



African Centre for
Biosafety



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Groups in Africa, Latin America condemn World Bank biosafety projects

The World Bank is set to secure funding from the Global Environment Facility (GEF) for two projects that will undermine public debate and aggressively drive GM crops into the heart of peasant agriculture. The two projects, one in West Africa and the other in Latin America, will hasten the spread of GM crops into farmer seed systems and even into certain centres of origin.

Project: West Africa Regional Biosafety Project

Implementing agencies:

World Bank, West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU)

Participating countries:

Benin, Burkina Faso, Mali, Senegal, Togo

Project: Latin America Multi-Country Capacity-Building in Biosafety

Implementing agencies:

World Bank, International Centre for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT)

Participating countries:

Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico, Peru

*The proposals for both projects are available on the GEF website:
http://www.thegef.org/Documents/Council_Documents/GEF_C28/WP.html*

Harmonise....

The projects are clearly being driven by an outside agenda. At their core is a long-standing strategy pursued by the World Bank and the US government to harmonise regulations for GM crops across regions in order to override national processes that are more susceptible to local opposition. The idea is to establish favourable regulations in a few countries whose governments are open to GM crops and then to use these regulations as a model that can be imposed on neighbouring countries by way of regional policy bodies. In this way, harmonisation side-steps any possible democratic debate and provides corporations with a large, one-stop shop for their GM crops.

The project's preliminary processes have already shown a complete disregard for genuine public debate. There is still no French version of the West African project proposal, even though all of the participating countries are Francophone. In Benin, NGOs participating in an initial project consultation organised by the US consulting firm Market Strategies were presented with the introduction of GM crops as a foregone conclusion. The NGOs were confined to a meeting separated from the previous day's meeting with farmers' organisations and government officials, which they were not allowed to attend. Likewise, in Costa Rica, the World Bank project builds on a GEF funded biosafety process that has already been denounced by the national network of civil society organisations active on biodiversity issues (Red de Coordinación en Biodiversidad) for its lack of effective civil society participation and for bringing forward a biosafety bill that excluded the network from participation in the National Biosafety Commission, something which is guaranteed by presidential decree.

In contrast, the GM lobby has a direct hand in the World Bank projects, as partners, advisors and even funders. Participants in the projects include CropLife—the main lobby arm of the GM corporations—as well as GM industry front groups like the [Public Research and Regulation Initiative](#) and [AfricaBio](#).

Contaminate...

The project's other core objective is to advance the GM industry's on-going strategy of contamination. The projects will facilitate or initiate field trials and pave the way for the commercialisation of GM crops, with a focus on crops that are central to the peasant farming systems in the respective regions. The Latin American project specifically sets out to facilitate the “deployment” of GM crops in the centres of origin for these crops. Contamination will be inevitable, as the World Bank certainly understands. Indeed, the projects assume that the GM crops will be introduced on a large-scale in the regions. Biosafety “capacity-building” in this sense is merely about managing the ensuing contamination.

Usurping sovereignty in West Africa

The West Africa Regional Biosafety Project is a direct descendent of the US Agency for International Development's (USAID) activities in the region and the UNEP-GEF project that came to an end last year. As national debate over GM crops has erupted in the region, leading to a wide variation in national biosafety process, USAID has been aggressively supporting regional biosafety harmonisation and the introduction of transgenic Bt cotton, the main cash crop for West African peasants.

The US government has a three-fold agenda in pushing Bt cotton in West Africa: bringing African support to the small club of GM nations on the international stage; distracting attention from unfair US domestic cotton subsidies; and, securing US corporate control over West Africa's lucrative cotton production. The World Bank project plans to piggy-back on several US Bt cotton projects¹ and use field trials to develop a single uniform model for risk assessment and regulation that can be adopted throughout West Africa.

USAID is also busy supporting biosafety harmonisation initiatives in the region. The Sahel Institute is drafting a regional biosafety framework for Burkina Faso, Mali and Senegal. The West and Central African Council for Agricultural Research and Development developed a \$25 million regional project on biotechnology and biosecurity with USAID support that was then approved at a Ministerial Meeting on Biotechnology of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in Bamako in 2005. During the Bamako meeting, which was also funded by USAID, the ECOWAS Ministers pledged to harmonise their biosafety regulations within 5 years.

The World Bank project is the next step forward in this harmonisation process. ECOWAS covers a large market, covering all 15 countries of West Africa, but, according to the World Bank, it doesn't have the authority to force member countries to adopt common legislation; it can only make policy recommendations. The World Bank project, therefore, focuses instead on WAEMU—a smaller grouping of 8 West African states that has the power to impose the “fast-track adoption” of compulsory “enabling” legislation on its members. As stated in the project proposal: “If WAEMU is able to harmonise national biosafety legislations and later to enforce a decision taken in one country in the other countries, it will drastically improve the investment climate in biotechnology for cash and food crops in the WAEMU area...by diminishing the costs of doing business.” Once adopted within WAEMU, the Bank says it will then look to “scale-up” the project to the much bigger market of ECOWAS.

Harmonisation is part of the agenda for the Latin America project as well. The countries in that region were in part selected because of the “political, strategic, future role they might play in biosafety management in their respective regions”. Such “harmonisation” is

¹ Current US programs to introduce Bt cotton in the region include a \$7 million “West African Cotton Improvement Programme” that promises to “improve the enabling environment for agricultural biotechnology”, a USAID-financed project for field trials of Bt cotton in Mali, and USAID's Bioengineered Cotton in Africa project.

inherently unscientific and contrary to sound biosafety practice. It does not respect even the minimum standards laid out in the Biosafety Protocol because the projects will usurp sovereign rights of countries to take biosafety decisions, on a country-by-country, case-by-case basis. The Protocol envisions that biosafety decision-making take place at the national level, in the context of open and transparent public awareness and participation (Article 23), respecting the rights of local and indigenous peoples (Article 26), and conserving centres of origin and genetic diversity. To be scientifically rigorous and sensitive to local realities, assessments must be based on a country's specific ecological socio-economic context and they must be informed by genuine public debate. The research required to support effective environmental risk assessments is extensive and long-term, and all countries must have enough policy space to set their own priorities and not be pressured, from a lack of resources and capacity, to adopt those that are reactionary or merely responsive to industry developments.

Destroying food sovereignty in Latin America

The main reason for selecting the five countries involved in the Latin American project is that as a group they are among the most important centres of biodiversity in the world and centres of origin for four of the five crops targeted by the project. This central objective is explicit in the name of the project: "Biosafety in Centers of Biodiversity: Building Technical Capacity in Latin America for Safe Deployment of Transgenic Crops".

There are five crops that the project focuses on: cassava, cotton, maize, potato and rice. Millions of people in Latin America depend on these crops for food, medicine, livelihoods and cultural identity. The rich diversity within these crops that exists in the region is directly attributed to indigenous and peasant farmers' communities, who have conserved, recreated and utilised the crops and maintained deep cultural and spiritual relationships to them. Maize, potatoes, cotton and cassava make up the most important crops for Mesoamerican, Andean and Amazonian communities. Rice is also an extremely important crop in the region since it makes up an essential part of the basic diet of local communities.

It is impossible to accept the project's purported concern in strengthening the capacity of participating countries to implement the Biosafety Protocol, an agreement dealing with transboundary trade in GMOs, when it focuses mainly on local food crops that are rarely traded across borders in the region. Rather, the real aim here is to push GM crops into the very heart of the region's peasant agriculture and food sovereignty. The project's introduction of GM varieties of these crops will inevitably contaminate traditional varieties and thus pave the way for the destruction of the seed and food systems that indigenous and peasant communities have developed over millennia.

The fierce resistance to GM crops among indigenous and peasant communities in Latin America is rooted in their determination to defend their seed systems from such GM contamination. The World Bank's project is a direct effort to undermine this opposition

by putting scientific agencies that have already demonstrated their support for GM agriculture, such as CIAT, the Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology Research (Costa Rica) and EMBRAPA (Brazil), in charge of developing field test protocols and regulations that can give the veneer of legitimacy to the deliberate GM contamination of farmer seed systems. The national scientific centres participating in the project are even referred to as “ports of entry”.

Biosafety hijacked

It's not a big surprise to see governments in Latin America and Africa signing up for these World Bank projects. Few governments are willing to uphold the opposition to GM crops that is expressed by their people, especially when money is on the table and powerful actors like the World Bank and USAID are involved.

These regional projects shift decision-making power even further to international and regional bodies that are removed from local influence and they give undue power to agencies like the World Bank, that are well-known for championing the interests of GM corporations. Such projects make a mockery of the vibrant national and local debates on GM raging around the world.

With another 10 regional biosafety projects supposedly in the GEF pipeline, the gulf between the official decision-makers and the people they supposedly represent could grow even deeper. Once again, real biosafety will have to be secured at the grassroots, in local struggles to keep GM crops out.

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