



Genotype
Tuesday, October 16, 2001

World Food Day:

Summit Plummet – but there’s an Undertaking in the Making

... and none to soon. As the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) recovers from delays to its World Food Summit at the hands of Italy’s Silvio Berlusconi, the world’s agricultural gene banks fret over GM contamination and government ‘biocrats’ gird their loins to fight for an International Undertaking intended to protect world seed security.

World Food Day (October 16th) comes this year with little to celebrate. After a year of preparation, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (Rome, Italy) is about to announce that its Heads of State meeting – “The World Food Summit/ Five Years Later” – is going to be later still. Following the debacle of the G8 summit in Genoa in July, Italy’s right-wing President Berlusconi got cold feet over a second summit in his country and tried, in the eleventh hour - to push FAO’s event across the Mediterranean into Africa. Now, weeks of dithering and nickel and diming by the Italian Government have forced the Summit to be postponed.

Summit Plummet: This, at a time when famines loom in Central America and Central Asia; and when the United States and other OECD powers are revving up for a new WTO round where agriculture and food security head the menu. While the South, especially sub-Saharan Africa, wrestles with food shortages, the North is almost traumatized with food safety concerns. 2001 began with scandals about illegal pollen pollution of genetically-modified (GM) maize and canola within the North’s food system. It went on from there to new revelations related to Mad Cow disease and then foot and mouth disease. Producer and consumer confidence in government biocrats and agribusiness has never been lower. If ever there was need for a food summit – despite and because of the current political meltdown - it is now.

Genetically-modified ‘Fort Knox’? Prospects for the immediate future don’t look better. In September the Mexican government divulged that traditional maize crops in the Mexican state of Oaxaca have been found contaminated with GM traits. The news has sent shock-waves through farming and scientific communities around the world. For years, agronomists and the directors of global crop gene banks (long term research refrigerators for seeds no longer in large-scale use that often contain irreplaceable breeding qualities) have told one another that, for all their concerns about GM biosafety, the real threat would arise if transgenic traits seep into the centers of biological diversity for the world’s food crops. Mexico is a mega-centre of diversity for some of the most vital food species – including maize. A GM trait for herbicide-tolerance, for example, could prove irrelevant for poor farmers who can’t afford – or don’t need – herbicides. But biodiversity could be eroded if wild crop relatives are displaced by crops carrying advantageous transgenes, and Mexican farmers could experience market disadvantages because of GM contamination.

Several Mexican civil society organizations (CSOs) meeting yesterday began wondering about the implications for national and international gene banks in the region. (See attached box, *What to do if your gene bank is contaminated with GM seeds.*) So far, the Mexican Government's response, predictably, is to downplay the problem. But, it is only a matter of time – perhaps a very short time – before one of the world's "Fort Knox's" of seeds discovers that its invaluable treasures have been polluted. With that contamination comes a major threat to food security.

Platform I.U.: The only good news on the horizon also comes from FAO. After almost seven years of painstaking negotiation, governments will meet in Rome beginning October 25th to complete a "platform" treaty – a legally-binding convention that scientists believe is a prerequisite for future agricultural development – known as the International Undertaking on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture. If agreed, the "I.U." will lay down the rules of the game for the scientific exchange of crop germplasm – the genetic material needed to adapt crops to global warming, to counter new pests and diseases, and to meet the other wants and hopes of a changing world.

Multinational agribusiness control of crop inputs – including seeds – and their aggressive pursuit of patents on plant varieties and genes – has soiled the historically-free exchange of research germplasm among scientists around the world. Where scientific seeds once moved with few constraints, the flow has now dropped to a trickle as governments and farmers fear corporate rip-offs. The proposed International Undertaking will restore confidence in the scientific community and allow researchers to swap seed without fear that someone else will purloin and patent it. A strong I.U. would also lay down the law for gene bank management and the handling of GM contamination. Three major stumbling blocks remain...

Turf tiffs: First, only a pre-determined list of crops will be exchanged. Those not listed will be isolated and the likelihood that scientists will develop them further is low. At the moment, Brazil is refusing to allow groundnuts (for which it is part of the center of diversity) on the list unless China offers up its diverse collection of soybeans. Similarly, Africa and Latin America are locked in a turf battle over forage grasses and legumes. Although they are largely ignored by consumers who only know food by its labels, forage species are essential for livestock improvement and critical to the welfare of pastoralists and subsistence farm families.

I.O.U.: Second (and related), OECD countries are offering very little in the way of benefit-sharing for the South. It's a well-kept secret that most of the world's crop genetic diversity originated in the South and much of the uncollected diversity remains there. The South's germplasm has been the basis for the North's surpluses. But, while Europe and even industry have shown reluctant willingness to increase funding for the conservation and development of agricultural germplasm, the US is digging in its heels. As some European diplomats joke, the US is only prepared to offer the I.U. an I.O.U.. Unless the US 'wises up', diplomats agree, that country will be outside yet another treaty looking in.

Farmers' Rights: Finally, although the North has been keen to acknowledge Plant Breeders' Rights (a euphemism for plant patents) in the I.U., they have balked at granting Farmers' Rights. For many membership organizations such as Via Campesina (an umbrella body for small farmers around the world), the legal entrenchment of their right to save, share, and breed any and all seeds whatever the origin, is sacrosanct. Given the ambiguities related to intellectual property in the Undertaking, the issue of Farmers' Rights might have to be forwarded, via special resolution, to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights for incorporation into the Right to Food.

As bad a year as it has been on the food front, if FAO can pull off this platform treaty on the handling of genetic resources, the UN agency will be able to claim a major victory for food security.

What to do if Your Gene Bank is contaminated with GM Seed...

Its only a matter of time before one or more of the world's major crop gene banks will report that its invaluable collection of traditional Farmers' Varieties, and their wild relatives, have been contaminated by genetically-modified traits. The traits may have seeped into the bank through new collections or through the grow-out (rejuvenation) of some accessions in GM areas. This is a serious issue. Nevertheless, in its usual 'tongue-in-cheek' style, ETC group (formerly RAFI) offers 12 steps institute directors should NOT consider for crisis management – and six they should.

The 12 Step Programme (what *not* to do):

1. Issue a news statement announcing that, after years of unheralded research, your institute has perfected a way to increase *ex situ* genetic diversity.
2. Explain that there is no problem as long as the seed is rejuvenated under national regulations applying to GM field trials.
3. Describe the contamination as an “adventitious present” from the biotech industry, emphasize the access and technology transfer opening for developing countries receiving gene bank samples -
 - 1) as long as they permit GM crop production; and,
 - 2) as long as they have effective regulatory mechanisms.
4. Write a note to your nursery trial recipients around the world telling them that you may have good news on the benefit-sharing front.
5. Announce that you are considering applying Terminator technology to all bank accessions so that the contamination won't be repeated.
6. Assure farmers that the collection is fully and reliably “backed-up” at another gene bank. (Don't mention that it's in the USA or Canada – the world's GM capitals.)
7. Rework the gene bank endowment appeal so that it talks about perpetual care for the ‘gene bank’ without reference to the ‘seeds’ – and appeal to corporations playing up the market opportunities now opening up through gene banks.
8. Try to convince the Gene Giants that there is sufficient genetic distance so that the contaminated accession should not be considered an infringement of their patented genes or traits.
9. Cross out the intellectual property restriction on gene bank MTAs.
10. Propose a slight adjustment to the FAO Trust Agreement so that accessions can be held “in trust” on behalf of Gene Giants.
11. Try to remember what CSO's told you about how most patents don't apply in most developing countries and write the offending companies demanding rent.
12. Recalling the “multifunctionality of agriculture,” announce that your gene bank is also available for industry partnerships to warehouse beer.

A better option:

1. Make public your policies on GM crops and your views on GM contamination.
2. Undertake a study of recent collections and grow-outs of species that (1) are subjects of significant GM experimentation; and, (2) were obtained in areas of experimentation or where contamination might have come through seed aid or food aid.
3. Until rigorous studies are completed, call for a moratorium on the field testing and commercial use of GM crops in Third World centres of genetic diversity.
4. Strengthen phytosanitary testing to check incoming material from nursery trials or other forms of scientific exchange where contamination would not normally be expected.
5. Keep the public informed of results and developments.
6. Demand the funding for any extra costs incurred from the polluters.