



Confronting Contamination:

Five reasons to reject GM co-existence

People all over the world are looking to Europe, where the hard-fought moratorium on genetically modified organisms (GMOs) is about to be lifted and where the struggle is now on to determine what will take its place. Genetic contamination is at the centre of the debate and much is being said about thresholds, co-existence and preserving “consumer choice”. But there’s a lot that’s not being said, particularly when it comes to how Europe’s decisions will affect the rest of the world. The larger issues at stake are in danger of disappearing in the minutiae of official negotiations.

Genetic contamination should be seen for what it is: an inevitable consequence of GM agriculture and the cornerstone of the biotech industry’s efforts to make the global acceptance of GM crops a *fait accompli*. The biotech industry wants its opponents to believe that the only option left is to “manage” the co-existence of GM and non-GM agriculture. They want us to abandon the fight to stop genetic engineering and to turn our efforts to salvaging remnants of non-GM agriculture, in much the same way that they’ve tried to co-opt the struggle for biodiversity into a non-threatening campaign to protect global ‘hot spots’. But such co-existence will inevitably lead to a two-stream system of global food and agriculture – a GM-free niche market for the very rich and a GM-polluted supply for the rest of us – with the same few corporations controlling both streams from seed to supermarket. In the face of this, more and more people are working courageously, with whatever means they can, to keep farms, zones, provinces, states, countries and regions GM-free.

Here are five reasons why the issue of contamination must lead to a complete rejection of GMOs:

1. The only way to prevent contamination is not to grow GMOs

Agriculture does not take place in a laboratory. Pollen travels. Seeds travel. Food travels. And they do not travel in nice, neat predictable ways. Insects can transport pollen over kilometres. So can the wind. The ability of seeds to stay in the soil for years before germinating can make things even more complicated. And there is no way to guarantee against human error and activity, whether it be scientists mistakenly sending GM seeds around the world to unsuspecting colleagues, people smuggling seeds across borders, farmers sowing the grains of GM food aid, or biotech companies frequently violating biosafety regulations. This is only logical: food and agriculture have always been about exchange, experimentation and trade and this is no different in the current context of globalisation.

Nobody is denying this basic fact in the European debate around co-existence. Study after study demonstrates the impossibility of practicing GM-free agriculture next to GM agriculture. This is why the co-existence negotiations are actually about thresholds (determining what levels of contamination are “acceptable”) and liability (assigning responsibility for the inevitable contaminations that will occur). And this is why the GM industry is not serious about participating in any co-existence plans that might actually keep GM and non-GM agriculture separate and assign liability where it is due, as Bayer’s recent decision to abandon the commercialisation of its GM maize in the UK goes to show. The most practical and cost-effective way to prevent GMO contamination is not to grow GM crops at all. Given that the arguments for growing GM crops are pretty weak from a farmer perspective and weaker still from a consumer perspective, there is no good justification for all the added effort and cost that it takes to bring GMOs into the agricultural system.

2. Damage control measures obstruct good farming practices

The proposed European plans for co-existence make it clear that separating GM and GM-free agriculture requires massive regulatory intervention. Crops have to be segregated by distance and barriers, seeds have to be certified as non-GM, funds need to be established to compensate non-GM farmers for contamination, post-harvest handling systems need to be developed, and so on.

The end result is far more control over farmers. They will be forced to conform to “co-existence” practices that have little to do with good farming. There will be more bureaucracy, paperwork, and pressure for certification and far less flexibility in deciding what to grow, when and how to grow it, and how to sell the harvest. Seed saving and exchanges, if they are not prohibited, will be much more complicated. The future of non-GM agriculture will be a tightly regulated system governed by onerous contracts that will leave farmers more vulnerable to the power of agribusiness. Moreover, for those countries without the resources for such regulatory intervention, there simply won't be a future for GM-free agriculture once GMOs are allowed in.

3. Contamination increases corporate control over agriculture

It's no big secret that the GM industry's interest lies in pushing GM crops as quickly and as widely as possible across the globe. Industry has raced to get its GM crops into the fields before biosafety regulations and public opposition set in. But it would be wrong to assume that the GM industry does not want some form of regulation for its products.

Big business likes regulations that enable it to control the market, while not preventing it from selling its products. Industry's lax attitude to the 'black market' for GM crops, such as that for Bt cotton in India or Roundup Ready soybeans in Romania, is just a temporary phenomenon. It likes this initial contamination because it puts authorities in an awkward position, and puts pressure on them to approve the crops. But once they attain this initial objective, the big companies quickly move in to squash the 'black market' and take control. This is what is happening in Argentina and Brazil.

The division between the biotech seed industry and downstream agribusiness is another temporary phenomenon. Alliances and mergers between the two industries will take off if and when the European and Japanese moratoriums on GM imports come to an end, giving rise to tightly controlled “identity preservation” systems, where farmers grow particular varieties under contract to corporations dictating what inputs they must use. These identity preservation systems, whether for non-GM or “value-added” GM crops, will be based on certified seed. Meaning, in order to “guarantee” the identity of their crops, farmers will have to grow their crops from seeds purchased from the company, leaving no room for seed saving or exchange. Farmers growing farm-saved seed will have to sell their crops outside of the non-GM stream, unless they can find informal local markets.

In the end, a small set of corporations or corporate alliances will emerge with complete control over the agriculture and food system, controlling both the GM stream, whether it be bulk commodities like Roundup Ready soy or “value-added” GM crops, and the non-GM stream, turning it into an expensive niche market for the rich, much like organic agriculture has become. Just look at Romania, where the only certified non-GM seed available is seed imported by Pioneer Hi-Bred from the US!

4. Contamination is an act of aggression

Most discussions of contamination focus on the “thresholds” of GM that consumers and industry will accept in “non-GM” products. But for many people, any GM contamination is an attack on their most sacred, fundamental beliefs. The most glaring example of this is the recent contamination of maize in Mexico.

For the indigenous peoples of Mexico and Guatemala, maize is the basis of life. In the creation story of the Maya, maize was the only material into which the gods were able to incorporate the breath of life and the gods used it to make the flesh of the first four people on Earth. For other peoples of Mexico, maize itself is a goddess. Maize has been the fundamental food of Mexicans for centuries and thousands of varieties provide an amazing range of flavours, consistencies, recipes, nutrients and medicinal uses. It has kept indigenous peoples alive in the face of discrimination, poverty and plundering. It has become equally key and often equally sacred for peasant communities in Mexico and in many other parts of the world. The vast majority of Mexicans will not hesitate to tell you “we are the children of maize”. So, when the people of Mexico discovered that their maize was contaminated by GMOs, they saw it as a violation of what is most sacred to them. Alvaro Salgado of the National Center to Support Indigenous Missions (CENAMI) expressed the popular sentiment: “Contamination isn't just one more problem. It's an aggression against Mexico's identity and its original inhabitants.”

5. The poor will suffer the most

There is simply no way that poor countries of the South will be able to implement the kind of co-existence measures being proposed in Europe. You only have to look at the situation with pesticides to understand the disparity in regulations and implementation between the North and the South. Whenever GMOs are introduced into Southern countries, contamination is inevitable, even if the GMOs come in as grain for food aid. But it's not just the ease with which contamination can occur that is so problematic for the South; it's also the implications.

The stakes are much higher in the South, since the poor are highly vulnerable to any disruptions in local agriculture, local food supplies, and local customs. Southern countries are also in a weak position vis-à-vis their exports. While they rely on agricultural exports for much of their foreign exchange, the export markets are controlled by Northern companies, who are free to block exports from Southern countries if they fail to meet the thresholds for contamination set by importing countries or even the companies themselves. The push for GM comes from the North, but it is the North that will end up dominating the non-GM market, if GMOs make their way into Southern countries.

The only practical option for Southern countries is to close their borders to all imports of GMOs. Such a move, however, takes a level of political courage that seems to be eluding many governments in the South. The unrelenting pressure from the biotech industry, the US government and their allies is often too much. In this context, support for "co-existence" in the North is an attack on solidarity with the people of the South. It will only encourage the spread and domination of GMOs over the South's agriculture.

Getting back to basics

There is no acceptable justification for GMOs. There is already more than enough knowledge and technology for farmers to practice agriculture in ways that will feed the world's population, look after the planet, and support the wellbeing of rural communities. Who cares if these practices aren't profitable for big agribusiness? GMOs are obstacles that prevent us from moving in the right direction and we need to treat them as such. The only possible position in support of pro-farmer, ecological agriculture and in solidarity with the world's peoples, is a complete rejection of GMOs.

A longer and fully-referenced version of this article will be published in the April 2004 issue of Seedling, and is available from our website.

