



**News Release:**  
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## Neither Early Warning nor Early Listening - What the CGIAR is Not Doing:

### Silent Science

*If you don't have anything nice to say don't say anything at all? When the policy committee of the world's most important agricultural science network met last week, they evaded all the tough questions related to transgenic maize in Mexico - the crop's center of genetic diversity. Last year, and again last month, the Mexican Environment Ministry confirmed that farmers' maize varieties in at least two states had been contaminated with DNA from genetically modified maize.*

**“Hot tamale” dropped:** The uproar over the Mexican transgenic maize scandal has derailed industry plans to get EU governments to abandon their *de facto* moratorium on GM (genetically-modified) crops and produce. Brussels had hoped to raise the issue during the EU's Barcelona round in March. But as *Nature Biotechnology* magazine reported in February, jitters over the Mexican debacle were causing both industry and pro-biotech governments to reconsider pressing for a decision that might go against them. The joint statement issued by more than 140 civil society organizations (CSOs) on February 19<sup>th</sup> reinforced their concern. The moratorium issue will not come up until the EU's October meeting. See: <http://www.etcgroup.org/article.asp?newsid=298> to view the joint statement.

Meanwhile, the Genetic Resources Policy Committee of the CGIAR (Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research) met in Los Banos, Philippines February 20-22<sup>nd</sup>. The CGIAR speaks for the 16 International Agricultural Research Centres responsible for the Green Revolution of the 1960s and 70s. One of the 16 centres, CIMMYT (the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Centre in Mexico) has been embroiled in the contamination debate largely because it has the world's most important maize gene bank. CIMMYT is not regarded as a cause of GM contamination nor is its bank contaminated. But CIMMYT and CGIAR not only develop new plant varieties and conserve genetic diversity, they are purported to offer scientific leadership and an early warning system when problems arise. “After listening to the Mexican Government's alarm bells for almost half a year, maybe our genetic guardians need an early listening system,” suggests the ETC group's Pat Mooney.

**Said and not said:** Among others, farmers' organizations and governments looked to the CGIAR meeting to bring clarity to the controversy surrounding GM pollution in a center of diversity and to suggest steps that could be taken in keeping with the precautionary principle adopted by governments as part of the Biosafety Protocol. In the end, the CGIAR declined to act. The research network was more concerned for its institutional safety than in biosafety. The committee concluded that it did not have enough information to act; that further studies were needed (but declined to suggest whose responsibility they should be), on the implications of GM contamination for genetic diversity, gene banks, and intellectual property. The committee only gently opined that FAO, UNEP, or UNESCO, (anyone but CGIAR) might want to look into the matter. Finally, they congratulated the Mexican government and CIMMYT for their transparency in dealing with the issue.

**Early warning denied:** The committee was expected to cut through the confusion surrounding methodologies for GM testing and provide an early warning for the international community. Instead, they chose to use the manufactured furor over methodologies as a reason not to act. Farmers and CSOs had expected the committee to rise above the academic squabble and simply address the direct statements of the Mexican Government confirming that the countryside was contaminated. The meeting will be remembered for the CGIAR's silence and passivity.

- ❑ **Field contamination ignored:** The committee would not state that regardless of the debate over test methodologies, Mesoamerican governments should enact the precautionary principle and assume that there is maize contamination;
- ❑ **Moratorium support sidestepped:** The committee turned down a proposal to commend the Mexican government's current moratorium on genetically-modified crops and, instead, "noted" the policy;
- ❑ **Precautionary principle discounted:** While acknowledging the importance of the situation, the committee refused to follow the recent U.S. precedent of invoking the precautionary principle to restrict the planting of GM cotton in some areas of the United States where wild or feral cotton is found. "The U.S. is hardly a center of diversity for cotton and cotton is much less vulnerable to GM pollution than maize," notes ETC's Silvia Ribeiro in Mexico;
- ❑ **Gene banks endangered:** Despite a general consensus that field contamination will lead to gene bank contamination, the committee and CIMMYT did not advise bank directors to take any specific actions or propose any specific policies or procedures;
- ❑ **Intellectual property policies compromised:** Although it vaguely noted that there might be patent issues involved, the committee did not decide to formally notify the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) that GM contamination involving in-trust material held in CGIAR gene banks could compromise access to bank accessions;
- ❑ **Biodiversity Convention dismissed:** The committee rejected a proposal that it ask the Convention on Biological Diversity to look into the issue of transgenic contamination in a Centre of Genetic Diversity even though the UN Convention has stressed the importance of such Centres and is meeting in April;
- ❑ **Farmers' Rights ignored:** The committee did not respond to the request that the CGIAR gene banks guarantee the continued access of farmers to uncontaminated gene bank accessions.

"For the world's farmers, the CGIAR's attitude is very troubling", says Mexico's Ernesto Ladron de Guevara, of the farmers' organization UNORCA, "because the seeds they have in trust are the contribution of farmers of the whole world with the understanding that the seeds remain the patrimony of humankind. The CGIAR is obliged to ensure that farmers can obtain good quality, patent-free and transgenic-free seeds from the gene bank collections." Ladron de Guevara is also the representative of the Genetic Resources Commission of Via Campesina.

Doctor Alejandro Nadal in Mexico City concludes, "CGIAR has failed to take responsibility by ignoring that genetic contamination will eventually make it very difficult or impossible to rejuvenate their seeds. By not calling for a moratorium to stop the sources of contamination in Mexico, and by failing to take steps to protect all centres of crop diversity, CGIAR is contradicting the precautionary principle." Dr. Nadal is the director of the Science and Technology Program at Colegio de Mexico.

**The "protecting their bottoms" line:** With the CGIAR planted firmly on its own hands, many organizations that have signed the Joint Statement will take the matter to the Convention on Biological Diversity when environment ministers meet in The Hague from April 8<sup>th</sup> to 26<sup>th</sup>. The issue is also bound to be discussed at the UN/FAO Committee on Food Security and at the World Food Summit that will take place in Rome in early June. "By that time," Pat Mooney admits, "the obfuscations around methodologies will be long past, and governments and CGIAR will have to discuss the real threat to food security. The world will also want an explanation from the CGIAR as to why they failed to provide farmers with an early warning."

#### **For further information:**

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