

Seedling

Biodiversity, Rights and Livelihood

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GRAIN is an international non-profit organisation which promotes the sustainable management and use of agricultural biodiversity based on people's control over genetic resources and local knowledge. To find out more about GRAIN, visit www.grain.org.

Seedling

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Front cover: Chickens of the rare "heza" (porcupine) variety at the UBINIG centre in southern Bangladesh (see page 30)
(Photo: GRAIN)

Back cover: Peach orchard and food gardens in Roma, Eastern Cape, where villagers have stopped using chemical fertilisers. (see page 28)
(Photo: GRAIN)

In this issue...

The “global food crisis”, as a hot topic, has disappeared from the headlines of most of the world’s press. Now that speculators have made a killing, prices are falling from the heady heights they reached at the beginning of 2008. Back to business as usual, it might seem. But this is not the case. Because the crisis was erroneously defined in most of the world’s media as being a “crisis of production” (when it was in fact largely caused by speculation and the deregulation of world trade), the World Bank, the European Commission, the United Nations, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Red Cross and others are falling over themselves to fund programmes to “boost production”. And the way to do this, say these bodies, is to bring in from outside “modern” and “productive” hybrid seeds (and, further down the line almost certainly, genetically modified seeds). As we argue in our introductory article, this is not the way forward. Bringing in seeds from outside undermines local seed systems, erodes seed diversity and creates dependency. Moreover, big corporations use seed aid as a means to gain a foothold in a new market. Yet again a crisis is being used to further the interests of agribusiness.

What happens to small farmers when they have an alien system forced upon them is spelt out in detail in an important article on the former “homeland areas” of Transkei and Ciskei in South Africa’s Eastern Cape, where the Green Revolution, new-style, has been in operation for five years. The programme, drawn up without consultation with local communities, has been a resounding failure. Farmers have been compelled to implement foreign technologies and farming systems. They have been told that their seeds and their knowledge are worthless. They have exposed themselves, their livestock and their soil to damaging chemicals. They have been trapped in debt. Not surprisingly, many farmers believe that they have no option but sit it out until the government tires and they can go back to the way they farmed before. There are really important lessons to be learnt from this experience. But will the agencies and the authorities listen?

In this struggle to preserve local knowledge and local communities, all opportunities have to be grasped. One such chance has arisen with the collapse of the World Trade Organisation’s Doha round. With this, the negotiating mandate for the proposed amendment on the patenting of life under TRIPS

got “washed away” too. This amendment, proposed by several developing countries, didn’t challenge the concept of patenting life, but merely modified it, so that developing countries would gain some financial benefit. We have long argued that it is the principle itself that is wrong. As we say in the short article, social movements and activists now have another chance to put pressure on their governments to oppose the “privatisation of life”.

Over the centuries communities have developed a strong attachment to the ecosystems they inhabit. Their relationship with local biodiversity is saturated with magic-religious beliefs. In our interview in this edition, Ulrich Oslender, a political geographer from the University of Glasgow in Scotland, UK, talks of the culture of the Afro-Colombian communities that inhabit Colombia’s extraordinarily diverse Pacific coast. For them the forest is inhabited by mythical figures and spirits, including the *tunda* and the *riviél*. It is this rich culture, just as important in its way as the biodiversity, that gets destroyed when paramilitary gangs invade the region and clear the communities off the land to make way for large-scale mining and farming projects.

But agribusiness and mining corporations are not having it all their own way, as is clear from this interview and other articles in this edition. Peasant farmers in Benin are developing their own dignified and calm form of resistance by quietly carrying on with their traditional way of life, despite the sales onslaught from multinational corporations. And in Bangladesh farming families are developing new ways of protecting their local biodiversity, particularly chickens and goats, while increasing their incomes. Here, too, it is not just a question of defending their livelihoods but also of fostering *ananda* – the joy of living.

In the home page of this edition, we have a short article on *Biodiversidad*, our sister Spanish-language publication. As Carlos Vicente, in charge GRAIN’s information work in Latin America, explains, the magazine is expanding and evolving, in response to the demands of a highly politicised continent. It is a clear example of the way in which GRAIN, working in many different regions of the world, is changing and adapting, just like the ecosystems and communities with which it works.

The editor



The world food crisis, rapidly defined by those in power as a problem of insufficient production, has become a trojan horse to get corporate seeds, fertilisers and, surreptitiously, market systems into poor countries. As past experience shows, what looks like “seed aid” in the short term can mask what is actually “agribusiness aid” in the long term. We look at what is going on.

Seed aid, agribusiness and the food crisis

GRAIN



Earlier this year, political and economic leaders, abetted by the corporate mass media, were quick to explain the current global food crisis as a “perfect storm” of several factors: weather problems, the diversion of crops into biofuels, oil price hikes and poor people becoming less poor and eating more animal produce. In short, they wanted us to believe that the food crisis was a problem of production. Many have shredded that argument and – while agreeing that production should be improved – have shown instead how current economic policies focused on global trade and deregulation are the real culprits.¹ Yet the supply-siders moved fast to promote their solution to the wrong problem: to boost production, mainly by getting higher-yielding seeds to farmers.

What seeds? Where from? With what impact on vulnerable communities and local biodiversity? It is hard to find reliable data, but there is a serious risk that this simplistic production-focused response to the food crisis, which avoids asking the really

challenging policy questions, will result in a new wave of genetic erosion and livelihood insecurity by overriding communities’ local seed systems. The consequences for the survival of farming families around the world, and therefore for food production, could be extremely damaging.

The “perfect choir”

Large amounts of money have been pledged in the last few months to send seeds and fertilisers urgently to food-crisis-stricken countries in the South. In May, the World Bank launched a US\$1.2-billion emergency finance facility to provide funds for the “rapid provision of seeds and fertilisers to small farmers”. Addressing the Group of Eight (G8) summit of the world’s richest countries, held in Japan in early July, the president of the World Bank, Robert Zoellick, told these powerful people that one of the main priorities in fighting the global food crisis was “to give small farmers, especially in Africa, access to seeds, fertilisers and other basic inputs”. In the lead-up to that meeting,

¹ See GRAIN, “Making a killing from hunger”, *Against the grain*, May 2008. www.grain.org/articles/?id=39

the European Commission's President, José Manuel Barroso, proffered €1 billion to pay for "fertilisers and seeds to help poor farmers in developing countries". Not to be outdone, US President George Bush announced US\$1 billion in food crisis money and told the press that he would convince other world leaders that they should make moves to alleviate hunger by "increasing the shipments of food, fertilisers and seeds to countries in need". Two weeks later, the United Nations Secretary General, Ban Ki-Moon, took the message to the UN General Assembly in New York: "We must act immediately to boost agricultural production this year. We do this by providing urgently needed seeds and fertilisers for the upcoming planting cycles, especially for the world's 450 million small-scale farmers."² Imagine! Billions of dollars suddenly disbursed to distribute seeds to the poorest farmers on the planet – a group whose needs have never before ranked high in these leaders' concerns.

Earlier the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) had launched its own "Initiative on Soaring Food Prices", meant to "demonstrate that by increasing the supply of key agricultural inputs, such as seeds and fertilisers, small farmers will be able to rapidly increase their food production". The FAO Initiative already covers 35 countries, to the tune of US\$21 million, while another 54 countries are being similarly supported under its Technical Cooperation Programme at the cost of US\$24 million. Apart from ensuring immediate seed and fertiliser supplies, the Initiative also aims to "encourage donors, financial institutions and national governments to support the provision of inputs on a much larger scale".³ It seems to be working, as organisations ranging from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to the Red Cross are falling over each other to set up programmes to get seeds and fertilisers to farmers in response to today's food crisis (*see* table on pages 4–5).

Learning from seed aid experience

The impact of seed aid – which means, in essence, the delivery of seeds to areas in crisis – has been a topic of hot debate among aid agencies for a number of years now. Very often in the past, development programmes focused on replacing what they viewed as poor-yielding local varieties with just a handful of so-called high-yielding seeds from research laboratories. Relief agencies distributing seed aid in emergency situations often followed the same pattern. Hardly any effort was made to understand local varieties: why farmers had selected them and why they continued to use them. Today, however, the advantages of local varieties are more widely acknowledged. It has been recognised that they

tend, among other things, to fare better under low-input conditions, to resist local stresses, to provide other outputs (such as straw for animal fodder) as well as grain, to have stable yields at low risk over time and to taste or cook better. In other words, they are appropriate, both culturally and agronomically.

Consensus is also growing about the drawbacks of bringing in seeds from outside sources. A few months ago, at a workshop on seed aid that brought together the main players in the business, a report was presented that underlined what critics had been saying for years:⁴

- Bringing seeds from outside is often not needed, as seeds tend to be available in local seed systems, even in periods of crisis;
- Direct seed distribution is not very effective, as farmers tend to prefer their own seed sources;
- If practised repeatedly, seed aid can result in dependency, undermine local seed systems, and erode local seed diversity.

Somewhat earlier, this change in thinking led to a change of policy in Afghanistan where a code of conduct on seeds for relief operations was adopted by a number of the leading aid organisations. It lays down that seeds should be procured locally, that any emergency seed supply should not distort local seed systems, and that seeds should be adapted to the local environment.⁵ There's no reason to doubt that the small or independent NGOs currently involved in seed aid projects in response to the food crisis are adopting this approach. It may be a different story, however, with the larger relief agencies, especially those paid to take on the work for governments.

Officials from the FAO assured GRAIN that the seed aid projects that they have mounted in response to the current global food crisis aim to source local seeds from local markets and dealers, and that they avoid hybrids and GM varieties. But the FAO's own media releases send a different and more chilling message. They talk of "trucks loaded with more than 500 tonnes of seed" leaving the Mauritanian capital for the countryside⁶ and "600 tonnes of improved seed varieties being made available to poor farmers in Burkina".⁷ At the very least, there is a mismatch between the official rhetoric and what is happening on the ground in some areas. And in the longer term the situation is even more worrying. With billions of dollars being thrown at humanitarian agencies to urgently get seeds and fertilisers to farmers in the name of the

2 BBC News, "UN warns on biofuel crop reliance", 18 July 2008
<http://tinyurl.com/3qruij>

3 FAO newsroom, "Initiative on soaring food prices now covers 54 countries", 9 July 2008.
<http://tinyurl.com/3ohbxz>

4 Louise Sperling, David Cooper and Tom Remington, "Moving towards more effective seed aid", *Journal of Development Studies*, Vol. 44, 2008.
<http://tinyurl.com/4gj5rx>
See also Louise Sperling, "When disaster strikes: A guide to assessing seed system security", Centro Internacional de Agricultura Tropical, Catholic Relief Services and US Agency for International Development, August 2008, 64 pp.
<http://tinyurl.com/45qoht>

5 FAO newsroom, "Code of conduct on seeds for Afghanistan reached", 30 May 2002.
<http://tinyurl.com/3sphbl>

6 FAO newsroom, "FAO starts seed distribution in Mauritania", 13 June 2008.
<http://tinyurl.com/3l3yb2>

7 FAO newsroom, "Planting under way in Burkina Faso", 11 July 2008
<http://tinyurl.com/4c8t2z>



Table: Seed aid to fight the

Country/agency	Comment
EU	At the G8 meeting in July, the EU offered €1.6bn taken from “unused agricultural subsidies”. Most of it is for buying fertilisers and seeds, or other measures to increase production, on credit. The money is to be administered by international and regional development agencies.
USA	In the lead-up to the G8 meeting, Bush announced US\$1 billion to fight the global food crisis. Bush is quoted as saying “I’ll also ask leaders of the G8 to make other important strategic moves to alleviate hunger, such as increasing the shipments of food, fertilisers and seeds to countries in need.” ¹
World Bank	In May, the World Bank launched a \$1.2-billion “fast-track facility” to meet immediate needs including the “rapid provision of seeds to small farmers”. ² The first grants went to Haiti (US\$10m), Djibouti (US\$5m) and Liberia (US\$10m). In June, the Bank started processing grants for Tajikistan, Togo, and Yemen. In Burkina Faso, “the emergency programme helped distribute 3,500 tonnes of improved millet, sorghum, maize, beans, and rice seeds to 140,000 households in 302 rural communities in the country.” ³
International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)	In April IFAD launched a US\$200-million initiative, and gives the following examples ⁴ (among others) of how it is being used: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In the Côte d’Ivoire US\$3 million is going to provide seeds and fertilisers to 10,000 small farmers as part of the government’s National Rice Programme; • In Mauritania US\$315,000 has been allocated for the purchase and distribution of seeds and the establishment of grain banks in poor rural areas; • In Haiti US\$10–15 million is being used to distribute seeds and to strengthen seed multiplication programmes, mainly for hillside small-scale producers; • In Syria funds are to be reallocated from an earlier loan to provide improved seeds, fertilisers and animal feed.
FAO	The FAO announced in July that it was already working in 54 countries “providing seeds, fertilisers and other supplies to small farmers as part of an initiative to help vulnerable households cope with the impact of soaring food prices”. ⁵ Examples include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Intensive distribution of millet, sorghum, maize, cowpea and peanut seeds to 33,000 farmers in Burkina Faso. (...) [F]or the current planting season, about 600 tonnes of improved seed varieties and 432 tonnes of fertilisers have been made available to impoverished farmers in Burkina.”⁶ • In Haiti, “seeds are being provided for maize, peas, native black beans, as well as cuttings to grow sweet potatoes and fertilisers.”⁷ By August FAO was distributing 600 tonnes of sorghum, maize and bean seeds to 70,000 target families. • In Mauritania, more than 500 tonnes of sorghum, millet, maize and cowpea seeds have been distributed.⁸



food crisis, with FAO calling for the “provision of inputs on a much larger scale”, and with messages coming from world leaders and finance institutions that the time is ripe to get new technologies to small farmers to boost their production, it seems that farmers’ local seed systems may well be threatened in many parts of the world.

Giving out to the private sector

The background to all of this is the recent radical transformation in the way agriculture is organised and supported. Twenty years ago, seed aid would

have been largely reliant on the public sector: seeds would have come from public plant breeding, production, and distribution systems, usually supplied for free, and recipient farmers would have been able to save seeds from the crops and share them with their neighbours. But since then the public sector has been divided, enclosed and privatised. Today, a handful of multinational companies from the pesticide industry control more than half of the global seed market, and their control extends through a growing network of private dealers and smaller national seed companies with political connections. Seeds are now big business.

food crisis – a few examples

Gates Foundation	The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is giving a US\$17.5m package of grants to respond to the world food crisis. Of this, US\$10m is going to the World Food Programme and the other US\$7.5m has been allotted to Mercy Corps, Oxfam America and Catholic Relief Services. Part of this US\$7.5m grant will be used for seed distribution in Haiti, Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia and Sri Lanka. ⁹
Red Cross	The Red Cross is involved in seed distribution programmes in a number of countries: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In Côte d'Ivoire, it has distributed seeds and fertilisers to some 21,000 farmers in the northern and central parts of the country;¹⁰ • In Guinea-Bissau, food supplies and rice and groundnut seed have been distributed to over 20,000 people;¹¹ • In Sudan, seeds have been distributed to over 36,000 traditional farming households.¹²
Catholic Relief Services (CRS)	CRS, an arm of the US Catholic Church, received US\$10m from USAID and committed US\$1m in private funds to deal with the world food crisis. Among other actions, they are providing rice farmers in Burkina Faso with "more productive seed varieties". CRS say that they support seed vouchers and fairs as appropriate distribution mechanisms.
Concern	Under its "Seeds for the Starving" programme, the Irish aid group Concern has purchased more than 70 tonnes of seeds, including haricot beans and sweet potato cuttings, for distribution to Ethiopian farmers.
Tearfund	With an initial provision of £200,000, the UK relief agency is supplying seeds to farmers in Ethiopia, where not only have basic food prices shot up three- to fourfold since the beginning of the year but also drought is pushing people to the edge. The seeds are distributed through a "seed-distribution loan scheme", with farmers paying back the loans. ¹³

- 1 Anne Davies, "Bush offers \$1bn to fight global food crisis", *The Age*, 4 July 2008. <http://tinyurl.com/3te4f8>
- 2 World Bank press release, "World Bank launches \$1.2bn fast-track facility for food crisis", 29 May 2008. <http://tinyurl.com/4wcqrv>
- 3 World Bank, "Seeds to fight food crisis in Burkina Faso", 2 July 2008. <http://tinyurl.com/4z22uh>
- 4 IFAD press release, "Developing countries make use of \$US200 million initiative to increase food production quickly", 3 July 2008 <http://www.ifad.org/media/press/advisory/2008/07.htm>
- 5 UN news centre, "Poor farmers in 48 countries receive UN aid to cope with high food prices", <http://tinyurl.com/3ufark>
- 6 FAO newsroom, "Planting under way in Burkina Faso", 11 July 2008. <http://tinyurl.com/4c8t2z>
- 7 FAO Initiative on Soaring Food Prices, country information on Haiti, July 2008.
- 8 FAO newsroom, "FAO starts seed distribution in Mauritania", 13 June 2008. <http://tinyurl.com/3l3yb2>
- 9 Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, "Emergency grants to help people most affected by global food crisis", 14 August 2008. <http://www.gatesfoundation.org/GlobalDevelopment/SpecialInitiatives/Announcements/Announce-080814.htm>
- 10 ICRC news release no. 08/106, "Côte d'Ivoire: Seed and fertilizer for 21,000 farmers", 20 June 2008. <http://tinyurl.com/4rx9zf>
- 11 ICRC news release no. 08/95, "Guinea-Bissau: Food and seed distributed to farmers in north-west", 5 June 2008. <http://tinyurl.com/3t6k78>
- 12 ICRC operational update, "Sudan: Responding to humanitarian needs in Darfur and Abyei", 8 April 2008. <http://tinyurl.com/3gqy5m>
- 13 Ed Beavan, "African food crisis is part of a 'silent tsunami'", *Church Times*, 22 August 2008. <http://tinyurl.com/4p4kn>
Tear Fund, "East Africa food crisis". <http://tinyurl.com/4jwzvy>



Those international agencies that still claim a "public" mandate, such as the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) and the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), are increasingly public-private coalitions with direct ties to the multinationals. Their research programmes feed into the corporations' growth strategies and they increasingly adopt elements of the same companies' business models. So any talk of seeds today, if it is not specifically about local or farmer's seeds, implies private seeds – seeds that farmers have to buy and that come with tight restrictions on their use.

At the national level, where the seed aid momentum is being translated into new government programmes, the link between the official responses to the food crisis and the agribusiness agenda is evident. For instance, the initiatives to boost food production in Benin and the Philippines as a response to the global food crisis are little more than subsidy schemes for seed and fertiliser companies (*see* Boxes). Indonesia, too, is gambling that the private sector's hybrid seeds will resolve its long-term rice needs. Despite years of failure with hybrid rice in the country and no credible studies to back up claims of higher yields, the government

Box 1 Worries for seed sovereignty in Benin

Benin is spending US\$7 million in subsidies to supply improved seeds urgently to farmers, according to Jinukun, a civil society network composed of peasant organisations, independent scientists, NGOs and activists. The programme deployed by the government is called PUASA (Emergency Food Security Support Programme). It aims to assist 1,850 farmers to produce 48,000 tonnes of grain (21,750 tonnes of rice and 26,250 tonnes of maize) on 15,000 hectares from the north to the south of the country. The maize seeds being distributed to farmers are of hybrid varieties such as DMR, Congo S, QPM Faaba, TZPB-SR while the rice seeds are those of NERICA 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6, IITA 128, WARB 32 and similar types. There is no support for the multiplication and distribution of local or traditional varieties, or farmers' materials, only so-called "improved" seeds coming out of a few research laboratories.

Local groups like Jinukun have so far found no evidence of GM seeds being distributed under the cover of the current food crisis, though they continue to monitor this closely. Meanwhile, there are concerns about rice shipments coming in from the US and Japan as food aid, which could possibly contain GM material. Additionally, people are alarmed about the decision announced on 18 July 2008 by the government of Burkina Faso, just north of Benin, officially to allow the production and marketing of two Bt cotton varieties owned and patented by Monsanto. The Burkinabe authorities have earmarked 15,000 ha of land to multiply Monsanto's Bt cotton seeds for the next growing season. These seeds could easily leak into Benin over the border, despite Benin's recently renewed – and regionally unique – five-year moratorium on GMOs.

While local groups understand the need to mount urgent programmes to deal with the current crisis in food markets, the real urgency, they say, is to regain Benin's food sovereignty – particularly in rice, for which Benin is 90 per cent dependent on imports. This requires putting into place new agricultural policies that support biodiverse farming, take account of the peoples' heritage, and guarantee adequate prices for Benin's millions of small scale producers.

Source: Drawn from a presentation by René Ségbenou to the Jinukun public conference: "Will the current food crisis open to the door to GMOs in Benin and in Africa?", held in Cotonou on 10 June 2008.

is subsidising the import and sale of hybrid rice seeds, and even using its farmer field school programmes to promote it. The few local tycoons and foreign companies that control the hybrid rice seed market in the country are the only ones whose profits are guaranteed.⁸

In Senegal, President Abdoulaye Wade launched his "Big Agricultural Offensive for Food and Abundance", or GOANA, as a response to the current food crisis. It aims to make the country self-sufficient in food by 2015, mainly by boosting the production of basic food and feed crops. Of the US\$792 million that the government says will be put into the project, US\$443 million will go to subsidise the purchase of fertilisers, US\$120 million to subsidise the purchase of seeds, and US\$30 million to subsidise the purchase of pesticides. Those companies involved in the production and distribution of these inputs, many of them foreign-owned, will be the first to profit from this scheme, particularly given the radical investment and fiscal deregulations that accompany GOANA.⁹ Senegal's main farmers' organisation, the National Rural Exchange and Cooperation Council (CNCR), which was not consulted about the Offensive, says that farmers will be at risk of not being able to pay back the credit for the purchase of inputs, even with the subsidies, because the project has done nothing to address the long-standing structural

problems that prevent farmers from getting a fair price in the market for their crops.¹⁰

In Mali, the National Coordination of Peasant Organisations (CNOP) says that it had also been excluded from the development of the government's response to the world food crisis — the Rice Initiative (originally dubbed Operation Rice Commando), which aims to double domestic rice production in a few years. As in neighbouring Senegal, Mali's Rice Initiative focuses on subsidising so-called high-yielding seeds and fertilisers, with CNOP protesting that this will channel all the benefits into the pockets of the input dealers.¹¹ In many West African countries, the emphasis is put on the rapid production and distribution of Nerica™ rice seeds, developed by the CGIAR, and not on farmers' varieties.

The national food crisis programmes in Africa, geared to the rapid deployment of new seeds and crop chemicals to farmers, mesh perfectly with the strategy of AGRA and the CGIAR for the continent. These groups have been moving centre stage and presenting themselves as saviours with the right solution to boost food production. On the sidelines of FAO's food crisis summit, a deal was signed between AGRA and all the Rome-based food agencies, in which AGRA will have a pivotal role in developing and promoting new seeds and

8 GRAIN, "The food crisis and the hybrid rice surge," 12 May 2008: grain.org/hybridrice/?lid=202 Biotani and GRAIN, "Indonesia: more hype than hope on hybrid rice", 26 October 2007. grain.org/hybridrice/?lid=196

9 Five guides for investors in GOANA were published by the Minister of Agriculture and APIX SA. All five guides are available in French (with a summary in Spanish by the Embassy of Spain): <http://tinyurl.com/3ttewu> To facilitate the entry of private investment, the Senegalese government has instituted special tax breaks, customs duties and VAT exemptions and the lifting of currency exchange controls.

10 CNCR, "Déclaration sur la GOANA et le Programme Agricole 2008/2009", Dakar, 30 May 2008. <http://tinyurl.com/3s7ojo>

11 CNOP, "Forum des rizeculteurs sur l'Initiative Riz", June 2008. <http://tinyurl.com/47mfma>



Box 2 FIELDS of gold – for the corporate sector

The Philippine government's main response to the food crisis is a rice self-sufficiency programme dubbed "FIELDS". (FIELDS stands for "Fertiliser, Irrigation, Education and training of farmers, Loans, Dryers and other post-harvest facilities and Seeds of high-yielding hybrid varieties".) It revolves around providing multiple loans and subsidies to farmers in order to increase total paddy production to 19.8 million tonnes by 2010. About PHP44 billion (US\$1 million) has been earmarked for the programme, a big chunk of which will be spent on the production and distribution of subsidised hybrid and certified rice seeds to farmers. The source of the funding is still being debated. The government wants to skim it off the value-added tax and royalties collected from energy use, while transporters and people's movements are clamouring for the government to scrap VAT altogether on fuel, which is already extremely expensive.

Under the programme, the seeds to be promoted are a combination of a few publicly developed hybrids and a number of private ones. Among the seed companies which will be supplying the seeds is SL Agritech, a Filipino firm that has already cornered much of the hybrid rice seed market through the government's previous hybrid rice programmes. Germany's Bayer is another major player. Several groups in the Philippines are very angry about the whole programme.

According to the Farmers' Council, a national network of farmers' groups, the proposed provision of a seed subsidy "will simply amount to subsidising big seed companies like SL-Agritech, Bayer and Monsanto". Early last year, the Farmers' Council estimated that SL-Agritech may have already pocketed some PHP208 million (US\$ 4.3 million) from the government's promotion of subsidised hybrid rice seeds. "The design of the FIELDS interventions will actually make the rice programme dependent on private companies with no accountability to the public," said the Farmers' Council leader and well-know peasant activist Jaime Tadeo.

"We are alarmed over this development" concurs Wilhelmina Pelegrina of SEARICE, an NGO working on the conservation and development of local seeds with farming communities in the Philippines. "Providing input subsidies for hybrid rice is not a sustainable way of achieving rice self-sufficiency and address the rice crisis", she said.

Centro Saka, a farmer-based policy research group, fumes that the FIELDS programme will "merely perpetuate the misguided strategies that have turned the Philippines into the world's biggest rice importer", citing the poor performance of the government's current hybrid rice programme and the corruption issues that haunt it.

The government, however, is bent on putting seed companies more firmly in control. At a national workshop on hybrid rice not long ago, the Arroyo administration made it very clear that its goal was to have the private sector in charge of hybrid rice commercialisation by 2010. The same thinking is shared by the brand new Hybrid Rice Research and Development Consortium that the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI), a CGIAR institute based in the Philippines, is coordinating. The consortium gives private companies not only privileged access to publicly held germplasm but also exclusive rights to commercialise hybrid rice lines developed through public research programmes. As soon as the food crisis erupted in the Philippines, with rice prices flying through the roof, the Department of Agriculture signed a cooperation agreement with IRRI to beef up research, production and deployment of new high-yielding varieties of rice for the FIELDS programme. This could have a devastating impact on local food sovereignty.



establishing a commercial seed sector in Africa.¹² A week later, AGRA signed yet another agreement, this time with the US government's Millennium Challenge Corporation, to "provide Africa's farmers with technologies, infrastructure and financing".¹³ In the same vein, FARM, a multi-million-euro initiative of the French Presidency and some of France's corporations, including the seed giant Vilmorin and global supermarket powerhouse Casino, has launched projects in Burkina Faso and Mali that aim to counter the effects of the food crisis by helping farmers' organisations to finance the purchase of fertilisers and seeds.¹⁴ FARM is specifically mandated to help poor countries to gain access to the "benefits" of European agricultural technology, such as seeds.¹⁵

When agricultural development becomes agribusiness development

To understand fully how today's top-down mobilisation to get seeds to farmers lays down a red carpet for agribusiness to walk into developing countries and hit the jackpot, one has to look at the changing landscape of corporate activity in the food system. The surge in agricultural commodity prices has triggered a corresponding rush by big business to take greater control over the entire food chain. Multinational food companies and retailers are moving deeper into food production, particularly through contract farming, in order to reduce procurement costs and guarantee supplies. Concerned about the long-term impact of high

12 FAO newsroom, "Boosting food production in Africa's 'breadbasket areas'". <http://tinyurl.com/3zngz>

13 AGRA, "AGRA and the Millennium Challenge Corporation launch a historic collaboration to provide Africa's farmers with technologies, infrastructure and financing". <http://tinyurl.com/3zh46p>

14 La Fondation pour l'agriculture et la ruralité dans le monde. www.fondation-farm.org/

15 La Fondation pour l'agriculture et la ruralité dans le monde. See <http://tinyurl.com/4rzu5l>

Box 3 All eyes on Africa

With the recent surge in agricultural commodity prices and the credit crunch, African agriculture has suddenly become a major target for investment funds seeking fast returns. Some private deals are being brokered through governments. The Chinese government and those of various petrodollar-rich Gulf states are actively facilitating the deployment of not just public sector loans but also important new private capital inflows into African agriculture. Chinese entrepreneurs are setting up various deals, from rice farming in Mozambique to sesame production in Senegal, often with state support for the introductory phase. Similarly, Gulf states are seeking to diversify and invest their oil revenue in agricultural production in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

But also, in perfect synch with the world food crisis, a new army of private equity funds and asset management groups are lining up to make big money in Africa. This is precisely because the vast majority of the farmers in the continent are peasant farmers without the infrastructure that industrial agribusiness needs. Specialised funds, such as the Agri-Vie Fund¹ (which is a new US\$90m private equity fund), Africa Invest² (that promises returns to investors of 40 per cent), and Emergent³ (a hedge fund targeting returns of 400 per cent on no-till farming), were created this year to cash in on Africa's agribusiness development. A trio of prominent Gulf investment houses has just created AgriCapital, a Sharia-compliant fund that will invest at least US\$1 billion of the region's brimming financial liquidity into biotechnology and food production overseas, including north and southern Africa.⁴ The Dutch Rabobank has also opened a new US\$75m fund for investment, mostly in African agriculture, while the French banks BNP Paribas and Crédit Agricole are doing the same. While half of Africa's private equity comes from a mix of sources in the US, the governments of Germany, UK, Belgium and the Netherlands are pitching in with tens or even hundreds of millions of dollars each.⁵

In various ways, these funds will work with governments to consolidate farms, to build roads and other infrastructure, to bring in technology (including biotechnology), to link to global markets and to set up truly functional supermarket supply chains – at lower cost than elsewhere, hence the potential payoff. As the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) puts it, none too subtly, “The curse of higher food prices can be turned into a blessing if African agriculture finally becomes a business.”⁶

- 1 Julie Bekker, “New private equity fund launched to invest in agribusiness in sub-Saharan Africa”, ITI News, South Africa, 13 August 2008. <http://tinyurl.com/4nwo3j>
- 2 See their website at <http://www.cruim.com/africa/africa-invest-home2>
- 3 David Stevenson, “Buy into Africa”, *Investors Chronicle*, UK, 15 August 2008. <http://tinyurl.com/47qdc>
- 4 Pratap John, “Gulf banks launch 3 major Islamic investment projects”, *Gulf Times*, 28 August 2008, <http://tinyurl.com/5ywkuh>
- 5 “Escalating food prices lure investors to Africa's agriculture sector”, Press Trust of India, 3 July 2008, <http://tinyurl.com/4s84vu>
- 6 Denise Wolter, *Higher food prices – a blessing in disguise for Africa?*, Policy Insights No. 66, OECD Development Centre, Paris, May 2008. <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/43/47/40986119.pdf>



food prices on national food security, the cash-rich governments of countries such as China and Saudi Arabia are working hand-in-hand with their domestic business sectors and newly created investment vehicles to outsource food production. And the hot money concentrated in the world's financial centres, reeling from the impact of the credit crunch, is looking to agricultural commodities and farmlands as a place for fast returns. All of this means that control over farming is increasingly moving out of the hands of farmers and into boardrooms. And board members on agribusiness corporations have very different priorities from farmers: they want control over a uniform supply of seeds to produce crops that feed into global agriculture commodity markets; they are not interested in local seeds or the preservation of biodiverse food systems.

Two of Asia's biggest food corporations – Sime Darby of Malaysia and Charoen Pokphand of Thailand – are now moving into rice production as

part of their home country's responses to the global food crisis. They are starting their programmes with the production and commercialisation of their own hybrid rice seeds – developed with the support of the public sector.¹⁶ Similarly, Chinese foreign investment in rice production, whether in Laos or in Cameroon, is invariably based on Chinese hybrid rice varieties, often initially tested and introduced through bilateral aid arrangements.¹⁷

Sub-Saharan Africa has suddenly become a magnet for this agribusiness invasion (see Box 3). But around 90 per cent of the seeds used in Africa are local varieties supplied by farmers, not suitable for big agribusiness. Corporate investment thus hinges on the introduction and spread of varieties suited to corporate needs – the equivalent of the Roundup Ready soya bean that paved the way for agribusiness to colonise rapidly the southern cone of Latin America. Local food systems depend on the opposite: diversity. And so the seeds and the seed aid programmes emerging from today's food

16 GRAIN, “Malaysia: Nestlé, Sime Darby lead corporate push into padi”, 1 February 2008. grain.org/hybridrice/?lid=198
Kamol Sukin, “Farmers add hybrid grains to their list of fears,” *The Nation*, 20 June 2008. <http://tinyurl.com/538mfk>

17 GRAIN, “The food crisis and the hybrid rice surge,” 12 May 2008. grain.org/hybridrice/?lid=202

crisis are situated at the heart of a fundamental struggle between competing models of food production: a corporate-controlled and globalised industrial food system versus a diversity of efforts to maintain, develop and expand food sovereignty. Looking at the available evidence, especially at the national level, it seems that most of the seed aid is landing on the agribusiness side of the fence.

Polarising possibilities

Across the board, from ministries of agriculture to the World Bank, this fundamental struggle over who controls food is camouflaged by an ignorant discourse that says: (a) that farmers don't have seeds – or they don't have “good” seeds; (b) that to provide farmers with “good” seeds, governments need to adopt the right market structures, including seed certification systems, lax biosafety rules and intellectual property regimes. The emphasis that is ceaselessly placed on the superiority of “good” seeds has an almost eugenicist feel to it: “good” seeds are hybrids, GMOs, certified or improved varieties, all of which are the “only” ones sure to give high

yields and therefore are the “only” way out of the current food crisis; “bad” seeds – or “flawed” seeds, as aspiring industry leaders in Ghana call them¹⁸ – are farmers' seeds, uncertified seeds, peasant varieties, anything that has not gone through a research laboratory and gained a government stamp of approval.

At the end of the day, the response to the world food crisis that says “we need to boost production!” steers the world away from the profound political discussion that is urgently needed about the mess we are in and how we got here. It leads to knee-jerk responses, such as the world's biggest powers pouring billions of dollars into the distribution of new, “improved” seeds to hundreds of millions of small farmers. These responses permit private capital, including purely speculative investment, to take over what used to be called agricultural development and to transform it into straightforward agribusiness development. It is already abundantly clear that, unless this invasion is stopped, the supposed beneficiaries – the small farmers – will be the victims.

18 Ghana News Agency, “Seed producers worry about poor use of improved seeds”, 21 August 2008. <http://tinyurl.com/4ubz73>



The food crisis, by numbers

On 18 September 2008, the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) announced that this year soaring global food prices have increased the number of people in the world suffering from acute hunger to more than 1 billion. Here are a few statistics that put today's global food crisis into perspective. Bear in mind that these numbers are from 2007, when global food prices rose 24 per cent. Things are much starker in 2008, with the FAO saying that global food prices have shot up 52 per cent since the beginning of the year, while agribusiness corporations progressively report new rounds of profit increases over last year's record numbers. In the year 2000, world leaders pledged to cut the number of hungry people in the world by half, to around 400 million. This was one of the central Millennium Development Goals. Today that pledge is becoming a huge embarrassment.

Increase in profits for the top three global fertiliser companies (Potash Corp, Mosaic, Yara) in 2007:

+139% (their total profits for 2007 = **US\$2.9 billion**)

Increase in profits for the top three global grain trade companies (Cargill, ADM, Bunge) in 2007:

+103% (their total profits for 2007 = **US\$5.3 billion**)

Increase in profits for the top three global seed/pesticide companies (Monsanto, Syngenta, DuPont) in 2007:

+91% (their total profits for 2007 = **US\$ 3.0 billion**)

Increase in number of people below the hunger threshold in 2007:

+10% (up by **75 million** to **923 million**)

Amount of funds for agriculture that the FAO says is required on an annual basis to resolve the current food crisis:

US\$30 billion

Amount of funds allocated by the US government – through taxpayers – to bail out the US banking system in 2008:

US\$1.015 trillion (as at 22 September 2008)



The collapse of the WTO talks has somewhat unexpectedly created a further opportunity to fight a last ditch battle against the proposed patenting of life in the TRIPS Agreement. The patenting of life is a fundamental negation of the way in which countless generations of rural communities around the world have protected their biodiversity and handed down knowledge about it. Under their stewardship biodiversity and knowledge have evolved and adapted. Privatising these precious resources would threaten the very basis on which society has sustained itself for millennia.

TRIPS

Close call in Geneva

GRAIN

One of the largely unnoticed consequences of the collapse of the World Trade Organisation's Doha Round of talks in Geneva in late July was that the proposed negotiating mandate for an amendment to the TRIPS Agreement regarding patents on life was "washed away".¹ This is good news. The proposal to amend TRIPS, first tabled in 2006 and now supported by over 100 governments, has no real social backing, as far as we know, and goes in completely the wrong direction.

Back in 1997, when the mandated review of the TRIPS Agreement's rules on the patenting of plants and animals began, governments from the South made a range of proposals on this highly contentious issue. Quite a lot of them – including India, the Africa Group and the so-called Least Developed Countries – called for TRIPS to be amended to ban patents on life. Governments of the North rejected this idea and the talks dragged on, fruitlessly. After the Doha Round was launched in 2001, Southern countries took a much softer tack and started emphasising the inconsistencies between TRIPS and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), particularly on the matter of benefit sharing (which CBD provides for and TRIPS, it was argued, prevents). Later on, the

TRIPS–CBD conundrum was designated an "outstanding implementation issue", and at the WTO's sixth Ministerial Conference in Hong Kong, in December 2005, countries were given the deadline of 31 July 2006 to make suggestions for a way out.

As a result, Brazil, India, Pakistan, Peru, Thailand and Tanzania came together and, in May 2006, proposed a draft amendment to Article 29 of TRIPS.² Article 29 lays out the rules of "disclosure": what information applicants have to provide in patent applications. The group proposed to expand those rules so that they cover biodiversity – and fall into line with the CBD. Specifically, they suggested that when an invention involves biological resources or related knowledge, patent applicants should be obliged to reveal ("disclose") from which country they got the material or knowledge. Additionally, they should have to show proof that they complied with national laws on getting the prior informed consent of whomever they sourced the material or knowledge from, as well as proving that some benefit-sharing arrangements were made. Finally, the group stressed that countries should be able to revoke any relevant patent if these procedures are not followed. Since then, the proposal has been fine-tuned in various ways and a lot of countries have come on board. (Not only from the South:

1 See William New, "Collapse of WTO talks washes away hope for TRIPS changes", Intellectual Property Watch, Geneva, 29 July 2008: <http://tinyurl.com/46sv5v>

2 The text is available on GRAIN's website: <http://tinyurl.com/3f3yf4>



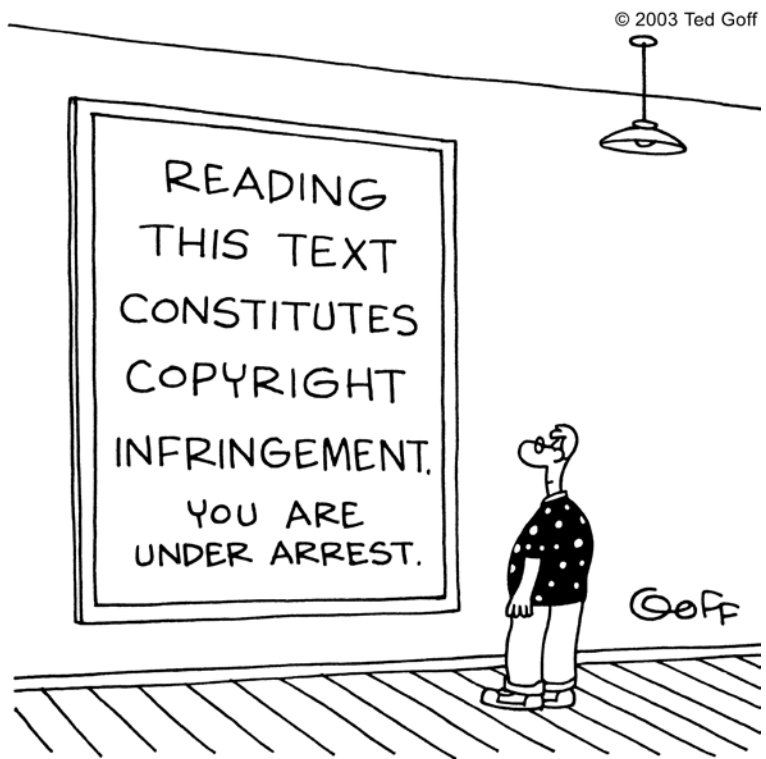


Norway, the EU and Switzerland are all amenable to some kind of disclosure deal for biodiversity, though they have their own separate proposals.)


The important thing in all this is that the proposed TRIPS amendment does not challenge patents on life at all. Rather than roll back the patent system from biodiversity altogether, the idea is to “improve” TRIPS by injecting some kind of “balance” into it. Put bluntly, through the proposed disclosure-of-origin deal the governments of the South are saying to the North, “OK, you can patent our biodiversity and traditional knowledge – as long as you pay for it!” If this amendment were approved at the WTO, it would amount to a clear and resounding “yes” to patents on life by nearly 160 governments. No more pretence of resistance from the South would be possible. Moreover, it would increase the power of the WTO by bringing traditional knowledge under its jurisdiction for the first time.

The political significance of this proposal is hard to overstate. For many peoples, the wealth of biodiversity that has been handed down through countless generations of farming families and other communities, as well as the local knowledge and cultures that it is inseparable from, is a collective heritage, not a piece of merchandise. The international peasant movement La Via Campesina puts it well when it describes biodiversity as “a heritage of communities at the service of humanity”. Think about it! They are not claiming property rights or monopolies, much less benefit sharing. Le’a Malia Kanehe of the Indigenous People’s Council on Biocolonialism is on similar ground when she says: “Many people interpret indigenous calls for participation as meaning they want a hand in the commercialisation of genes extracted from their native lands, but this is missing the point. What they want is the right not to own these things.” Rather than respect such deeply held views and honour the rights of peoples who brought us this diversity and knowledge in the first place, the governments at WTO want to turn their heritage into property and make money from it. Worse, they frame this as an answer to biopiracy.

Disclosure-of-origin rules are already weaving their way into a number of national laws. India, the Andean Community and Brazil have brought all manner of disclosure requirements into their own patent systems. Egypt has put them into its plant breeders’ rights Act. But no domestic regime in Cairo or Quito carries weight at the US Patent Office. They need to get it into international law and make it mandatory if it is to have any real effect in the North.



On the table in Geneva last July was a package deal on how to further open world markets that included a mandate to negotiate the TRIPS amendment. Once approved, this amendment would provide the backing in international law that is missing at the moment. In the event, the talks broke down over the demand from some developing countries, particularly China and India, to increase special safeguards for developing country farmers who can’t compete against food import surges.³ As a result of the breakdown in the talks, the mandate to negotiate the TRIPS amendment fell dead in the water, along with everything else.

As a result, there is an opportunity to increase awareness about the gravity of the situation. The whole idea that patents on life, or plant breeder’s rights for that matter, could be made “fair” by paying someone for the source material is completely misguided. By accepting the principle that life can be “privatised”, even if part of the financial benefit remains in the South, goes in precisely the wrong direction, especially when all of this revolves around governments, many of which don’t recognise farmers’ or indigenous peoples’ rights. If anything, TRIPS should be amended to make patents on life illegal. The choice is clear: it’s either “yes” or “no”. 

³ This is the conventional explanation for the breakdown of the talks. The explanation less talked about is that the US threw in the towel on special safeguard mechanisms because cotton subsidies were next on the negotiating list – and Washington has no proposal on how to reduce its support to a few thousand politically powerful US cotton producers, as demanded by African nations.

For several decades now, the multinationals have been trying, one way or another, to control the way Africa uses its genetic resources, especially its seeds. Among the strategies they have used has been: to introduce chemical inputs, with all the problems these create; to sponsor national and/or regional laws, mostly copied from European models; and to implement programmes such as the US-backed African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) and the Millennium Challenge Account. Local communities, however, are resisting in a calm and dignified manner by transmitting from generation to generation their own cultural practices. Some examples gathered during a trip to south-west Benin show how communities are still able to control their seed use and to manage their genetic resources.

Resisting transnationals

- the experience of farming families in south-west Benin

JINUKUN, Synergie Paysanne, GRAIN



We would like to thank Christophe Megbedji, Mayor of Klouékanmè, for talking to us and for his efforts to promote agriculture in his municipality. We also thank the fishing associations of Grand-Popo.

JINUKUN, the national network for the sustainable management of natural resources in Benin, is the country's focal point of COPAGEN, West Africa's coalition to protect African genetic resources.

Synergie Paysanne is a farmers' trade union in Benin.

Women take the lead

Béatrice Sotondji, a farmer from the village of Fongba (Lokossa), has a nursery for traditional oil palm trees, grown from seeds that her father-in-law gave her. She prefers seeds from traditional trees because, even though trees grown from so-called "improved" seeds can produce a lot of oil and help her to get rich, the *sauce-graine* (palm-nut cream) and the oil extracted from traditional palm trees look better, smell better and taste better. Fongba is not an area with native oil palm trees and, about 50 years ago, villagers fetched seedlings from the village of Sè, several dozen kilometres away. Now that Béatrice has developed her nursery, farmers in Fongba can use her seedlings to sow in their fields. She normally makes no charge – giving seeds away is one of the essential

characteristics of peasant agriculture – but, if demand becomes too great, she asks for a small financial contribution.

Béatrice has another field where she has been growing food crops for the last nine years. She does not use chemical fertilisers and always has good yields. The only problem has been flooding (a natural catastrophe that has grown worse as a result of climate change in West Africa), which makes it impossible to use part of the field. Béatrice herself selects the seeds she will sow in the following year and has never bought seeds on the market. The seeds she was given when she started her life as a farmer a dozen years ago still serve her well today. She intercropped maize and cassava, planting them at different times of the year. At harvest she carefully selects the seeds for each crop from the first plants to ripen. She dries these seeds in the sun and then

stores them above her kitchen chimney to prevent them being attacked by weevils. Because of this care all the seeds germinate each year.

“The multinationals condemn us to a slow death”

Not all farmers, however, always save their seeds. Félicien Zonglahoun from Yénawa (Klouékanmè Commune) has, along with other crops, a field of haricot beans and groundnuts. He sometimes selects and conserves seeds for the following season but, if he runs into financial difficulties during the year, he sells his entire harvest, including the next year's seeds, so he then has to buy more seeds on the market. He uses chemical fertiliser on his crops, saying that the soil on his land is poor and that he needs chemical inputs to get good yields. In neighbouring areas, such as Lalo and Lokossa, where the soils are still fertile, farmers produce two crops of maize per year. But in Klouékanmè, he says, they have only one crop, because of pests and poor soil.

Félicien has an oil palm grove, inherited from his parents, with a nursery of native trees. He uses the oil from these trees for his own consumption and sells any surplus on the market. He sometimes fells the taller trees in order to extract the palm liquid to drink or to make *sodabi*, the local alcoholic drink. He does not use chemical fertilisers or pesticides in his palm grove. He says that nearly all the villagers grow traditional oil palm trees, and that the few peasants who grow palm trees from improved seeds do so because they have more money. He also has a grove of orange trees. He planted the orange trees four years ago and they began to bear fruit

this year. He uses pesticides on his orange trees. He says that there is not enough manure in his village to meet everyone's needs and he, like many of the men, sometimes uses chemical fertilisers. The women, he says, use just animal manure and they get better harvests. Even though Félicien uses chemical inputs, he is no fan of the multinationals: “they kill us alive”, he says. “They put us in our tombs, condemning us to a slow death.” He is not a member of any peasant organisation and has never heard of GMOs.

Unlike Félicien, Gilbert Danglo, a farmer in Yénawa II, is politically active. He is secretary of the Union Communale des Producteurs de Klouékanmè (UCP – Klouékanmè Farmers' Union), a local peasant organisation belonging to the Fédération des Unions de Producteurs du Bénin (FUPRO – Benin Federation of Farmers' Unions), which is a founder member of the Réseau des Organisations de Paysans et Producteurs d'Afrique de l'Ouest (ROPPA – the West African Network of Peasant and Producer Organisations). He grows salad vegetables (tomatoes and peppers), haricot beans and oil palm trees. He uses chemical fertilisers on his tomatoes but not on his other crops. Some of his tomatoes are hybrids but few of his other crops are.¹ He has an interesting collection of different varieties of haricot beans and tomatoes in his fields, some of them named after their biological or culinary characteristics. He selects and saves seeds for subsequent crops.

One of the most widely cultivated crops is *pois d'angol* (a legume similar to a pea). Indeed, the name of the commune – Klouékanmè – reflects the farmers' fondness for this crop: in the local language, *kloue* means *pois d'angol* and *kanme* means a crop that increases the nitrogen in the soil (which is, of course, what a legume like *pois d'angol* does, as it captures nitrogen from the air). *Pois d'angol* is almost always grown in consortium with other crops and sown at the beginning of the first rainy season. Like the other farmers, Gilbert grows cassava because it is used in this region to make tapioca and flour. For their cassava the farmers use cuttings from local varieties or “improved” varieties supplied by the Ministry of Agriculture's regional services. Sometimes these varieties include ones from the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA). Farmers have also been given an “improved” variety of maize, DMR² (see Box on page 15), which cannot be stored for as long as local varieties. Gilbert knows what GMOs are and opposes them because of what he has heard about them on the radio. His suspicions were aroused when he heard that farmers and consumers in the developed countries that produce GMOs refuse to

1 A hybrid is a seed that has been improved by crossing two varieties generally belonging to the same species, genus or family. Hybrids are different from GMOs, largely because of the technology used to produce them (hybridisation respects nature by crossing plants or animals that are closely related in nature, while GMOs are the product of genetic engineering that goes to the heart of living things and mixes different species, genera, families and kingdoms.) Hybrids pose fewer problems than GMOs; the problems posed by GMOs are biological, economic, social, cultural and ethical in character.

2 DMR = Downy Mildew Resistant, a maize variety that is resistant to disease. It was created by the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Centre (CIMMYT) in Mexico. CIMMYT forms part of the network of 15 international agriculture research centres that constitute the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), which promoted the Green Revolution in the 1970s.

Photo: GRAIN



Leguminous plant commonly known as Akpakoun in Klouékanmè (Couffo Department)





Photo: GRAIN

A maize granary in Klouékanmè (Couffo Department)

consume them. He has never heard of “terminator” seeds.

Klouékanmè illustrates the tension that often exists between government policies and those adopted by local village communities. The agronomist Maxime Toklo, who is president of an NGO called the Association pour l’Agriculture et le Développement Durable (A2D – Association for Agriculture and Sustainable Development), and also works for the Klouékanmè commune council, explains what happened. “As part of a consultation, the local people expressed their wish to grow tomato and orange crops. As the council has only limited resources, it decided to support tomato growing and obtained the support of some development agencies for this option.” Maxime said that the experience was an example of how decentralisation can work well in a commune. But then, without consultation, the government declared Klouékanmè to be a cotton-growing area. One of the agencies that agreed to support the council’s tomato-growing initiative is now having second thoughts because of the government’s decision.

Other decisions that greatly affect local people are imposed from even further away. A few months ago, a group of Malaysian businessmen visited West Africa at the request of Benin President Yayi Boni, as part of his dream of turning Benin into an “emerging country”. As a result of this trip, 400,000 hectares are now to be planted with oil palm trees. Although no official statement has been made, it seems likely, in view of the obsession with agrofuels in Benin and in Africa as a whole, that the oil from this plantation will be used to produce agrofuels.

Farmers grow citrus fruits as well as subsistence crops

Davi Kouassivi planted an orange grove ten years ago in the village of Davihoué. He bought the young

trees from orange tree breeders and he now grows them together with groundnuts. The latter grow in furrows that retain water, which then penetrates under the orange trees and promotes better yields. To start with, he bought local groundnut seeds at the market and now keeps seeds from one harvest to another. As the soil was poor, he used chemical fertilisers around the orange trees but not on the groundnuts. He sells the produce from both these crops. He also has a field of traditional oil palm seedlings that he received as gifts from friends or took from the wild. He never applies chemical fertilisers to the palm trees that he will be using to produce palm-nut cream and oil for home consumption. (Davi’s behaviour here is typical: all the peasants we met recognised that chemical fertilisers can help to increase yields, but most did not use them on crops that they were intending to consume at home, preferring to use organic fertilisers on them.) Davi knows about GMOs because he attended a conference organised by Klouékanmè council. He has also heard of “terminator” seeds.

Brother Edmond Adjoglo is both pastor and farmer, with a field of just under one hectare. Like other “landless” peasants, he rents his field. Landless



Photo: GRAIN

The peasant-pastor with the baobab fruits harvested near his field



“Improved” seeds in Benin

Most crops grown in Benin, and the rest of Africa, either come from wild plants that have been domesticated over thousands of years, such as oil palm tree, yam and sorghum, or have been introduced from other countries in recent centuries – for example, maize, cassava and mango. Many varieties have also been “improved” by national or international agricultural research. In other words, they have been intensively bred to improve yields. As there is generally an inverse relationship between quality (such as taste, texture and aroma) and yields, local farmers often choose not to eat “improved” varieties, even if they are cultivating them. It is not surprising perhaps that in Benin the communities that exercise social control over local seeds often have a complex attitude towards the “improved” varieties: if they agree to cultivate them, they also resist introducing them into their own social, cultural or spiritual practices. It is in day-to-day life that one finds the strongest resistance to market forces and globalisation.

One example is yams. Yams are used in rituals during the annual community celebrations from Nigeria to Guinea. People in these communities never eat new varieties of yam during these ceremonies. This kind of custom, along with traditional farming practices, ensures the sustainable use of African genetic resources. In the 1970s, agricultural research introduced another variety of yam, known as *florido*, from Puerto Rico to the Côte d’Ivoire and then to other countries in the region, including Togo and Benin. Although this variety is easier to propagate than local varieties, it is used only as a cash crop; farmers very rarely use it for domestic consumption.

The Benin Agricultural Research Institute (INRAB) works with peasant communities to provide them with improved seeds. A number of improved varieties, mainly of maize, have been widely distributed. One of these is DMR maize (see note 2 on page 13), which is more resistant to drought than local varieties. It has a cycle of 60–70 days. At the end of its cycle, the grains can no longer be consumed fresh because they become very hard, almost like glass, so neither farmers nor consumers like it. Production in Benin is mainly in the south.

This variety was produced by researchers to increase yields, but it has brought only adversity and desolation. It is attacked in the fields by weevils and by the greater grain borer brought to Benin by food aid. This pest is called the “shredder” because of the damage it causes. The variety is difficult to conserve because the shucks do not entirely cover the ear. After four months’ storage in traditional granaries, DMR turns into 80 per cent powder. The flour obtained from milling is more like semolina, because the seeds are difficult to grind. Millers therefore strongly dislike this variety. Consumers do not like the paste produced from it. Food processors, however, like it, because it produces a greater quantity of cornmeal and so there is more to sell. Another improved variety is the Pozanika, which is hardy, has very starchy large seeds, and a cycle of 120 days. Unlike DMR, Pozanika is tender, but it is also difficult to store. Indeed, successful storage of improved varieties requires the use of highly poisonous chemical products (actelic super, cypercil and so on). This is particularly dangerous for peasant farmers, because they have not been trained in the use of toxic products.

peasants include outsiders and local people whose parents did not leave them any land when they died. This situation has not, however, engendered the kind of social struggle mounted by landless peasants in Brazil. When he began farming some eight years ago, Brother Edmond bought local seeds at the village market. Since then, he has saved seeds at each harvest for use in the next season. Like other people in the village, he sometimes exchanges seeds. He grows maize, pepper, tomatoes and cassava.

Brother Edmond has also acquired a range of different varieties of haricot bean, all of them local. He produces his own hybrids, carefully crossing different varieties to obtain the required characteristics. When he is producing his hybrids, he is careful to consider all the characteristics of the parent plants, including the length of their flowering cycle. When planting them, he also takes into account the direction of the wind, so that the

pollen will be distributed well. He does not use chemical fertilisers because, he says, they give a bad taste to the crops and make them deteriorate more quickly. Some of his produce is consumed at home (particularly the maize) and some is sold at the market (especially the haricot beans). He has no difficulty selling his beans: consumers like them because of their unusual colour, the size of the grains, and the way they taste and smell.

Fishing at Grand-Popo

As with almost every activity in agriculture, there are two kinds of fishing: traditional fishing, often called artisanal fishing, as widely practised in local communities; and “modern” or industrial fishing. For the purposes of this article, we shall concentrate on artisanal fishing, which plays an important role in the subsistence strategy of some communities by the coast.



The group we interviewed was led by Mr Agbobli Ayikoue, known as Hounnonvio (son of the fetisher), from the fishing community of Ewécondji-Plage in Grand-Popo in the department of Mono. They fish to feed themselves and to sell on the market. They are local people, but there are other fishing communities composed of outsiders, including Ghanaians, in the region. Agbobli Ayikoue said that *bobi* fish were available in the sea only between October and December, but most of the other fish they caught were found almost all year round. As the years have gone by, the size of the fish has decreased. People say that this is because the old custom of taking only big fish is no longer respected. The fry used to be allowed to grow, but today the nets catch all the fish, big and small.

Internal conflicts have also led to people giving up the traditional ceremonies that used to protect the fish. The community used to consult the “FA” (a traditional divinity) after which they made sacrifices (known as “Sanvo”) so that fish would be plentiful. Avlékété Kpanou believes that several *vodouns* (local divinities) need annual sacrifices of particular animals: oxen, sheep, turkeys, ducks and chickens. Each *vodoun* prefers a particular animal. All owners of fishing equipment used to contribute towards the organisation of these ceremonies. These days, however, there are disagreements about who should pay what. And, say the fishermen, these conflicts between human beings have also led to conflicts between the *vodouns*. For instance, the ox has to be placed in a canoe and put out to sea several kilometres from the shore as a sacrifice. In the past, the canoe was swept out to sea but in recent years the canoe has returned to dry land, signalling that the ceremony has failed. Mr Alowodo Mensah,

however, has other explanations for the scarcity of fish: pollution of the sea by phosphates coming from Togo; the use of motorboats rather than line fishing; the presence of menstruating women at sea; and the dumping of waste in the sea.

Some ceremonies, such as *Glatin*, are still respected. *Glatin* forbids fishing on every fifth day, the day of rest for the *vodouns* who make the fish plentiful. Mr Joachim Danhouan, who lives in the Kindjinhoué (Ewécondji) neighbourhood and is the representative of the Union Nationale des Pêcheurs Marins et Assimilés du Bénin (UNAPEMAB – the National Union of Fisherfolk and Associated Workers of Benin), agrees with his colleagues that some rituals are still respected, but he points out that there used to be a lot more trees and bushes in the mangrove swamps. He links this to the decrease in the practice of certain ancestral ceremonies, such as consulting the “FA”, and to the introduction of Christianity.

Conclusion

Like most peasants in developing countries, the farmers of south-west Benin have been quietly perpetuating their ancestral agricultural practices, exchanging seeds without reference to any intellectual property rights used by transnational companies to control seeds. By promoting these practices, farmers are contributing to achieving food sovereignty in their communities and their country. There is no doubt that cultural diversity, combined with the agro-ecological diversity that characterises all countries, constitutes the basis for guaranteeing the rights of local communities over their genetic resources.



Fisherfolk at Grand Popo (Mono department)

Photo: GRAIN

Ulrich Oslender, a political geographer at the University of Glasgow, has carried out research into social movements and spaces of resistance in Latin America. He currently works as an EU-funded Marie Curie Research Fellow investigating the forced displacement of Afro-Colombians from Colombia's Pacific coast region, which he explains through a methodological framework he calls "geographies of terror". Since the mid-1990s, he has conducted extensive fieldwork in Colombia and has worked closely with the social movement of the country's black communities. He can be reached at: Ulrich.Oslender@ges.gla.ac.uk

Ulrich Oslender



Ulrich, you've worked for over 12 years now with the Afro-Colombian communities along the Pacific coast of Colombia. What have they told you about their relationship with their ecosystem before their way of life was disrupted by outsiders?

When I first travelled through the Pacific coast region in Colombia back in the mid-1990s, I was struck by the sheer exuberance of the tropical rainforest environment and, despite high rates of deforestation, the seemingly impenetrable density of the forest. The region is also crisscrossed by literally thousands of rivers, small and large, that carve up this environment and make it difficult to traverse. This has, of course, been one of the reasons why it was relatively well preserved. Even today there are only a handful of main roads leading into the Pacific coast region from Colombia's interior. The main form of transport for local communities is by river, either in the traditional dugout canoes, the *potrillos*, or in engine-driven modern speedboats. Adaptation and creative use are probably the best ways of expressing the relationship that Afro-Colombian communities have established with this rainforest ecosystem over hundreds of years.

At the heart of this relationship lies a respect for nature nurtured by magic-religious beliefs. The river, for example, is not seen as an obstacle – as it is by modern engineers and planners, who despair at the difficulties of building roads or bridges on

“fluid” lands that are prone to frequent flooding. For local populations the river is a resource. Not only does it provide essential foodstuff but supplies the basic infrastructure in the Pacific coast. In fact, many locals, especially the older folks, refer to stretches of river as “roads”. They say, for example, that such and such a settlement is four roads up the river, which means you have to travel around four bends in the river to get there. It seems that in their imagination people have effectively “urbanised” the river environment by applying the road metaphor to the river bends. Adaptation to this fluid environment has also meant that most settlements are along the river banks.

This trend goes back to the days of *automanumisión* or self-liberation from slavery, which started really as soon as the first enslaved Africans were brought to the Pacific coast region to work the alluvial gold mines. Some of the enslaved managed to escape, while others bought their freedom with money they had earned while working on their “days off”, a process that could take many years, of course. At the beginning these freemen, or *libres*, would often still follow the slave gangs to pan for gold. But increasingly they began to settle along the river banks. Following the official abolition of slavery in Colombia in 1851, this settlement trend really took off, and many wooden houses were built on the river banks – usually on stilts in order to avoid flooding – and small-scale agricultural plots were established. A profound knowledge of

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the environment was quite simply essential for survival.

Can you tell us a bit more about these communities' knowledge of their environment?

The whole knowledge system in the Pacific region, which developed over hundreds of years, is constructed around the major role played by the forest and the rivers. It provides valuable information about how to live in such an environment, where flooding is so frequent and where some of the world's highest rainfall is registered. One aspect that I always found fascinating is the way in which the tides are used by rural communities – for example, by the *concheras*. These are women who travel from their homes to the coastal mangrove areas to collect shellfish, or *conchas*. Normally they travel at low tide, when the receding waters enable them to navigate much faster downstream in their canoes. It is also at low tide that the mangrove is exposed and the collecting of shellfish is much easier. The *concheras* then wait for high tide to arrive to give them a helping hand, so to speak, to travel back upstream. So the women plan their working day around the tides. Which means they may start their journey in the middle of the night. This is really listening to nature and following its rhythm. Quite the opposite from “modern man” and our desire to tame nature. If you don't listen to nature, you end up paying the price. It is not uncommon, for example, for a craft to get stuck in the mud because one set off too late. That happened to me. You then sit in your canoe in the mangrove swamps waiting for the high tide to set you free again, being pestered by swarms of little flies – a nightmare!

How does the local biodiversity affect their cultural and spiritual life?

The Colombian Pacific coast region is one of the world's biodiversity hotspots. Which means it harbours an incredible diversity and density of fauna and flora. The relationship of local communities with their biodiversity is saturated with magic-religious beliefs. It is a relationship of profound spirituality. Folklore has it, for example, that the forest is inhabited by mythical figures and spirits. The *tunda* is one of them, a forest vision that appears to children as a woman they know well, only to lure them into the forest where she possesses them. This story is often told to children to deter them from venturing close to the dangers of the forest. Other spirits include the *riviél*, a poor solitary devil condemned to sail on the open sea at night in a wrecked canoe with a light in its stern. He comes as a warning to fishermen not to stray alone on sea at night, as the *riviél* rams into their

boats and sinks them in revenge for his solitary fate.

On the other hand, traditional healers, the *curanderos*, make use of the rich variety of flora. They are highly respected in their communities and prepare creams, lotions and liquids using locally gathered herbs, bark and plant extracts. Often it requires some form of spiritual invocation for the medicine to work. The healers cure all sorts of ailments with their medicine, including snake bites. One such form of healing is through the *botella curada*, a bottle filled with a variety of balsamic herbs and viche, the unrefined, locally produced sugar-cane spirit. For five months I shared a house in the small town of Guapi with a traditional healer who always invoked her saints in the preparation of these bottles. Doña Celia cured a number of ailments in this way, ranging from the general weakness of the body to menstruation problems to snake bites and malaria. The house was often full of people seeking her advice and treatment.

Were the communities effective guardians of the environment?

The idea that communities are “guardians” of local environments is, of course, a fairly recent discourse of modernity that became quite commonplace after the UN Brundtland Report of 1987 and the Rio Summit in 1992. This was really when a global consciousness was formed over the fragility of our environments and the devastating impact that humankind was having on them. So the notion that local communities in fragile ecosystems – such as in tropical rainforests – were experts in protecting this environment became a commonplace assertion, with a dose of romanticism mixed in for good measure. However, these discourses are frequently marred by racial underpinnings of the “noble savage” kind, which seek to fix these mostly non-white communities in the role of pre-modern saviours from environmental destruction. This is not to be cynical about the sustainable ways in which these communities have lived their lives, but one has to be careful not to essentialise these populations in such a role.

Black communities in the Pacific coast region of Colombia have indeed lived in very sustainable ways in *convivencia*, or together with, the environment. Yet one also has to see that Afro-Colombians are also involved in environmentally destructive activities, such as large-scale logging and mining, fishing with dynamite, and, more recently, the cultivation of coca for the illegal drug trade. Afro-Colombian activists have repeatedly pointed

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Photo: Ulrich Oslander



Doña Celia, a traditional healer, enjoys a smoke

out to me that what is required is an economic strategy for the region that combines sustainable development policies with a real empowerment of local communities; for them to decide what kind of development is desired and required. And this has to go beyond merely ambiguous acknowledgement of traditional ways of life as “guardians of the environment” to a progressive understanding of sustainable development. This is in a way what legislation in the early 1990s seemed to make possible.

The 1990s marked a significant departure from previous relations between the state and black populations in Colombia. To start with, Colombia’s new constitution of 1991 declared the nation to be multicultural and pluri-ethnic. This was a significant step, as the country’s black communities were for the first time officially recognised as an ethnic minority. The constitution also made provision for a law to be passed that would grant rural black populations in the Pacific coast region collective land rights. Law 70 was finally passed in 1993, and it is an obligatory reference point today if we want to understand the changing regimes of representation and black ethnic identity construction in Colombia.

Now, as a result of Law 70 collective land titles have been issued to black communities over almost five million hectares in the Pacific coast region since 1996. These lands had, of course, been used by Afro-Colombians for hundreds of years but they had officially been considered state-owned, or *baldías*. This had meant that commercial enterprises,

especially loggers and mechanised gold-mining companies, were able to exploit these lands freely via state concessions. Their extraction practices were frequently environmentally unsustainable, to say the least, and often left a path of destruction and deforestation. Law 70, then, was partly seen as a way of protecting rural black communities and their lifestyles from such predatory extraction practices. Black community councils were to administer the collectively titled lands as the territorial and environmental authority. In the 1990s, then, there seemed to be an overlapping of interests between the Colombian state and black organisations. They seemed to share a common aim in working towards more sustainable ways of developing the Pacific coast region. In all, the 1990s were a time of hope.

But it failed, didn't it?

It didn't fail at all. In fact, it is an ongoing process. There are still a number of collective land titles that are being processed and have not yet been handed over to local communities; although the bulk, it has to be said, have been granted. And black activists insist that the collective titling of lands is the way forward. What has changed, however, is the context in which such land titling is meaningful. In the past the Pacific coast region was often referred to as a peace haven or a refuge in the violent cartography of Colombia. The internal armed conflict had not reached this region to the same extent as in other parts of the country. But this changed dramatically in the mid-1990s. In fact, 1996 marked a turning point in the fate of black communities in Colombia. That year saw a coordinated offensive by the Colombian army and paramilitary forces on local populations in the municipality of Riosucio in the northern Chocó department. This attack was launched under the pretext of combating guerrillas of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, the FARC, who are the country’s most powerful guerrilla group. I have talked to survivors who recall the “night of terror” on 20 December 1996 when heavily armed paramilitaries entered the town of Riosucio at dawn. They broke down doors, tearing people out of their beds, and, with a list in hand, started to kill. Many of those who managed to escape stayed in hiding for days, submerged in the rivers with the water up to their necks. Many others disappeared and were never found again. In the following months this military campaign was extended to the surrounding valleys. Local populations were subjected to indiscriminate air bombing. The bombing of civilian populations is not an uncommon strategy of the Colombian military, especially in more remote areas.

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People became so scared that they fled in their thousands, taking with them just the bare necessities. No one knew when this campaign would stop, and people feared that they could be the next victims. This traumatic experience is not something you forget. Ever. Today, when black movement leaders travel abroad to talk about their struggle, they often invoke the events of December 1996, a defining moment for many of them personally. This attack on the civilian population led to the first huge exodus of black peasants and fisherfolk from the Pacific region. It really marks the starting point of massive displacement in the region. Local communities have become trapped in the conflict. They are caught in the crossfire, both metaphorically – black activists talk of being “sandwiched” between guerrillas, paramilitaries and army – and quite literally, when the bullets start to fly. An impossible situation. Many have fled, becoming the displaced, *los desplazados*. Estimates talk of almost 4 million people being displaced in Colombia since 1985. And Afro-Colombians make up an increasing percentage of this population.

What happens to their view of themselves when they become desplazados?

This is really a very complex situation. Remember the conditions in which they were forced to leave their homes, often running away with just the clothes they had on. One activist told me how, after he had fled from his river community in the Chocó department, he wandered around in the forest for days trying to orient himself, until he finally reached another community where he was helped. But even then fear drove him on, until he arrived in the capital, Bogotá, a city he had never been to before. He was one of the first people displaced during the attacks in the Riosucio area, and at that time there was no network of Displaced Afro-Colombians in Bogotá as there is today: the Association AFRODES now provides a first port of call for the many black *desplazados* arriving in the capital. In the city the displaced experience a huge sense of alienation. The difference in the two ways of life is enormous. Even basic activities become a huge problem, such as taking a bus, for which you have to have a fare, something you didn't need on the river where you had your canoe to get around. You also have to register with the government as a displaced person, and only then do you receive some emergency aid, such as precarious housing, and some food and clothing. And perhaps most difficult of all is the stigmatisation as victims that many displaced experience. They feel discriminated against because of their condition as poor and displaced. And as Afro-Colombians they are also discriminated against because of their skin colour.

Many Colombians would, of course, deny this, saying that there is no racism in Colombia. But that is a myth. You just have to talk to displaced Afro-Colombians about their problems finding work, or even renting modest accommodation, when landlords simply will not rent to them because they are black.

How has the growing influence of transnational companies affected the type of displacement that the communities are suffering?

When the attacks in the Chocó happened in 1996, it first looked as if this was a military campaign against the FARC in the region. But it became quickly evident that there was an altogether different logic behind this glaringly obvious attempt to drive local populations off their lands. And this has to do with the legislation and the collective land titling that I was talking about earlier. Because it was precisely at the moment when the black communities in the Chocó Department were to receive their first land titles that they were attacked, threatened and driven off their lands. Now why would that be? One of the crucial changes that this legislation brought was the way in which concessions for exploiting the lands were dealt with. Previously, on the *baldíos*, it was the state through its regional development corporations that would hand out a concession to a company intent on exploiting a given area, for example, for logging or mining. But today these companies have to enter into direct talks with local communities, who are the territorial authority now. And these have often quite different ideas of how to develop their lands sustainably. Many companies have simply been rejected. This is a completely new situation, and one that those companies are not used to. Previously, they would mostly have it their way, and logging concessions were often gained by bribing corrupt officials. This is no longer possible.

So in a way, the new legislation – and this is a painfully ironic impact – while it legally empowered local communities to decide over land use, it was also a wake-up call for many business interests in the area that things had changed and had to be dealt with differently. Struggles over land in Colombia have a long history. And violence has always been part of these processes. So what we are faced with today is a new wave of violence directed at intimidating local populations, so that certain business interests can have it their way. Some local communities have been co-opted, that is, they have agreed to cooperate in return for some kind of financial incentive. This has led to huge organisational problems among black communities, as black activists are desperately trying to get the people to

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stick together as a community – a common unity – in order to implement sustainable development strategies that would benefit the population in the long term. That’s why I mentioned earlier the need for black activists to find an economic strategy with which to provide income for locals who otherwise are easily co-opted by the promises of big capital. And if co-option does not work, coercion is applied. Community leaders are targeted, and massacres are committed. All of which leads to the effective expropriation or deterritorialisation of local communities.

Has the takeover of land to cultivate global commodities, such as African Palm, intensified the expropriation?

There can be no doubt that the intensification of African Palm cultivation in the Pacific coast region has been a major force behind the expropriation of black peasants. Large conglomerates, consisting of national and transnational capital, operate throughout the region. And Colombia’s President, Álvaro Uribe Vélez, has declared on many occasions that the cultivation of African palm is a major economic export strategy for Colombia’s future. The reasons behind this are interesting. While the cultivation of African palm in Colombia goes back to the 1930s, there has been a significant increase in the area under cultivation since the 1990s. In fact, Colombia is today the fourth largest palm oil producer in the world, after Malaysia, Indonesia and Nigeria. Rather than for soap and animal foodstuff, however, palm oil is today used in the production of biofuels, specifically biodiesel. This is an emerging industry of potentially huge economic impact. It seems clear that Colombia’s President has set his sights on being part of this global development.

Is what is happening to Afro-Colombians part of a global process?

One can say that global processes are partly responsible for what is happening to Afro-Colombians. Because of the hype over biofuels, the cultivation of African palm has become of such interest to Colombia’s government and the economic elite. Development plans are devised to speak to these global trends. Without the potentially huge market in biofuels, I am convinced there would be no major intensification of African palm cultivation in Colombia. However, there is a wider global process at work. In fact, a global trend linking displacement and development can be observed throughout the world. People have always been forcibly displaced to make space for development projects, of course. Think about the construction of huge dams in India or China, for example. But

what we are witnessing today is a renewed cycle of the violent “expropriation of the commons” on a global scale. That is the passing of common goods, such as lands and service industries, into private hands for the accumulation of capital. The Marxist geographer David Harvey explains this in terms of “accumulation by dispossession”, which I think is an interesting analytical angle from which to view these global processes. It is therefore important not to view the Colombian case as isolated. Of course, the particular national context in Colombia provides the setting where forced displacement and development are played out. But it is important to bear in mind the global pressures under capitalism that play their part in shaping these processes in the first place.

What can be done to combat the “expropriation of the commons”?

In many parts of the world, local communities have resisted these processes. After all, the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas in Mexico began in 1994 partly as a fight to reclaim the *ejidos*, the commons of indigenous peoples in Mexico. It seems to me that it is important to connect these different local struggles in spaces where international solidarity can be generated. I am thinking, for example, of what is happening at the World Social Forum, or rather Forums, since these now take place in different locations around the world. There, activists from all over the world meet to exchange their particular experiences and to discuss common strategies of resistance. Some argue today that these spaces have lost the energy of their initial meetings. And they may go more and more unnoticed in the mainstream media. But for those who actually participate, they are enormously useful. The fact that today so many people around the world know about the plight of Afro-Colombians is partly due to these efforts of internationalising solidarity, and of globalising resistance.

For example, African American politicians in the United States have in recent years taken an increasing interest in the plight of Afro-Colombians. Some of them have visited Colombia to witness this struggle on the ground. And on their return they have started campaigns for the US Senate to put pressure on the Colombian government to recognise the plight of the Afro-Colombian populations and to protect them. Particularly in cases such as the Colombian, where local communities feel not only abandoned but actively persecuted by the state, it is important for them to find this kind of international support. Black activists in Colombia are quite clear about the importance of mobilising the solidarity of the African diaspora in this way.

- K** Joseph Eve
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- R** Ramón Vera
- S** Daycha Siripatira
- T** Tim Lang
- U** Ulrich Oslander



The latest rescue plan for Africa is another Green Revolution. GRAIN, alongside a host of others, has written and commented extensively on the Alliance for a Green Revolution for Africa (AGRA) and the impacts it will have on the continent.¹ In the meantime, this model of a Green Revolution has already been implemented for the past five years in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. It provides us with a case study and an indication of the likely outcome of such an approach in other parts of Africa.

Lessons from a Green Revolution in South Africa

GRAIN

1 GRAIN Briefing, "A new green revolution for Africa?", December 2007.

grain.org/briefings/?id=205
See also K. Lobe, "A Green Revolution for Africa: Hope for Hungry Farmers", *ILEIA* 24.2, 2008.

<http://tinyurl.com/3r2y26>

2 Persistent poverty is a critical issue for Africa as a whole and South Africa in particular. It is vital to move beyond the livelihoods analyses of poverty and engage with the key structural conditions that perpetuate poverty. It is critical to understand the political economy of poverty, as well as the social and spatial formations that entrench the adverse terms on which the poor are forced to participate in the mainstream economy. See A. du Toit, *Chronic and Structural poverty in South Africa: challenges for action and research*, Bellville: University of the Western Cape, Chronic Poverty Research Centre Working Paper 56, July 2005.

<http://tinyurl.com/3z26bh>

3 The Transkei and Ciskei, together with other homelands, were where the apartheid government forced the majority of the black population to live. After 1994, Transkei and Ciskei, together with the "white" part of the Eastern Cape, were amalgamated into one province, the Eastern Cape. But the division is as stark today as it was 14 years ago.

4 L. Khumalo, "Government plans to establish biofuels industry in Eastern Cape", South African government communication and information system, 8 March 2007.

Africa has a long history of colonialism and neo-colonialism that changed land ownership, and so destroyed vibrant agrarian communities and deepened structural poverty.² South Africa had its own brand of social and spatial engineering, which resulted in a form of land distribution more skewed than anywhere else in Africa. As a result, the Eastern Cape province is clearly divided between two agricultural realities – prosperous large-scale commercial farms and the former apartheid "homeland areas" of Transkei and Ciskei,³ where most land is owned on a communal basis and where 70 per cent of the rural population are considered food insecure. From the 1940s, apartheid planners intensified top-down experiments in social engineering among the communities in Transkei and Ciskei, causing a huge loss of land and livestock. At times, the local population resisted these initiatives: they saw them, correctly, as destroying their livelihoods and creating unequal wealth and power relations (see Box 1). Mostly, however, they were coerced into accepting them, either by violent means or by promises of wealth. When in 2002 the Eastern

Cape Department of Agriculture (ECDA) announced, as part of its Green Revolution strategy, a plan for a Massive Food Production Programme (MFPP) in the province, it promised that the outcome this time would be different. As the name implies, the aim is to increase food production hugely and rapidly, and so provide food security for the poor in rural areas. The ECDA also later earmarked an additional 500,000 hectares of fertile land to supply a multi-billion dollar biofuels industry as part of its "integrated agrarian transformation" plan.⁴ Both of these programmes are to be implemented principally on communal land.

The Green Revolution approach is always the same, and the MFPP exemplifies it. Initial subsidies and credit are made available so that farmers can buy into the project. The conditions include replacement of farmers' varieties with hybrids and GMOs, mandatory use of fertilisers and pesticides, the mechanisation of production, and the consolidation of land ownership. The outcome is predictable and widely documented. Once farmers are trapped in the system, the subsidies are



Box 1 Land use – strengthening the legacy of apartheid

Rural development and agrarian reform in Africa must be understood in the context of its colonial past, which radically reshaped societies and their land use. In the Eastern Cape, this means taking into account the “Betterment Scheme”, implemented with much community resistance in the 1940–1970 period. The Betterment Scheme was designed to transform the land use pattern by forcing people to relocate into villages and dividing the land into residential, grazing and arable units, reducing livestock numbers at the same time. This plan for rural apartheid was to some extent motivated by concern for soil conservation but the main intention was to gain more control over local populations.¹ Many communities resented the forcible manner in which this scheme was introduced and, in fact, it was only properly implemented where the government was able to coerce chiefs and headmen to help enforce and monitor it. This “corruption” of traditional leaders created immense social disruption and often provoked violence and faction fighting.²

The Betterment Scheme eventually collapsed, as did the “Tractor Scheme” and others, and in their wake common property owners were left confused and unclear as to their land tenure situation, with a heavy loss of livestock and plant species essential for survival.³ There were often divisions between communities and their leadership. In places where the Betterment Scheme did not reach or where there was successful resistance, agricultural practices and land use are more intact and productivity is much higher.⁴

The land situation is complex and steeped in historical injustices. On the one hand, overcrowding and a lack of access to land is a major contributing factor to persistent poverty. Many people experience a land shortage in and around villages and say that their land is too small to grow what they need. After the forced relocation and disruption of land use, villages are now in many cases too far from the arable fields for people to be able to protect crops from livestock and theft. This is why the ECDA and foreign investors talk about “under-utilised land”. This communal land, although not always planted, is still highly valued by communities for many other uses – collecting thatch, medicinal plants, grazing and so on.⁵ The relationship between rural livelihoods and access to natural resources is very well documented, but it continues to be ignored by government policies. Instead, officials and investors lament that this “dead capital”⁶ is not being used for the benefit of society “at large” and are now targeting it for biofuels.⁷ It is clear that the thinking is not different from that which was dominant during the colonial heyday – Africa must sacrifice its “unproductive” use of land for the production of biofuels to export to Europe to benefit society “at large”.

- 1 F.T. Hendricks, “The Pillars of Apartheid: land tenure, rural planning and the chieftancy”, *Journal of African History*, Vol. 33, No. 2, 1992, pp. 342–4.
- 2 A. Claasens, *It is not easy to challenge a chief: lessons from Rakgwadi*, PLAAS Research Report No. 9, 2001.
- 3 Z. Ntshona, *Valuing the commons: rural livelihoods and communal rangeland resources in the Maluti district, Eastern Cape*, PLAAS Research Report No. 13, 2002.
- 4 P. McAllister, “Maize yields in the Transkei: how productive is subsistence cultivation?”, quoted in S. Shackleton et al., *Re-valuing the communal lands of southern Africa: new understandings of rural livelihoods*, London: ODI, Natural Resource Perspectives No. 62, November 2000.
- 5 Thatch grass, for example, is and will remain a major source of income for rural communities in the Eastern Cape. See T. Kepe, *Waking up from the dream: the pitfalls of “fast-track” development on the Wild Coast*, PLAAS Research Report No. 8, 2001.
- 6 Term used by the CEO of the Southern Africa Biofuels Association, Andrew Maseneke, in a public debate in Cape Town, 27 August 2008.
- 7 Interview with Felix Hobson, manager, MFPP, Bisho, Eastern Cape, July 2008.



withdrawn and farmers become indebted, creating the space for local elites to step in and gain land and power. Hey presto! A new customer base and market for GMOs, hybrids and agrochemicals is created. The scheme may come with slick propaganda about improving food security, but it hides the agony of debt, the continued loss of land, seed and communities, and the poisoning of people, soil and water.

The ECDA officials were inspired by a visit to soya fields in Argentina and Brazil.⁵ They came back enthused by the South American farmers’ apparent success, failing to notice the damage that

the stampede into soya monoculture has done to rural communities, particularly in Argentina.⁶ Convinced that the technology (minimum tillage plus GM crops and pesticides) would vitalise the rural economy, they decided to impose this approach on the Eastern Cape farmers.

The infrastructure for the new “production model” of agriculture was already in place. Extensive corporate lobbying over many years has ensured that policies and infrastructure favour agribusiness. These include pro-GMO legislation, strict intellectual property rights on seeds, free trade agreements and privatisation of resources and

⁵ Interview with John Allwood, technical manager, ECDA, May 2007.

Interview with Felix Hobson, manager, MFPP, July 2008.

⁶ Miguel Altieri and Walter Pengue, “GM soybean: Latin America’s new coloniser”, *Seedling*, January 2006. <http://tinyurl.com/3v283q>



Photo: GRRAIN

Traditionally, sheep and cattle graze in maize fields after harvest. Introducing new chemicals brings risks, to humans and to animals. In Dellville Trust village, three cows died after eating chemical fertiliser in a field.

7 Government policies are pro-business, with the assumption that the poor will be lifted by macro-economic growth. GEAR and AsGiSA (Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa), informed by initiatives such as NEPAD and CAADP (Comprehensive Africa, Agricultural Development Programme), are all based on the erroneous assumption that there is a positive link between globalisation and poverty alleviation. Given these global, regional and national policies, it is no surprise that in his 2007/8 budget vote speech, G Nkintini, the MEC for Agriculture, Eastern Cape, reported that the Department would intensify the implementation of the Green Revolution strategy in response to a "number of initiatives being formed on the international, regional and national levels." Budget vote speech 2007/8, Eastern Cape Legislature, Bisho, accessed 26 April 2007.

8 "The Gini coefficient for the African population has risen from 0.62 in 1991 to 0.72 in 2001. This level of inequality is comparable with the most unequal societies in the world." C. Schwabe, *Fact Sheet: Poverty in South Africa*, Human Sciences Research Council, 26 July 2004. <http://tinyurl.com/47zftx>

9 Interview with John Allwood, technical manager, ECDA, May 2007.

10 See A. du Toit and D. Neves, *In search of South Africa's Second Economy*, Bellville and Manchester: University of the Western Cape and University of Manchester, Chronic Poverty Research Centre Working Paper 102, 2007. <http://tinyurl.com/3nvev3>

public research institutions. The next step was to use government pro-poor projects to provide the public funding to create a new customer base for international agribusiness.

This model flows from the neo-liberal economic policies adopted by South Africa's post-apartheid government, with their emphasis on export-based agriculture and macro-economic growth. All these policies have hugely benefited multinational agrochemical companies but have not helped South Africa's smallholder farmers and rural communities.⁷ Even though they were supposed to redress the injustices of South Africa's past, these free-market agricultural and economic policies have, on the contrary, reinforced earlier inequalities. The poverty gap has widened and wealth has become further concentrated in the hands of a small elite – now black and white – making the terms by which the poor engage in the economy even more inequitable.⁸

The Massive Food Production Programme (MFPP)

The Massive Food Production Programme (MFPP), also named *Siyakhula* ("we grow"), was introduced in 2002 under the Provincial Growth and Development Programme. It was presented as a "flagship programme" within the government's Green Revolution strategy and its objective was to "unlock the agricultural potential in underdeveloped areas" in the province. Another "cornerstone poverty eradication programme" along the same lines was the *Siyazondla* ("we feed ourselves") communal gardening programme. The ECDA believes that, if farmers adopt these new technologies, the province can increase its maize production and become self-sufficient by the end of the 5-year project. The aim of the MFPP is to get a critical mass of rural households (200,000)

self-sufficient in carbohydrates and proteins by the end of the programme.⁹

Given its ambitious targets for "social mobilisation", the plan is highly simplistic, patronising and staggeringly top-down, with no evidence of consultation with the farmers who are to be mobilised. All the rhetoric is there. There are "public-private partnerships" between government, agribusiness and local contractors (with taxpayers providing the money and the private sector skimming off the profits). "Food security" is to be achieved by subsidising fertilisers, pesticides and seeds (both hybrids and GM seeds) and by consolidating and mechanising the land. The requirement for "sustainability" is covered by the plan to phase out the subsidies. The plan does not take into account the large body of recent research that is critical of such a narrow technical approach, and recommends that pro-poor policies should address structural imbalances, be based on the realities of rural people and support their fragile social and economic networks.¹⁰ These networks play a vital role in community resilience, and the immediate impact of the MFPP was to disrupt existing community structures and practices by imposing a technical approach that favours some while excluding others.

Even though the MFPP is supposed to be reducing social inequalities, it has become clear that the programme is not for everyone. The selection criteria are specific and demanding. Only villages with the best farming potential have been selected; this alone guarantees an unrepresentative outcome. The mean annual rainfall must be at least 500 mm, falling between 1 November and 30 April, or there must be reliable irrigation. The soils must have a rooting depth of 600 mm and a slope not exceeding 6 per cent. Only plots of land that are at least 50 hectares in size are accepted, so the project relies on community cooperation and the agglomeration of communal plots into larger fields. This means coercing the whole village into participating. Another condition is that the farmers must be prepared to use the minimum tillage farming technique and to employ herbicides. Farmers are advised not to intercrop with beans and/or pumpkins, as they traditionally do.

The first year the farmers get their seed, fertilisers and pesticides for free, with the government providing finance through Uvimba Bank.¹¹ In the second year the farmers have to start paying back the government subsidy, and by the fifth year they have to bear the full cost. Farmers are responsible for harvesting and marketing their crops. As part of the mechanisation drive, the government provides

Box 2 Snapshot of the impact of MFPP on a village: Dellville Trust

Four villages in the Cala area of the Eastern Cape have participated in the MFPP, complying with government criteria of a high rainfall area and accessibility. One of these villages is Dellville Trust, consisting of 24 families. Each household had to make available to the scheme 3.5ha of their fields, which could then be consolidated into 70ha, making mechanisation easier. With a loan from the Uvimba Bank, the local *Nkosi* (Chief), Mr M Zengetwa, bought a R1.2 million tractor and other equipment so that he could be a contractor. He is the chief of seven villages in the area, farms on 395ha of his own land and owns 300 head of cattle.¹ After two failed harvests, some members in the community wanted to withdraw but he would not let them, because he had to pay off his tractor. "If you go under, I go under," he told them. Instead, he suggested that the farmers use their social benefits to pay their debt, or take out a loan from MAFISA.²

The way people in this village see it is that the government has asked to "borrow their fields for five years". One woman farmer said "It does not feel like my field any more. I used to go there every day, but now I hardly ever do." The MFPP caused conflict within this community: people differed over the use of a contractor; some people wanted to get out and others not; and there was resistance to implementing minimum tillage. Mrs Dyanti, a widow, was very distressed, because she didn't have a pension and feared having to sell her livestock to pay her debt. "I cannot sleep and haven't even told my children about it." Moreover, three cows died after eating chemical fertiliser left in one of the fields.³

The Chief felt that "the government wants to help the farmers of the Eastern Cape but that they are not ready to be helped." He was also quite clear that the project could only work for bigger farmers, saying that "small farmers will not be successful and will 'die' after the 5 years are over." The Department of Agriculture finally withdrew the village from the MFPP but in a way that has made the people feel that it was their fault the programme failed. The only farmer to make money was one who doubled up as a contractor on his own and other farmers' land.⁴

1 Interview with Chief Zengetwa, Dellville Trust, May 2007.

2 Micro Agricultural Finance Institutions of South Africa, another government project giving credit to micro-enterprises in rural areas.

3 Interview with villagers by Tim Wigley, July 2008.

4 Interview with Mr Mdaka, Elliot district, September 2007.

loans to contractors to buy equipment and pays them to prepare and plant the fields. These contractors can also participate as farmers, and most of them take advantage of this opportunity. From the beginning MFPP's intention has been to make an impact quickly: by the end of 2007, 421 projects, reaching 15,099 households and covering more than 50,000 hectares of land, had been approved. Partly because of its scope, the programme is officially viewed as a great success. The Minister of Agriculture announced that, in view of the programme's achievements,¹² it would be increasing its budget from US\$13 million in 2007/8 to US\$ 27million for 2008/9.¹³

On the ground, another story

Experience on the ground, however, is entirely different. Over the past year, GRAIN has interviewed farmers and researchers involved in the MFPP and found little evidence of success.¹⁴ Even officials in the ECDA have acknowledged the difficulties and failures of the programme, blaming the farmers for their "lack of understanding and commitment". They also admit that there is a lot of political pressure to deliver. This helps to explain

the gap between what the ECDA says publicly and what is really happening in communities.

In reality, the first two years of the MFPP were an absolute disaster. As hundreds of farmers had failed to pay back their debts, Uvimba Bank decided in 2005 to undertake an audit. They discovered that inputs had arrived up to two months late, so crops had been sown late and had failed. There was evidence of corruption rife among contractors. Chemicals were not being applied correctly. Seeds had been planted on land that did not fulfil the criteria. Communities did not agree about land rights. Minimum tillage was poorly understood and managed. Inputs were being sold on to third parties. A white farmer, paid to mentor a community near Mbizana, acknowledged that the cost of the inputs was just too high for small farmers, and there was no way that they could ever become independent. He said that he had been "tempted to tell farmers to just buy food with the money" as their losses would be less than growing the food themselves with the MFPP.

The programme was revised a number of times in response to the failures. In the process, government



11 Uvimba Bank was formed by the government and makes credit available for rural development and agriculture.

12 Budget vote speech 2007/8 delivered by MEC Mr G Nkwinti for Department of Agriculture, Eastern Cape Legislature, Bisho.

13 Increased from ZAR90 million to ZAR188 million.

14 With grateful acknowledgement to Tim Wigley for his interpretation and guidance in the field.

15 It is estimated that 12 million South Africans receive social grants. See also M. Appel, *Social grants making an impact*, SouthAfrica.info, 7 April 2008. <http://tinyurl.com/3fno44>

16 S. Perret et al., *Activity systems and livelihoods in the Eastern Cape Province rural areas*, Department of Agricultural Economics Extension and Rural Development Working Paper, 2000. <http://tinyurl.com/4x2muf>

17 M. Samson et al., *Social Grants, South Africa*, London: Overseas Development Institute, Inter-Regional Inequality Facility Policy Brief 1, 2005. <http://tinyurl.com/4n7qb2>

18 In an interview in September 2007 with an extension officer in Cala, it was clear that where farmers had a surplus, they had problems with storage and marketing.

19 The contradictions are staggering: on the one hand, with the approval of international business and governments, the MFPP, at the sweep of a pen, virtually wipes out agricultural biodiversity in the Eastern Cape; on the other hand, the same interests support the building of a seed vault near the North Pole specifically to ensure that the seeds constituting such biodiversity are preserved for future generations. See GRAIN, *Svalbard seed vault: not everyone is celebrating*, 2008. www.grain.org/nfg/?id=557

20 Communication from Tim Wigley, after an interview with Chief Zengezwa, Dellville Trust, July 2008.

21 K. Darmgaard Hansen, "The Massive Food Production Scheme, Eastern Cape – Design, Extension Approach and Scope for Adoption of Minimum Tillage", Master's thesis (AD 03010), Department of Plant and Soil Science, Royal Veterinary and Agricultural University (KVL), Denmark, 2006.

22 NGOs in KwaZulu Natal also experience how the Department of Agriculture makes funding for smallholder farmers conditional on them creating new community structures, such as cooperatives, and the use of GMO seeds. See K. Palitza, "Small Farmers Pushed to Plant GM Seed", Inter-Press Service, 21 July 2008. <http://tinyurl.com/4k7dhc>

officials seemed to forget who the programme was meant to benefit. They blamed farmers for being "opportunistic" and argued that social grants (that is, welfare benefits) were one of the reasons farmers were not "committed" to farming. It is true that South Africa is one of the few countries in Africa where there is an extensive social welfare system¹⁵ and that an estimated 75 per cent of the Eastern Cape rural population are on benefits (two-thirds of them women). Rural households in South Africa thus rely on a wide range of livelihood strategies, of which agriculture is just one. The situation is diverse: for many people, agriculture and access to natural resources still make an important contribution to livelihoods, food security and social networks.¹⁶ The suggestion that social grants are to "blame" for the failures is not supported by evidence. The evidence suggests that those households with access to land and to alternative sources of income are the ones with the resilience that enables them to participate in this kind of project.¹⁷ The very poor and the land-poor families are consistently excluded.

The MFPP has also created dependency on an unreliable and opportunistic private sector, ineffective government and fickle international markets. The programme is inflexible, and over the timeframe of this project the price of inputs rose exponentially, exposing farmers to even more risk. Storage and market access were not addressed by the project, and farmers reported that this was a big issue for them.¹⁸ In many cases the price they got for their product on the local market was lower than that paid for traditional maize, which is still preferred for eating.

While it is clear that MFPP, the Green Revolution of the Eastern Cape, has been singularly unsuccessful in relieving poverty or integrating farmers in the market, it has, however, had a series of other long-term consequences.

a) Destruction of agro-biodiversity and knowledge

One of the most serious impacts of the MFPP, which features in none of the plans or evaluations, has been the loss of traditional seed.¹⁹ Over the years agricultural policies have eroded South African farmers' capacity to conserve and enhance their own seeds but, despite this, many smallholders have still managed to use and save traditional seeds. In interviews, farmers clearly expressed their preference for these seeds. One chief said that he plants one hectare of his 40-hectare maize fields with traditional seed, while planting the rest with MFPP seeds. He and his family consume the maize from the traditional seed, while selling the harvest from the MFPP seeds.²⁰

Farmers in the programme hope in the future to recover the traditional seeds they have lost from families in other villages that have not participated in the MFPP. They say that, apart from their preferred taste and health benefits, crops from traditional seeds have two key advantages: they are very well adapted to the environment, particularly to the acidic soils which dominate the region; and they are reliable. There are recorded incidences where the MFPP seeds did not grow properly, while traditional seeds in adjacent plots, in the same soil, fared well.²¹

b) Creating a market for GMOs²²

South African farmers have been growing GM crops for 10 years, but the technology has not reached smallholder farmers because of the cost. The MFPP presents the ideal opportunity for companies to get the government to subsidise the introduction of GM crops, and they have not hesitated to target the decision makers: government officials, chiefs and mentors. Chiefs in the Flagstaff district attended a two-day conference at which Monsanto introduced its Bt maize²³ (the advertising campaign for which was called *iyasihluthisa*, which means "it fills your stomachs").²⁴ The chiefs, who were told that yields would increase up to 133 percent,²⁵ are now coercing their communities to plant it.²⁶ And the farmers planting Roundup Ready maize²⁷ and Bt maize are not aware that they are planting something different. They have not been told about the need to plant buffer zones, the possibility of contamination and insect and weed resistance, the



Photo: Tim Wigley

Owing to lack of information, some farmers participating in the MFPP initially stored inputs, including bags of poison-covered seed and pesticides, in their kitchens.

health risks, and so forth. Moreover, the farmers gain nothing from planting Bt maize apart from a bigger bill: in 2008 the Agricultural Research Council found that the African stalk borer has built up resistance to Bt maize in South Africa.²⁸

c) *Reduction in nutritional value and productivity*

Traditionally farmers intercrop maize with pumpkins and beans. When farmers plant hybrid seeds or GMOs, and use chemicals, intercropping with these food crops is not possible. In addition, farmers say that the timing of these seeds is not compatible with planting traditional winter crops, so the planting of oats during the winter months as fodder for sheep has had to be stopped. As a result, the total nutritional value of the crops harvested on the farmers' land and the total output have both declined, and additional food and fodder have had to be bought.

A fundamental flaw in the MFPP is that it seriously underestimated the efficacy of the traditional production systems, even though recent studies have shown that in these "the ratio of output value to input costs actually indicates a very efficient system."²⁹ There are several reasons why this is so: fields often are irregular in shape, so it is difficult to calculate yields; farmers usually practise mixed farming, but studies record the harvest from only the main crop, disregarding other crops, fruit and wild foods, even though these may represent half of the total value of the produce; and yield estimates do not capture either the early harvesting of green maize, substandard produce (even though it is always used in some way by the farmers) or the good quality produce kept for seed.³⁰

d) *Poisoning of soils*

MFPP officials recommend that farmers use chemical fertilisers rather than animal manure, and farmers are now expressing concern about the quality of their soil, as they can see that the fertilisers harden and "poison" their soils. They were given little advice about the dangers of pesticides and the best way to use fertilisers. At one homestead, the chemicals were stored in the kitchen (see picture opposite). In another community, three cows died after eating chemical fertiliser.

When a farmer was asked why he was continuing with the "modern" methods if they brought no benefit, he replied: "I am hopeful that if conditions are favourable I will become a big man." Women farmers tend to be more realistic, saying that they want to go back to the traditional way of farming because it gave them more security and better quality food for their families. Even so, they are often forced to participate in such schemes because

of social pressure, along with more overt political pressures.

e) *The disempowerment of local farmers*

Perhaps the greatest failure of the MFPP was that it was no different from previous top-down government interventions and was never "owned" by the local farmers. Government officials imposed a complete change in agricultural practices on communal farmers. Some of the officials were quite clear about what they were doing: they were demanding a "change of mindset" and were attempting to "convince people to do things they do not understand".³¹ Financial pressure was used to push through change: when farmers had been unable to pay back the percentage of their debt required by the programme schedule, the officials changed the rules so that the farmers were required to pay a deposit up front before receiving the inputs. The aim was to teach the farmers to "take responsibility". In practice, this narrowed down participation to households with other sources of cash, such as social grants.

Government officials have a strangely distorted view of the unequal power relationships inherent in the project. They say that government "took a risk" in helping these farmers and that the farmers are "using political pressure" to avoid paying their debts. They clearly cannot conceive of the risk that a community, or an individual farmer, has to take when they participate: apart from dealing with inefficient and corrupt bureaucracy, they must also now implement foreign technologies and alien farming systems; they are told to let go of their seed and their knowledge; they must take on debts; and they must expose themselves, their livestock and their soil to damaging chemicals. Why did farmers feel they had no choice but to participate? This can only be understood in the cultural context of the chiefs having a lot of power, in addition to a political context, in which there is little room to challenge the ANC government. One farmer commented: "the government is farming on behalf of farmers and when the five years is over I will go back to the way I farmed before." This was seen as a government project, and government was responsible for the results. The farmers had no option but to sit it out.

If not the farmers, who benefits?

Over the time of the MFPP implementation, maize prices have been very volatile, fluctuating between US\$65 and almost US\$260 per tonne, while input costs have risen exponentially, to US\$909 per hectare.³² Comparing figures over the project time is therefore difficult. In 2007, the farmers

23 A genetically modified form of maize that has had a gene inserted to make it resistant to the African stalk borer.

24 In a bizarre twist of "putting words in the mouth of farmers" the International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-biotech Applications (ISAAA) reported in February 2008 that Eastern Cape farmers are so happy with Bt maize that they call it *iyasihluthisa*, reminiscent of the way Makhathini cotton farmers were ruthlessly exploited by Monsanto to sell Bt cotton to the world. <http://tinyurl.com/4cssje>

25 E. Botha, "Chiefs to hear about GM crop benefits", *Daily Despatch*, 26 October 2004.

26 Discussion with Klara Jacobson, Swedish researcher working in Xhophozo village near Flagstaff, May 2008.

27 Maize that has had a gene inserted to make it resistant to Monsanto's herbicide Roundup.

28 "Stalkborer breaks Bt Armour", *Farmers Weekly*, March 2008.

29 P. McAllister, *Maize yields in the Transkei: how productive is subsistence cultivation?*, quoted in S. Shackleton et al., *Re-valuing the communal lands of southern Africa: new understandings of rural livelihoods*, London: ODI, Natural Resource Perspectives No. 62, November 2000. <http://tinyurl.com/3eu5ot>

30 Ibid.

31 Interview with Felix Hobson, manager, MFPP, July 2008.

32 Exchange rate in August 2008: ZAR7.7 = US\$1.



Box 3 Another village is possible: Roma

By Tim Wigley

Near Cala, just down the hill not far from Dellville Trust is Roma Village, which was not part of the MFPP. Over the last five years the community has, instead, received training in natural farming methods, enhancing what it was doing anyway. Some farmers have been very pleased with the results they have achieved. For example, Mr and Mrs Tyandela have for the last five years achieved yields in excess of 4 tonnes of maize per hectare. Their results were so impressive that almost the entire village has stopped using chemical fertilisers and now uses animal manure to fertilise their land. In fact, the yields achieved by the Tyandelas exceeded those of Tiwana MFPP, which is considered one of the best of the MFPP results in the district. Today Mrs Tyandela trains her neighbours and other farmers in the area. This is real social mobilisation because these farmers are independent and self-sufficient. They know what they want and are able to say no. They can apply their knowledge and transfer this knowledge to build a strong community.

All the yields measured in Roma exceeded those achieved in another neighbouring village, Sifondile, which is taking part in the MFPP – and that is without taking into account the pumpkins and beans that are intercropped with the maize in Roma. In fact, this practice is a form of insurance because, when the maize yield is low because of adverse conditions, often one of these companion crops will do better than normal. In Sifondile village this practice was stopped with the introduction of MFPP because the herbicide used kills these crops. In previous years Sifondile village used to get a particularly good bean crop. A 2006 costing exercise to compare production costs for maize in these two villages showed that in Roma it cost 28 cents to produce one kilogram of maize and in Sifondile it cost 3.73 rands – thirteen times as much.

Some comments made by villagers in Roma:

- “We used to believe that if we did not use chemical fertilisers we would not get a crop so, if we had no money at planting time, we did not plant. Now we can plant without money.”
- “We used to think we could only plant our gardens in summer but now we have something green in our gardens throughout the year.”
- “Using manure on our land has improved the soil and it holds more moisture now than it did when we used chemical fertiliser. Whereas before, if we had a drought, the soil would get very hard and even crack, so when we ploughed it made big clods, now the soil stays soft and easy to work.”
- “We have noticed that food grown with manure tastes much better and is healthier too. We do not have to take our children to the clinic as often as before.”

Two events illustrate how aware people are of the advantages of using traditional seeds and organic methods.

- In 2007, Mr Tyandela took half a bag of the maize he had harvested and compared it with a full bag from the MFPP in Sifondile. His half bag was heavier than the full bag of MFPP maize.
- In 2008, the Department of Agriculture decided to support the community garden in Roma with chemical inputs, but when they delivered the fertiliser the community said they did not want it and sent it back. They prefer using manure in the garden because they know it does not destroy their soil.

interviewed had debts that varied between US\$ 640 and US\$ 7,272, with only the farmers who were also contractors having higher income than debt. The vast majority of farmers agreed that they were unable to repay their debts, despite the subsidy. Fallout rates have been extremely high, with a trend towards only individual farmers participating towards the end of the study period. Uvimba Bank has had to write off farmers' debts, and these farmers were taken out of the programme.

The programme was revised to ensure better debt repayment, so focus has shifted even further away

from the poorest towards the better-off farmers. Farmers now have to “take more responsibility” and put down a deposit of 25 per cent – this amounts to US\$ 230 per hectare.³³ There is also a stronger focus on a partnership between government and the private sector to force farmers to practise “better financial management”. The main beneficiary of the project is, of course, the private sector, particularly the seed and agrochemical companies, as the government is now subsidising the introduction of their expensive products to a new market of small farmers who would otherwise not be able to afford them. Most of the US\$ 60

³³ To put this into perspective: government grants for pensioners are US\$106 per month; the average income for 75% of the Eastern Cape population is less than US\$ 110 per month; in the rural areas it is even lower.

million plus of public money pumped into this scheme goes to them. South Africa's seed legislation also protects their interests and ensures that they get their royalties. As the companies are focused on short-term profit, the sustainability of this venture is not their concern.

Contractors require a special mention as they benefit from a four-fold subsidy. On the one hand, they are paid to plough and disk the land of participating farmers, regardless of the level of their skill; they are also participants, qualifying for the subsidy given to farmers; they are also paid if they work as a contractor on their own land; and they qualify for a soft loan from Uvimba Bank to buy implements such as tractors. In many cases they are to blame for failed crops, either because they were not experienced enough for the work or because they lacked commitment to the outcome of their work. This is a classic example of how local elites are well placed to access project funding and to pocket the benefits, creating greater disparities in the community.

Talk Left, Do Right³⁴

Despite all the disruptive land policies of the colonial and apartheid systems, access to land and natural resources still plays a significant role in the livelihoods and household economies of rural dwellers. Clearly, the Eastern Cape government has either not taken cognisance of, or chosen to ignore, the impressive literature that demonstrates this.³⁵ As a result, the MFPP focuses on "monetising" livelihoods and limits its concept of food security to the parameter of yield only. Those behind it have not tried to embrace any of the complex social and economic structures underpinning poverty. The programme does not build on local priorities and strengths; instead, it has increased vulnerability by eroding them.

The dominant paradigm behind MFPP is the idea that there are two parallel economies – the so-called "first" and "second" economies – and that the poor must be integrated into the "first". Poverty studies show that this is a false separation and that the poor are in fact integrated, but on such adverse terms that their poverty is deepening. By giving lip service to poverty alleviation and then not giving attention to structural conditions that hinder



Peach orchard and food gardens in Roma, Eastern Cape, where the villagers have stopped using chemical fertilisers.

and destroy people's efforts at making a living, these policies and programmes are predestined to have the opposite effect.³⁶ Poverty not only persists but is deepening in rural areas because of the inequalities and vulnerabilities created by attempts to integrate Africa's smallholder farmers into global capitalism and "free markets". Rather than pushing massive schemes that are risky and costly and create dependency on the volatile "first" economy, government officials in South Africa (and the rest of Africa) should be adopting policies based on the principles of local and national food sovereignty. These would entail agrarian reform based on local control over seed and seed diversity, low input agriculture, soil and water conservation strategies, access to land and natural resources, and support for local markets. In short, what is needed are government policies that focus on social needs, not integration into world markets.

Both MFPP and AGRA advocates reinforce the colonial image that African farmers are ignorant and unproductive and that local practices have nothing to contribute to livelihoods. What they really want is to create markets for GMOs and agro-chemicals, and ultimately to obtain access to land to grow lucrative global commodities. As the MFPP has shown, people and soils are impoverished in the process, and seeds, knowledge and the very concept of community are lost.

34 A term taken from S. Saul, "The Hares, the Hounds and the ANC", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 25 No. 1, 2004. He writes about the inherent contradictions in the South African government which on the one hand bases its political relevance on "Third World" development rhetoric, but on the other hand presents itself as a "reliable client" to global capitalist interests, which are profoundly anti-poor. The MFPP and AGRA are doing the same.

35 The important contribution of so-called "under-utilised" communal lands to livelihoods has been widely recognised for many years now, but it is ignored because it does not fit into the market economy outlook. See, for example S. Shackleton et al., *Re-valuing the communal lands of southern Africa: new understandings of rural livelihoods*, London: ODI, Natural Resource Perspectives No. 62, November 2000. <http://tinyurl.com/3eu5ot>

36 A. du Toit and D. Neves, *In search of South Africa's Second Economy*, Bellville and Manchester: University of the Western Cape and University of Manchester, Chronic Poverty Research Centre Working Paper 102, 2007. <http://tinyurl.com/3nnev3>



Seeds for tomorrow

GRAIN

“I receive the seed, breed from it and then return it to the centre”, said Shahida, a young woman with four children living in the village of Datinakhali in the district of Cox’s Bazar in the far south-east of Bangladesh. A routine procedure, it would seem, except that the “seed” that Shahida is referring to comes not from plants but from animals: she has received three pairs of chickens (cocks and hens), several cows and a nanny-goat. Once she has bred the animals, she returns them, along with half the offspring they have produced. Holding her youngest child in her arms, Shahida points to a hen running around her yard. “That’s one of the 30 chicks I bred with the birds I borrowed”, she explained. “I am now breeding chickens and selling them in the local market.” We went round behind her house, against the walls of which sticks of cow dung were drying in the hot sun, to be used as fuel. She pointed out a brooding hen, sitting on eggs in a grass-thatched hut.

Shahida may not be classified as economically well off: her small cash income probably means that she and her family are included among the one billion or so of the world’s poorest people, who live on less than a dollar a day. But, although she lives in a region vulnerable to cyclones, Shahida considers herself fortunate. She cultivates a host of crops, including paddy rice, beans, chilli and aduki beans, and saves seeds from one year to another. She rears chickens, goats,

ducks, cows and even a few buffalo. She has a small fish pond and she collects salt from the salt-flats. She, her husband and her four children are self-sufficient in food, eating well throughout the year. They earn a small cash income from selling chicks, young goats and duck eggs.

Shahida has received help from UBINIG (Policy Research for Development Alternatives), a policy advocacy organisation, in organising her farming activities. She was able to branch out into animal husbandry, which brings her family its main cash income, only because UBINIG lent her the first animals. By returning the original animals and half their offspring, Shahida is helping to extend the scheme to many more families. UBINIG’s headquarters are in Dhaka, but it runs a training centre a couple of hours’ drive from Cox’s Bazar town. It promotes *Nayakrishi Andolon*, a form of ecological agriculture that works with nature, not against it. It is based on a simple guiding principle: observe, learn, taste and experience the processes of life, and transform them in order to unleash *ananda* – the joy of living. UBINIG carries out both an ecological and a social function: it conserves and propagates crops and animals that have evolved over thousands of years to thrive in the saline conditions dominant in this coastal area of the Bay of Bengal; and it helps poor farming families to improve their livelihoods.

Recovering from chemical farming

According to Rafiqul Haque Tito, UBINIG’s regional coordinator, one of the centre’s key roles today is to help local farmers to recover from the ravages of chemical farming. “Bangladesh is a hotbed of diversity”, said Tito. “We have six seasons, including the *boro*, the dry season. In the past many farmers used the dry season to plant winter crops, including nitrogen-fixing plants that helped to restore the fertility of the soils. With the advent of the Green Revolution in the 1960s, the ecological balance was disrupted. Farmers were encouraged to bore wells, to irrigate the land and to get a third harvest, using high-yielding varieties (HYVs) of paddy rice. It made farmers rich for a while but it has created all kinds of problems.” Today the region has to buy from outside crops



Photo: GRAIN

Shahida at her smallholding near Cox’s Bazar, south-east Bangladesh.

that it used to be self-sufficient in, such as pulses, garlic, onion, chilli, cabbage, beans and peas. The rivers have become polluted with pesticides. Farmers are having to populate their fish ponds, still a prominent feature of the landscape, with fish purchased from outside. With the prevalence of HYVs, originally supplied at very low prices, farmers have lost some of the resilient local varieties. In a similar way, local breeds of chickens, goats and cattle are also beginning to die out.

In heroic fashion, UBINIG is helping the farmers to fight back. In its vegetable gardens, it is cultivating 92 different species of plants, including a large number of medicinal plants. Of these, 28 are wild plants that can either be eaten or used as medicinal plants (sometimes both). It has hundreds of different varieties of some of these species, possessing, for instance, over 2,000 varieties of paddy rice, some of which are saline-resistant. It has also assembled a remarkable collection of indigenous chickens. “The government says that Bangladesh has just five or six local varieties of chicken, but we alone have 35”, said Tito. Some, like the *heza* (which means porcupine in Bengali), are semi-wild and their populations have fallen to dangerously low levels. “By lending out breeding pairs, usually to local women, we are increasing the numbers of the endangered chickens and providing livelihoods for the women”, said Tito. Over 500 women locally are benefiting from the scheme.

UBINIG is swimming against the tide. With government backing, industrial poultry farming has been growing rapidly



Photo: GRAIN




Several rare local varieties of chicken in the run at the UBINIG centre.

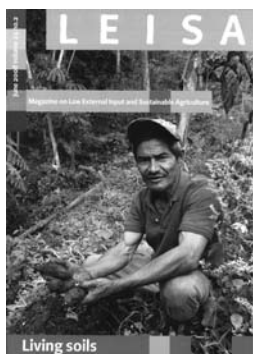
and, along with it, outbreaks of bird flu. Thousands of chickens were slaughtered earlier this year in northern Bangladesh after the biggest ever outbreak of bird flu. Tito said that the government had been doing everything possible to reassure worried consumers, pointing to a text message he had just received from the authorities to reassure him that it was safe to eat industrial chicken. "They have been sending out these messages regularly to all the country's mobile phone users but still people are much happier to eat our chickens. They are resilient and don't catch bird flu. They eat healthily, scavenging for scraps for three quarters of their food, with feed making up the other quarter. They take three months to be ready to eat and they taste much better. Our farmers are finding that they are in big demand at the local markets."

Eschewing tobacco

More and more families are turning to UBINIG for help. Inland, to the east of its training centre, a large area is devoted to tobacco monoculture. "Tobacco farmers use pesticides at every stage", said Tito. "The rivers have become contaminated, and forests are being destroyed because of the huge amount of firewood used in the kilns to cure the tobacco." Because the work is so labour-intensive, families also rely heavily on child labour. Recently 200 families sought out the centre to provide them with seeds as they intend to give up tobacco cultivation and return to traditional farming.

Flooding is part of the ecosystem and people have learnt to live with it. "The centre was flooded a year ago, with the water rising two metres inside

the building", said Tito. "Despite the disruption, a flood every five or six years is good, for the silt it leaves behind replenishes the soils, making them more fertile." Shahida agrees. "We are used to it and it improves our land", she said. "It causes problems only when the authorities want to evacuate us because of flood warnings and we refuse to go unless they let us take all our animals with us." What is new, however, is the force and the frequency of the cyclones and the relentless rise in sea level. A low-lying country, Bangladesh is extremely vulnerable to climate change. It is clear that in future the saline-resistant varieties of paddy that Tito and his colleagues are carefully preserving and propagating are going to be increasingly in demand. These tried and tested plants may yet have a key role to play in defending livelihoods. 



Sustainable agricultural experiences shared in *LEISA Magazine*

Small farmers worldwide have vast experience, but much of their valuable knowledge is often not shared beyond their own community. This is a pity because there is much to be learnt from them. Exchanging such experiences can help other farmers to improve productivity and generate income in an ecologically sound way.

LEISA Magazine finds and publishes such experiences. In this way, a success story from Bolivia can inspire farmers in, for example, Bhutan. LEISA Magazine is one of the rare publications that bring together the practical experiences of those working on sustainable agriculture around the world.

LEISA Magazine has subscribers in 163 countries. The magazine is read by agriculture/development fieldworkers, researchers, teachers, policymakers and entrepreneurs.

A global network

LEISA Magazine has a global edition and six regional editions (*see below*). They all provide their readers with accounts of practical experiences on sustainable small-holder farming, and offer debate, background information to the news, and information on books and websites. All the editions together have a readership of about a quarter of a million people.

The regional editions are published by the LEISA Network, a global partnership of organisations committed to the cause of small-scale farm families. These farmers have been sidelined by "modern" agricultural development. However, small-scale farming continues to be a crucial source of livelihood and food security for an estimated 600 million families. It harbours and nurtures biodiversity, it safeguards the resilience of agro-ecological systems against natural and human-made disasters, and it serves as custodian of cultural traditions.

Birthday

Next year, the magazine celebrates its 25th birthday. The whole year will be devoted to the theme of family farming; every issue will focus on a sub-theme within this. More information on the jubilee will appear in the December issue of LEISA Magazine, which focuses on climate change.

The next regular issue of the LEISA Magazine, due out in September, will be on social inclusion and is entitled "Respect through farming". Previous issues of LEISA Magazine include: "Living Soils", "Ecological pest management", "Healthier farmers, better products", "Securing seed supply" and "How farmers organise".

LEISA Magazine is published quarterly by ILEIA (the Centre for Research and Information on Low-External-Input and Sustainable Agriculture). The six regional editions of the magazine, published by partner organisations are: *LEISA Revista de Agroecología* (in Spanish, for South America), *SALAM* (in Bahasa Indonesia), *AGRIDAPE* (in French, for West-Africa), *LEISA India* (in English), *LEISA China* and *Agriculturas* (in Portuguese, for Brazil). All editions are freely available on the network's website (www.leisa.info).

To subscribe to *LEISA Magazine*, send an email to subscriptions@ileia.nl or write to: PO Box 2067, 3800 CB Amersfoort, the Netherlands. Or visit www.leisa.info for more information on subscriptions.



Protests successful

On 22 August 2008 the Peruvian Congress voted 66–29 to repeal a controversial presidential decree that would have facilitated the acquisition by large corporations of communal indigenous lands. The vote, which was a major political setback for President Alan García, took place after 11 days of mass mobilisations. Thousands of Peruvians from 65 indigenous groups shut down oil pipelines, took control of large gas fields and blockaded roads. “We are defending ourselves against government aggression”, said Alberto Pizango, president of AIDSESP (Asociación Interétnica de Desarrollo de la Selva Peruana/Interethnic Association for the Development of the Peruvian Forest). Miguel Palacín Quispe, from CAOI (Coordinadora Andina de Organizaciones Indígenas), said that the new decree was “an instrument to evict communities from their ancestral lands and to destroy traditional forms of labour, economy and organisation: in short, to put an end to the indigenous communities, something that even the dictatorship of Alberto Fujimori could not manage to do.” García sent in the army, and fierce clashes ensued between protesters and the police.

The indigenous groups resorted to protests after talks failed to secure the repeal of the decree. Decree 1015 would have modified law 26505, which makes it necessary, before communal lands can be sold, that two-thirds of the community vote in favour. Decree 1015 would have reduced the required majority to 50 per cent plus one vote and, even more seriously, would have abolished the requirement that the meeting is quorate. In other words, if a community of a 1,000 people held an assembly which only 100 people attended, it would have been enough for 51 people to vote for the proposal for the sale to be authorised. Law 26505 was passed as part of the free trade agreement (FTA) that Peru agreed with the USA in December 2005.

Finnish patent

Fears are growing in some sectors that the world may indeed be heading for a flu pandemic. The British government, for instance, recently decided that it was the biggest risk facing the country, saying that a flu pandemic, which could claim up to 750,000 lives in the UK alone, was “not a question of if but when.” For most of us this is a

fairly alarming prospect, but for others such an event presents merely another opportunity to make money.

According to well-sourced information posted on a blog (www.immunocompetent.com), a tiny Finnish company, Remedal, has filed for patents on nearly all injected or intranasal human vaccines containing an H5 and an N2 antigen. These would be the vaccines required if H5N2 flu, at present affecting poultry and birds, were to mutate into flu that could be passed from human to human. If an H5N2 recombinant were to spark off a pandemic (or threaten to do so), these vaccines would be in great demand.

It is evident that Remedal hasn't the capacity to develop and market a flu vaccine. The only compound it currently produces is a “dietary supplement” that, it says, aids alcohol metabolism, thus reducing hangovers and liver damage. Even here it is looking for another company to buy the compound and commercialise it. So Remedal of Helsinki has no plans to provide the world with pandemic flu vaccines but merely wants to claim a royalty on these vaccines, if its gamble on H5N2 works out. A nice little earner.

For food sovereignty

In August a group of women delegates from CLOC (Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Organizaciones del Campo) and Via Campesina took part in a preparatory meeting in Rosario in Argentina for the World Assembly of Women, which will be held as part of the Fifth International Conference of Via Campesina in Mozambique in October 2008. This is an extract from the statement they issued at the end of their meeting:

“We agreed in our deliberations that food sovereignty, as a principle of a political nature that questions the capitalist system in all its expressions, seeks the transformation of society and establishes the need to deepen the struggle against neoliberal policies in support of the defence of land and territory. For this reason we must carry on with the battle against transnationals and free trade agreements that have been destroying peasant agriculture, territory and local food systems. We will continue our struggle to prevent the signing of new agreements and to repeal those already signed. And we reaffirm our commitment to continue fighting against the foreign debt, which operates as a mechanism

of oppression that undermines the sovereignty of our peoples.

For this reason we declare our commitment to deepen the struggle for our rights as women and as peoples, to carry on producing food and to protect our land and nature. It is imperative to guarantee food for everyone and to defend our right to water, land, seeds and the defence of our territories.”

Ecuador bars GMOs?

As part of the process of drawing up a new constitution, the Ecuadorean authorities held a series of forums in different parts of the country to consult the population about genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Time and again peasant farmer organisations, indigenous groups and the general public voted for an Ecuador free of GMOs. Observers said that it was hard to think of another issue over which society was so unanimous. It is easy to understand why. Maize has been cultivated for over 5,000 years in Ecuador. Peasant agriculture centres around three crops – maize, beans and pumpkin. The maize provides physical support for the beans and the beans capture nitrogen from the air, improving the fertility of the soil. It is alarming to think of the damage that the introduction of GM maize could cause to this delicate ecological balance.

Even so, the business sector lobbied hard for the legalisation of GM crops. Large-scale poultry farmers and the poultry industry were in favour, for it is cheaper to import as animal feed subsidised GM maize from the USA than to buy the product from Ecuadorean farmers. PRONACA, a huge company running fully integrated poultry and pork operations, strongly backs GMOs too. In close alliance with Monsanto and Bayer, it currently employs contract farmers, supplying them with a “technology package” of hybrid seeds, fertilisers and pesticides. It would be very simple to switch to transgenic seeds in the place of the hybrids.

It was difficult to reach an agreement between the various groups. The constitutional text, reached by consensus, says: “Ecuador is declared a country free of transgenic seeds and crops. Only as an exception, in the case of national security, with the support of the President of the Republic and approved by the majority of the National Assembly, will genetically modified seeds be allowed.” So the country is declared free of GMOs, but a door is left open....



Biodiversidad



Seedling's sister publication, *Biodiversidad*, written in Spanish and distributed in Latin America, is growing rapidly. As Carlos Vicente, who runs GRAIN's information work in Latin America, explains, it is responding to the demands of a highly politicised continent, where social movements are finally managing to get some of the more progressive governments to take up their demands.

“*Biodiversidad* magazine has evolved. When it was created in 1994, as the result of a joint initiative between GRAIN and REDES-AT (an ecological group in Uruguay linked to Friends of the Earth), the aim was to produce a publication that would publicise the struggles and the issues around biodiversity in Latin America. Our intention was to combine articles from *Seedling* with our own articles on the local and regional reality of Latin America. Right from the beginning we created an advisory board, drawn from people from different regions and sectors of Latin America, to help define the issues to be covered and to establish the broad editorial guidelines.

In July 2007 we decided to widen our editorial group and to decentralise our printing. We brought in Acción Ecológica from Ecuador, Grupo Semillas from Colombia, Grupo ETC from Mexico, Campaña de la Semilla from Via Campesina in Chile, Acción por la Biodiversidad in Argentina and Red de Coordinación en Biodiversidad from Costa Rica. As well as this, we produced one edition of the magazine in Portuguese in association with Centro IPE in Brazil and we plan to go on doing this in the future. We brought in a new editor – Ramón Vera Herrera – who is based in Mexico. He comes up with an editorial proposal for each edition and oversees the coordination of all the material. Once the edition is finalised, it is distributed electronically and printed in each of the contributing countries.

It is this process which has led to a step change in our circulation. In 2007 our print run was 2,500–3,000 copies and we distributed it by mail to subscribers from all over the continent. As a result of the changes mentioned above, our print run has increased to 8,000 copies. We still mail it to our subscribers but, as well as that, our editorial partners distribute the magazine by hand at the various meetings, events and demonstrations that they are involved in. In this way we get our magazine to the social movements and their struggles.

We see our role as supporting the different struggles of the social organisations in Latin America, giving them useful information and analysis that help them gain a better understanding of the processes that affect them. At the same time, we are helping to publicise their problems, resistances and strategies that they are developing. Our magazine turns up all over the region, and is clearly used by social organisations. As a result, we are confident that we are achieving our objectives.

Biodiversidad is developing its own identity, which is somewhat different from *Seedling*'s, because we are so fully involved in Latin America's social struggles. At the same time, *Seedling* continues to be our sister publication and an essential reference point for us. We still routinely translate and publish articles from *Seedling* that deal with global problems so that we can encourage discussion about these issues in the Spanish-speaking world. At the same, the fact that articles from *Biodiversidad* are beginning to be used in *Seedling* has generated an enriching process that we hope to sustain and deepen.

We try to strike a balance between regional and international information in *Biodiversidad*, but sometimes it is quite difficult. Capitalist globalisation means that the problems that Latin America faces have many points in common with those faced in other countries, and we want to make the connections. Sometimes we are able, through GRAIN's network, to look at problems from a global perspective, as was the case with our special issue on agrofuels. In this instance we were very pleased to be able to print the magazine in Spain, thanks to contacts with EHNE (Euskal Herriko Nekazarien Elkartasuna/Solidarity of Agricultural Workers of the Basque Country) and Veterinarios sin Fronteras (also including in this edition some articles looking at the problem from a Spanish point of view).

As to the future, we want to strengthen our network, getting ever closer to social movements, peasant organisations and indigenous peoples, so that we can reflect their demands, proposals and visions. We will discuss this in our next editorial meeting, to be held later in 2008, when we will be talking about increasing yet further our presence in Latin America, bringing in other organisations. We are hopeful about the future because Latin America is a highly politicised continent, and governments are beginning to listen to social movements and to take on some of their demands. Yet we must also remember that most people live in a situation of oppression, in which the neoliberal model is still dominant.”



