

Trouble in Paradise

Civil Society Denounces CGIAR for Denial, Diversion and Delay on GM Contamination in Mexican Centre of Genetic Diversity

For the first time in its more than 30-year history, the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) – a network of public and private donors that supports sixteen agricultural research centres around the world – held its annual meeting outside the confines of the World Bank in Washington, DC. The CGIAR is the largest public sector agricultural research effort and is mandated to serve the developing world's poor. The chosen site for this week's annual meeting was the Shangri-La Hotel in The Philippines, home to the nearby International Rice Research Institute (IRRI), one of the research centres in the CG system. Also for the first time in its history, the CGIAR's annual meeting took place within earshot of farmers' protests and street demonstrations critical of the CG's governance structure, research orientation and lack of accountability to Third World farmers. The CGIAR learned that even Shangri-La can be tainted by protests, police barricades and water cannons!

The weeklong meeting was a time of strenuous soul-searching for members of the CGIAR's Committee of Non-governmental Organizations (the NGO-C). The CG System established the NGO-C in order to get input from civil society. Over the past year, half of the NGO-C's members have resigned. The NGO-C was evaluating its relationship to the CGIAR in the midst of farmer protests at IRRI on Tuesday, and further protests on Wednesday by several hundred people attending the Peoples' Street Conference in front of the Shangri-La Hotel. The protests were organized by a coalition of Southeast Asian civil society and farmers' organizations, especially MASIPAG and KMP (a peasant farmers' movement that is a member of Via Campesina) and SEARICE.

On Thursday, October 31, during an official session devoted to discussions of civil society's relationship to the CG, the NGO Committee's interim co-chair, Patrick Mulvany of the Intermediate Technology Development Group announced that the NGO Committee would freeze its participation from CGIAR in the coming year. The primary reason cited for the freeze, among others, was the CGIAR's failure to act since the discovery – more than 13 months ago – that GM maize had contaminated the crop's centre of diversity in Mexico. The Mexican-headquartered International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (CIMMYT) is one of the centres in the CG system and is mandated to help eradicate poverty and conserve maize diversity. CIMMYT has failed to respond to civil society's repeated requests that it weigh in on the reality of GM contamination. Instead, the Institute has limited itself to pious pronouncements about the need for scientific clarity and promises to help in any way short of

action. In spite of the Mexican government's official recognition of GM contamination, the new Director General of CIMMYT, Masa Iwanaga, refused yesterday to acknowledge GM contamination in the maize centre of genetic diversity during a discussion of major challenges confronting the research centres.

The NGO Committee's freeze means that the NGO-C will not replace vacant seats on the Committee. In addition, the Committee will not accept money from the CGIAR and will not agree to sit on the Executive Council or any other committees, or participate in CG programs.

For an institution whose mandate is to increase food security, alleviate poverty and protect the environment, the abdication of the NGO-Committee is a resounding vote of no confidence from civil society. Equally disturbing, at the very time that the CGIAR is embroiled in controversy over GM contamination, the CG system is gaining increasing influence and membership from the Gene Giants. For example, the Syngenta Foundation for Sustainable Agriculture (wholly owned by Syngenta – the world's largest agrochemical corporation) became a new member of CGIAR this year. The Novartis Foundation's Executive Director is a member of CIMMYT's Board of Directors. (Novartis is one of the world's largest pharmaceutical corporations.)

Maybe industry's influence and the CGIAR's failure to act on GM contamination is the reason many people had trouble deciphering the welcome sign in front of CGIAR's Annual General Meeting (AGM) at the Shangri-La Hotel.

The sign read: CGIAR's AGM '02

Many thought it read: CGIAR's a GMO 2! (GMO = genetically modified organism)

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For background information about GM contamination in Mexico, please visit the ETC Group web site: <http://www.etcgroup.org>

The Action Group on Erosion, Technology and Concentration, formerly RAFI, is an international civil society organization headquartered in Canada. The ETC group is dedicated to the advancement of cultural and ecological diversity and human rights. www.etcgroup.org. The ETC group is also a member of the Community Biodiversity Development and Conservation Programme (CBDC). The CBDC is a collaborative experimental initiative involving civil society organizations and public research institutions in 14 countries. The CBDC is dedicated to the exploration of community-directed programmes to strengthen the conservation and enhancement of agricultural biodiversity. The CBDC website is www.cbdcprogram.org.

