

Position Paper

# **Protocol on Biosecurity and the Convention on Biodiversity: No to the privatization of biodiversity!**

Family farming, a solution to the challenge of biodiversity and climate change

Wednesday 18 June 2008, by [La Via Campesina](#) (Date first published: April 2008).

In May 2008 in Bonn, Germany the 4<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol on Biosecurity (MOP4) also called the « Cartagena Protocol » and the 9<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD, COP9) will take place.

For millenia small-scale farmers of the world have conserved and renewed plant and animal biodiversity. Faced with the grave threats that today weigh upon biodiversity, whether of wild or agricultural species, we call on signatory governments to the Convention on Biodiversity to recognize the ancient role of peasant/community based farmers. Their struggle has always been to control the erosion of biodiversity and to limit the effects of climate change. Therefore, we demand that governments radically reassess the national and international policies that are wiping out rural communities across the planet. We also warn them against the false solutions -GMOs, agrofuels and forest monocultures, so called “carbon sinks”, which, far from resolving these problems, only make the situation worse by marginalizing small producers even more.

## **The MOP: a market of fakes**

The central theme in the discussion following the Meeting of the Parties (MOP) on the Biosecurity Protocol from May 12-16 will be the question of compensation for the damage caused by genetic contamination. We, the peasant farmers of Africa, Europe, the Americas and Asia, categorically refuse to discuss compensation. We do not want GMOs at all. We will not exchange our autonomous agriculture, our health and the quality of our environment for a few dollars of compensation.

Those responsible for genetic contaminations are perfectly identifiable. Monsanto, Dupont, Syngenta, Limagrain, Bayer and Pioneer are attempting through the use of genetically modified and other patented seeds to create a worldwide seed monopoly. To do so, they destroy and actively fight against the diversity of small scale farmers' seeds that are in the hands of rural communities and put seeds protected by intellectual property rights on the market that contaminate the rest of the plants. Rather than debating the amount of compensation to give to the victims of contamination, member States of the Biosecurity Protocol ought to prevent contamination by dismantling these transnationals and by affirming the prohibition of the patenting of living things.

## **The COP: false solutions for real problems**

### ***GMOs aggravate climate change and the disappearance of biodiversity***

Contrary to the general discourse of seed companies, industry GMOs and hybrid seeds are not a

miracle solution, which can tomorrow guarantee seeds which will have the capacity to respond to profoundly disrupted climactic conditions, assuring the feeding of future generations. In effect, these “stable and uniform” seeds of the industry – the only seeds authorized in most industrialized nations – are incapable of adapting themselves, since they can only be reproduced as identical specimens.

In contrast, peasant seeds, thanks to their variability and their inter-variety diversity, can evolve and adapt to drastic climatic changes and to different types of terrain by being replanted each year in the fields and being continuously improved through participatory selection by the rural communities themselves.

Nevertheless, the multinational seed giants do all they can to destroy small farmers’ seeds and impose their monopoly upon what they call « phyto-genetic resources ». In most industrialized countries they have pushed governments to adopt laws that prohibit the re-sowing of their harvests, the exchange of farmers seeds and the sale of crops produced by family farmers. Elsewhere, the subsidy programs of the « green revolution » push family farmers to abandon their traditional seeds for hybrid seeds or GMO seeds which are strongly dependent on chemical products. Parallel to this, the seed companies have developed legal instruments and techniques to ensure respect for the « intellectual property » in their seeds. The ‘terminator trait’ is one of these instruments.

Since the last meeting of the COP in 2006 in Brazil, following pressure from social movements and notably from women family farmers, the signatory States have adopted a moratorium on Terminator seeds (the technologies of genetic restriction or GURT). The goal of Terminator technology is to prevent small-scale family farmers from replanting their harvested seed by rendering the seeds sterile and thus obliging them to re-purchase their seeds each year from these same industries.

The seed industries seek today to overcome the moratorium by developing technological solutions with similar effects as Terminator, but which will not be submitted to this moratorium. Since March 2006, the EU has financed a three-year research project called « Transcontainer » that seeks to develop a new generation of suicide seeds, in this case genetically modified plants whose fertility can be activated or deactivated by chemical agents. These seeds are presented as the miracle solution to permit the coexistence of GMO crops and non-GMO crops. In reality, their principal « raisin d’être » is to impose GMO crops, most notably in regions where public opinion is in firm opposition, and to oblige farmers to pay each year to restore the fertility of their seeds. Transcontainer would permit seed industries to achieve the same result they tried to obtain with Terminator.

Whether through patents, certificates of plant acquisition or GMOs, the objective of multinational seed companies is to impose their property rights on all existing seeds, by eliminating the inherent biodiversity of cultivated crops which could compete with them. Is it because they seek the total destruction of all the biodiversity of cultivated crops in the fields that these same seed companies are today financing the storage of seeds stolen from small scale farmers and indigenous peoples in the gene banks of Svalbard in Norway?

We, the small-scale farmers of the world, do not need Monsanto or Limagrain to provide seeds to us. For millennia, we have conserved, exchanged, replanted and adapted our seeds. Rural communities have the collective right to the usage of their seeds, and their privatization by fraudulent means is pure and simple robbery.

In addition, the wiping out of farmers’ seeds puts humanity’s capacity to adapt to the challenge of climate change in peril because the seeds sold by industry are tied to industrial forms of production and energy use (notably with inputs) and are destructive of the fertility of soils. The soil, and more specifically the organic material in the soil, stores important quantities of carbon. Industrial forms of agriculture, by impoverishing the soils and replacing the organic matter with synthetic inputs,

liberate the carbon stored in the soils, thus increasing the level of CO<sub>2</sub> in the air. In contrast to this, small-scale farming contributes to the enriching of the soil and the preservation of organic material, without which production would not be sustainable. Small-scale farming contributes, therefore, to conserving carbon in the soil and thus to limiting climate change.

### **Agrofuels will not resolve the energy crisis and will exacerbate climate change.**

Agrofuels are the second miraculous solution promoted by governments to respond to the energy crisis and climate change. They are also on the agenda of discussion for the COP. Nevertheless, agrofuels do not provide an effective response either to the energy crisis or to climate change.

Industrial agrofuels are based on monocultures of corn, sugar cane, palm trees, rapeseed and so on, the cultivation of which requires enormous quantities of water, land and fertilizer. These agrofuels must then be processed in another location, after being transported halfway around the planet. As well as this, more energy is required to produce industrial agrofuels than they provide in energy: the net output of agrofuels is negative. Agrofuels are not currently economically viable without the massive government subsidies and the capital investments of speculators which they currently receive.

In relation to climate change, agrofuels also produce a net negative. Their production requires fertilizer and fuels that intensify climate change. In addition, agrofuels emit all the carbon that they have sequestered into the air when they are burned. Most significantly however, the development of agrofuel monocultures on lands previously occupied by forests or by small-scale farming practices weakens the capacity of soils to store carbon. Thus, far from being the claimed "carbon sinks" these monoculture forests (eucalyptus, African palms) increase the quantities of carbon in the air, which in the mid-term puts the very possibility for the existence of animal and human life on earth in the balance. These forest monocultures are also very susceptible to fire, which was demonstrated by the large forest fires in Indonesia in 1997 (African palms), or in Portugal (eucalyptus) in 2007: after these disasters, enormous quantities of CO<sub>2</sub> were released into the air. Finally, the multinationals try to use the green image of agrofuels to introduce GMO trees whose impact upon ecosystems and health could be dramatic.

The solution to the energy crisis and to climate change is therefore not to substitute fossil fuels with agrofuels. It is necessary to change our production and consumption methods and patterns and, in industrialized countries, to drastically reduce our consumption of non-renewable energy.

While industrial agriculture is a net energy negative, family farming agriculture produces more calories than it consumes. The reduction of our energy consumption therefore depends on maintaining and developing small-scale agriculture which uses more human energy (the work of men and women farmers) and less energy derived from fossil fuels. We need more farmers to stop climate change!

The development of industrial agrofuels destroys family farming by monopolizing land and available water, and by eliminating plant biodiversity. The introduction of fossil fuels led people to believe that human labour would be reduced. Agrofuels, by giving priority to feeding cars over people, effectively eliminate the people!

While some farmers have started producing Agrofuels, which may lead to some short term benefits, in the long run their existence will be threatened by their dependence on trans-national corporations.

Far from being a solution, agrofuels are a threat!

## **Protected Areas: Protected for Whom ?**

The third main theme of discussion at the convention on biological diversity is on protected areas. The method currently proposed by the CBD for choosing these areas does not take into account whether they abut on human populations or whether local populations are a fortiori consulted when these territories are categorised. This can have terrible consequences for the populations of these areas, including their expulsion in the name of preserving the environment.

Similarly, criteria for establishing the « sustainability » of the biodiversity in these areas is defined by the same certifying organs who are promoting the exploitation of these forest resources and other important ecosystems. Generally as soon as local populations are prohibited from having access to these resources, contracts are signed with large companies to exploit the wood or acquire the phytogenetic resources present in the territory. The environmental consequence of the displacement of these indigenous populations and peasant farmers and of the sale of the rights to exploit the territories is the replacement of a rich agroforestry system of great biodiversity with a system of monocultures (of teak for example) and the consequent loss of an immense heritage of knowledge and agroecological practices.

In other words, far from protecting the environment, when the populations living in these areas are ignored, these protected areas can become zones of environmental pillage.

## **The solution : a diversity of human cultures and the biodiversity of plants and animals**

Only small scale farming and the defence not only of plant and animal biodiversity, but also of the diversity of cultural human models can respond in a sustainable way to the current environmental crises (loss of biodiversity, climate change and the energy crisis) with which the world is faced.

In order to adapt, seeds must be diversified and variable. That goes for animals as well. Only a biodiversity conserved and renewed in the fields of small-scale farmers will permit the development of plant and animal species which can adapt to the context and climate of tomorrow. Instead of investing millions of dollars in the ex-situ conservation and laboratory research on genes, it is urgent to support field-based conservation and participatory selection. The essential work of renewing biodiversity in the fields can only continue with the presence of numerous men and women farmers in all the regions of the world through models of diversified production. The massive destruction of farming communities that is already advanced in Europe and North America and is increasing in Asia, Africa and Latin America imperils the very ability of humanity to survive the changes that this century has ushered in.

In order to continue to play a role which favours biodiversity, the rights of family farmers must be respected. This is a question of making sure that the rights of peasants are affirmed under the international Treaty on Phytogenetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (TIRPAA), to confirm the right of farmers to « save, use, exchange and sell seeds reproduced on the farm. »

We the small-scale farmers of the world refuse to abandon the right to collective use in opposition to a so-called « benefit sharing » dependent on the application of private property rights on seeds (via patents and certificates of plant acquisitions). Seeds are the collective inheritance of indigenous and farming communities: they do not belong to any private person, but it is the obligation of all to pass them on to future generations. Similarly, the rights of farmers must also include access to land and to water as collective usage rights, the right to exchange and to sell the products of small-scale agriculture on local markets and the right to participate in all decisions that concern us. It is through respect for and active application of these rights alone which will allow the farmers of the world to fulfil their role of preserving biodiversity and struggling against climate change.

The presence in all territories of family farmers producing food locally and preserving the soil is both the solution to the energy crisis and climate change tied to the increase in carbon in the atmosphere. We must replace the industrial production model of agro-exportation based on high levels of energy consumption and long distance transport for a localized model of production that is intensive and based on human work. The forms of production that most conserve energy are those that require human labour: to maintain the fertility of the soils and to diversify production (of both animals and plants) in the selection of the plants and the animals most adapted to that territory etc... At a time when millions of landless farmers die of hunger in the shantytowns and only demand a bit of land to cultivate, it is urgent to replace chemical fertilizers and pesticides with small farmer's labour.

The diversity of peasant and indigenous societies, which constantly renew their traditional knowledge specific to their territory, constitute our greatest wealth in the face of the current situation. We must not only stop the rural exodus and the destruction of farming communities, but encourage a significant part of our population to become farmers in order to respond to the current threats.