

FAO's Biotech Meeting Dubbed “Biased for Business” as Steering Committee Member Resigns in Protest

On the eve of a major intergovernmental conference on Agricultural Biotechnologies in Developing Countries (ABDC) in Guadalajara, Mexico, a civil society member of the international steering committee has resigned, calling the preparations for the gathering of governments and scientists “hopelessly biased” and “foolishly sidestepping key socioeconomic and scientific issues.”

Pat Mooney, Executive Director of ETC Group, a Canada-based international civil society organization with a long history of work with FAO and biotechnology issues, resigned from the steering committee on Tuesday, February 23. The UN Food and Agriculture Organization conference, hosted by Mexico, runs from March 1- 4 in Guadalajara.

“The overwhelming thrust of the guiding documents for the meeting are hopelessly biased in favour of biotechnology and skewed to persuade developing countries that they have no option but to climb on the biotech bandwagon. It's unacceptable that a supposedly neutral inter-governmental body like FAO would allow itself to be turned into a billboard for Big Biotech,” Mooney says. “The organizers of the ABDC don't seem to know the ABCs of how to run a conference where different points of view can get a fair hearing. The precautionary principle (related to human and environmental impacts) is almost ignored. The oligopolistic nature of the biotech seed industry – where four companies control global seed sales – is not addressed. And although the background documents mention problems related to biotech patent monopolies, they conclude that the global South has no choice but to surrender. There is no serious discussion about the enormous opportunity cost of developing genetically modified crops compared to conventional plant breeding.”

Pat Mooney is also making his resignation public because farmers and other civil society partners in Mexico have said that FAO organizers were using his membership on the steering committee to claim their interests were represented. “I would never claim to be speaking on behalf of anybody but myself,” Mooney insists. Last September, when Mooney received drafts of the conference documents, he wrote back with fourteen major amendments¹, mostly related to the overall bias of the texts and the issues that were not addressed. He advised the organizers that the documents – as drafted – should not be allowed to go

¹ [The observation sent to FAO can be read here.](#)

forward. He received no reply. The final texts were sent to the steering committee just before Christmas and Mooney had the opportunity to review the several hundred pages only a few days ago. "I was shocked that none of the issues I raised were addressed."

The conference has had problems from its inception. Mooney was invited to join the steering committee in mid-2008. Since he was unable to attend the first session, his colleague in ETC Group, Hope Shand, attended. Shand was so disappointed with the bias in the initial discussions that, with Mooney's agreement, she resigned. Several months later, the FAO secretariat asked him to reconsider. "I was assured that FAO was anxious to have an open, multi-stakeholder dialogue on all of the issues," Mooney recalls. "I felt that I should support a transparent dialogue and agreed to rejoin the committee. Having now read the final documents, I feel used and abused by the entire process." Despite his resignation, Mooney will go to Guadalajara and attend the conference and participate on a panel on crop biotechnology Monday March 1st at 4:45 pm. "I have strong views and want to state them, but I can't be on a steering committee that hasn't steered anything, resulting in unacceptably biased documents."

The choice of Mexico as a venue for the biotech conference is also controversial. The Mexican government has recently broken a 10-year moratorium on the planting of GM maize. Answering a letter against these GM maize trials sent by 1500 organizations from 67 countries, the FAO secretariat said that it was a "national matter" for Mexico, not for FAO.

"It's a mockery that FAO is coming to Mexico to endorse biotechnology. They seem to be oblivious to the historic crime that Mexico's government is committing by allowing the planting of GM maize in its center of origin," says Veronica Villa from ETC Group in Mexico. "Maize is not only in the heart, economies, cultures and livelihoods of the Mexican people, it is also one of the main staple food crops in the world. Contaminating the center of origin of maize concerns the whole world and FAO is not behaving responsibly."

Many international organizations have reacted to the bias of this conference and have echoed the Mexican organizations' concerns. While the FAO Conference is taking place the peasant and indigenous Network in Defense of Maize, Via Campesina and the National Assembly of Environmentally Affected People will be convening a popular public hearing to prepare a case for international tribunals regarding transgenic contamination of native maize in Mexico.² This FAO Conference and its faulty process will be discussed in the tribunal.

² Coverage of the hearing and other activities under the umbrella called "GMO steal our future" can be found at <http://www.radiomundoreal.fm/Los-transgenicos-nos-roban-el?lang=es> and <http://www.biodiversidadla.org>

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