosafety can help in the harmonisation of national legislation. Participants actively encouraged their governments to adopt the Model Law.

The workshop participants also stressed that the growing of Bt crops, which produce their own insecticide, does not mean that farmers stop using insecticides. Bt cotton has self-defences against certain pests, but not all.

Is there an alternative to both pesticides and genetic engineering?

The participants learned about different agricultural methods, such as integrated pest management, which allow farmers to deal with pests in an ecological way. Among other solutions, it was proposed to give more value to the gene pool and agricultural heritage of West Africa. African fauna and flora is extremely rich. If public research would lend a hand, local biodiversity could fight malnutrition and assure food security. But this heritage is now being privatised by Western companies, as in the case of the yellow yam (*Dioscorea dumetorum*) which has been patented by the company Shaman Pharmaceuticals. Their patent (US 5019580) applies to the use of dioscoretine for the treatment of diabetics. How can we protect our collective rights to this heritage? How can we secure appropriate sharing of benefits, linked to its use?

In the end, the workshop came up with an action plan. The participants committed themselves to: inform a wide public using different methods (e.g. radio programmes,

written articles, educational materials, etc.); take action to influence official bodies; contribute to the development of a national and regional network for the sharing of experiences and information; and help promote alternative technologies.

Finally, a group was created to work with Social Alerte Burkina which has already been engaged in raising awareness.

At the political level, the participants called on Burkina Faso to immediately vote for a moratorium on the use and commercialisation of GMOs, so that time can be devoted to informing the public and assessing all the risks related to GMOs.

-- The Participants