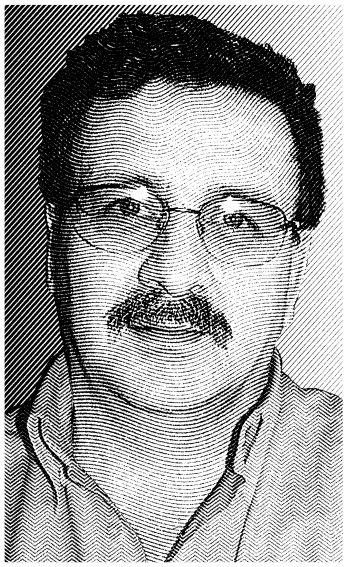
Q&A:

Transgenic foe works to unite small food producers

Germán Vélez directs Grupo Semillas, a Bogotá-based, nongovernmental group that supports the collective rights of Indian and peasant farm communities and their sustainable use of biodiversity. An agronomist trained at the National University in Medellín, Vélez spent six years during the late 1980s and early 1990s in Colombia´s Amazon working for the Amazonic Institute of Scientific Research (Sinchi), a semi-public research institute. There, he studied Indian forms of agriculture and helped indigenous communities develop their commercial potential in agro-forestry and organic agriculture. As director of Grupo Semillas, he has worked with Indian, Afro-Colombian and peasant farming communities developing legal and organizational tools they can use to defend their territories, prevent privatization of their natural resources and keep their crops free of genetically modified (GM) plants. Vélez spoke to EcoAméricas correspondent Steven Ambrus in Bogotá.



Germán Vélez

What do GM-free zones need to be effective?

GM-free zones only can work if communities have a certain degree of governmental authority, if they have control over the entry and exit of goods from their territory. That means the power to influence state institutions with respect to the kinds of agricultural development and food-aid programs carried out in community territory. It means the autonomy to implement inspections. And it means the authority to impose rules on community members, so they don't bring GMOs [genetically modified organisms] into the area on their own initiative.

But can they really work?

It all depends. The European Commission is in the process of drafting regulations that will determine how much autonomy communities have in protecting themselves from GMOs. Pro-GM industries are lobbying for co-existence legislation that would permit transgenic and non-transgenic crops to be located near each other. But those pressures cannot be allowed to prosper. Even with mandated separation distances, contamination through wind-blown pollen will occur. Lawsuits can also be launched by a community to try and keep out transgenics. Communities have brought suits against neighboring farmers because of contamination. In both Germany and France, farmers have been reluctant to use certain transgenic corns for fear of such suits. But lawsuits cut both ways. Pro-transgenic farmers also have sued communities for shutting them out.

And in Latin America?

Lawsuits on contamination are more difficult in Latin America because laws here generally favor producers of transgenic seeds and technology. But communities might keep transgenics out if they have the power to impose real controls. In Colombia, Indian tribes have an advantage because of the legal autonomy granted them under Colombia's 1991 constitution. But peasant cooperatives and municipalities generally don't enjoy that autonomy in Latin America, where many nations are highly centralized. In those cases, it depends on the power each community has to pressure state and national authorities and the sensitivity of authorities to the danger of transgenics.

How about economic pressure?

There are a lot of economic factors that can help the GM-free movement. In Europe, for example, polls have shown that 50-70% of consumers don't want transgenic products in their foods. In the U.K. most supermarkets chains, like Sainsbury and Safeway, have decided either to make their own brand products GM-free or require labels on all products with transgenic ingredients. Supermarket chains in other countries, like Carrefour in France, Migros in Switzerland and Esselunge in Italy, have made similar decisions. So there is a growing market for GM-free products, just like there is for organic products. If governments in Latin America see there is a competitive advantage in producing GM-free—if they see that GM-free communities can earn significant incomes in exports—they might be more sympathetic to the cause.

And international agreements? How much protection do they offer to communities that want to keep out transgenic products and crops?

Unfortunately, not much. The relevant international agreement is the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, which was ratified by more than 120 countries and entered into force in 2003. It governs cross-border trade in transgenics. It determines, for example, that transgenics exported for their release as seeds into the environment must be labeled as such, while transgenics intended for food or industrial purposes must be identified to say they "may contain" GMOs. It allows countries to ask for risk assessments on transgenics and restrict or even prohibit the import of transgenics. But it has no impact on what happens once transgenics cross a nation's border. That depends on the biosecurity laws each nation adopts. And unfortunately, as I said before, legislation in Latin America favors producers of transgenic technology. When you look at everything from the 1992 Convention on Biological Diversity to free-trade agreements, you see trade, intellectual property rights and the development of technologies take precedence over biodiversity protection. As with the Cartagena Protocol, regulations end at a nation's border. After that, it's up to each country to develop its own legislation.

How would you describe the anti-GM movement in Colombia? Apart from the Zenús, what are other organizations doing?

The non-governmental groups SwissAid, AgroEcological Network of the Caribbean (Recar) and Grupo Semillas recently launched a national campaign to alert the public to the dangers of transgenics and pressure authorities to defend local communities that want to protect their food security through sustainable agriculture. We are working with numerous peasant farmer and Afro-Colombian communities interested in diversifying their production, strengthening local markets and exchanging native seeds to preserve biodiversity. We are working with Indian groups like the Paez [in the southern state of Cauca] who might be interested in establishing their own GM-free zone. And we believe we will be able to influence policy. Seventy percent of the nation's food is produced by small peasant farmers, not by the big agro-industrial concerns engaged in GM-based agriculture. That gives us clout if we act together.