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| <i>African Centre for Biosafety</i> | <i>ETC group</i> | <i>GRAIN</i> | <i>Red por una América Latina Libre de Transgénicos</i> |

News Release / June 27th 2006

Groups in Latin America and Africa call for rejection of World Bank-GEF biosafety projects

Two World Bank projects, with funding from the GEF (Global Environmental Facility), propose to introduce genetically modified crops such as maize, potatoes, cassava, rice and cotton into five Latin American and four African countries that are centers of origin or diversity for these and other major food crops. Civil society organizations warn that DNA contamination from genetically modified crops poses an unacceptable risk to stable crops that are the basis of peasant economies in these regions. The multi-million dollar projects are being promoted under the guise of scientific biosafety research, but civil society organizations on both continents are calling for their immediate rejection because they threaten food sovereignty and farmer-controlled seed systems.

The African Center for Biosafety, the Network for Latin America Free of Transgenics and the international organizations Grain and ETC Group have released an in-depth analysis of two World Bank projects: *West Africa Regional Biosafety Project* affecting Mali, Burkina Faso, Senegal and Togo; and *Latin American Multi-Country Capacity Building in Biosafety*, to be implemented in Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico and Peru.

“Although they are presented as ‘biosafety’ projects, these proposals pave the way for the introduction of GM varieties of staple crops that are of fundamental importance to peasant communities” said Elizabeth Bravo from the Network for Latin America Free of Transgenics.

The project participants include research institutions within the different countries, the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT, based in Colombia, a member of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research, CGIAR) and the World Bank. Project advisors include AfricaBio and PRRI (*Public Research and Regulation Initiative*), industry-affiliated organizations that are well-known promoters of GM crops. Civil society organizations point out that, by opening new markets to GM crops, it is the biotech industry that is the true beneficiary of the project.

According to Grain, “The projects are clearly driven by an outside agenda. At their core is a long-standing strategy pursued by the World Bank and the US government to harmonise GM crops regulations 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 key countries and then use these regulations as a model that can be imposed on neighbouring countries by regional bodies. In this way, they side-step any possible democratic debate and provide corporations with a large, one-stop shop for their GM crops.”

Recalling the DNA contamination of native maize grown by peasant farmers in Mexico, Silvia Ribeiro of ETC Group points out, “The Mexican government has done nothing to hinder the illegal GM contamination of peasant maize in Mexico. On the contrary, they have exempted the companies from responsibility by passing a national biosafety law that is popularly known as the ‘Monsanto Law’ because it only protects the interests of transnational biotech companies,” adds Ribeiro. The World Bank projects, explains Ribeiro, talk about capacity building based on “science-based mechanisms” to manage contamination, but, she says, “This doesn’t exist; it is written to mollify critics and give

the false impression that it's possible to introduce transgenic maize in Mexico in a 'safe' way, and to demonstrate that GM can be introduced in other centers of origin and diversity in the South. Contamination can only be 'managed' by farmers and indigenous people who have been forced to develop strategies to confront it."

In the case of Africa, the project proposes to conduct experimental field trials of GM crops, while in Latin America, "capacity building" is proposed as the approach to managing crop contamination. In both cases, the underlying assumption is that transgenic crops are already being grown, or will be introduced in the near future, and thus, that contamination is unavoidable. Therefore, the projects aim to develop methods to manage it, along with "cost-benefit" analyses and ways to manage public opinion as well.

"The projects ignore the possibility that GM crops are not allowed, which is precisely what the majority of small farmers and peasant communities in the targeted countries have demanded. If this reality were respected, there would be no need to 'manage' contamination or develop costly biosafety mechanisms because the crops wouldn't be exposed to the risk of contamination," declares Mariam Mayet from the non-governmental African Center for Biosafety.

Genuine public debate and the opinions of the affected communities are widely disregarded in the project proposals. Both project proposals have been circulated in English only, while the official languages of the targeted countries is French in Africa, and Spanish or Portuguese in Latin America.

"It's scandalous that they are trying to legitimize the introduction of GM crops in centers of origin and diversity, as is the case with maize in Mexico, potatoes and cotton in Peru and cassava in Brazil. Even rice, which doesn't originate in our region has been largely adapted by peasants on our continent, becoming an important component of local food," said German Velez, from the Colombian civil society organization Semillas. "Under the guise of 'scientific research' the goal is to legitimate the contamination of seeds that are the basis of peasant economies – and ultimately create dependence on corporate seeds. Clearly, this only benefits the biotech industry," continues Velez.

The project also proposes to educate authorities and the public in order to link the idea of biosafety to biotechnology, and to achieve a "less alarmist public discourse."

"The GEF's so-called biosafety 'capacity building' has been denounced all over the world as a public participation farce – its primary aim is to win biosafety laws that are favorable to the biotech industry," agrees Eva Carazo, from the Biodiversity Coordination Network in Costa Rica. "In Costa Rica, the Biodiversity Coordination Network demanded that GEF stop giving funds for this purpose. But this time GEF is coming back with even more dangerous projects, because this time it's about introducing GM crops in the centers of origin and diversity for those crops," says Carazo.

The groups are demanding the cancellation of the projects, which have not yet received final approval by the GEF.

The full analysis of the World Bank biosafety projects can be downloaded here:

www.grain.org

<http://www.etcgroup.org/article.asp?newsid=568>

Groups in Africa, Latin America condemn World Bank biosafety projects

Released by:

African Centre for Biosafety - <http://www.biosafetyafrica.net>

ETC Group - <http://www.etcgroup.org>

GRAIN – <http://www.grain.org>

Red por una América Latina Libre de Transgénicos - <http://www.rallt.org>

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