Biosafety in Danger

How industry, researchers and negotiators collaborate to undermine the UN Biodiversity Convention

Summary

New and controversial genetic engineering techniques like gene editing, Synthetic Biology and gene drives are increasingly the subject of attention and debate at a global level. Environmental groups and many amongst the scientific and farming communities are calling for strict regulation of these new techniques and for a global moratorium on gene drives in the interest of public health and the environment. But biotech corporations are lobbying hard to avoid regulation and oppose any restrictions.

Important talks on these issues will take place at both EU and UN level in the immediate future. The EU is facing a crucial moment as the European Court of Justice is expected to issue **a ruling** on the matter this summer. Meanwhile **subsidiary bodies** of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and its Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety (CPB) will meet in Montreal in the first two weeks of July to discuss the biosafety risks of (Extreme) Genetic Engineering techniques, including synthetic biology and gene drives.

New documents released to Corporate Europe Observatory by the Dutch Ministry of Health show how a Dutch lead official for EU and UN-level biosafety issues has actively participated in **networks run by lobby group PRRI (Public Research and Regulation Initiative), which brings together biotech corporations, industry-friendly researchers and other "like-minded" regulators and negotiators** with the explicit aim of influencing the outcome of UN biosafety talks. This official chaired EU talks on the endorsement of risk assessment guidance for GMOs and actively shared information she had access to from this role within this lobby network. The documents can be downloaded from the Dutch government website.

PRRI, based in Belgium and founded by a Dutch ex-official on biosafety regulations, also undertakes activities at EU level, for example organising events with biotech lobby group EuropaBio. The organisation was funded by Monsanto and Croplife in its early days, and later by the governments of Spain and Canada, and by the EU. There is no financial information to be found on PRRI's website from 2012 onwards. A Corporate Europe Observatory background article on PRRI from 2008 can be found here.

From the industry side, the PRRI email groups included lobbyists from Bayer, Monsanto, J. Craig Venter Institute, and the international industry umbrella organisation Croplife International. Actively participating regulators included members from the Dutch, Brazilian, Honduran and Canadian delegations.

The released documents illustrate how industry, researchers and regulators organise and prepare in advance of CBD/CPB negotiation rounds through dedicated PRRI-organised email lists, preparatory meetings and sharing political intelligence. PRRI's activities to influence outcomes also included providing a 'backup team' to support delegates while they slept, training groups of students to engage in lobbying and side events, mobilising participants to take part in official online CBD consultations and organising a "pool-side/beach social event" to which undecided national delegates were invited. PRRI members

speak of their circle as a “like-minded” group, and refer to NGOs and less industry-friendly regulators as the “precautionary types” that will “demonize” synbio or new techniques.

The Dutch, Canadian, Brazilian and US regulators also took part in a **secretive PRRI meeting** in Washington DC at the headquarters of the International Life Sciences Institute (**ILSI**) for “like-minded regulators” in February 2016 to discuss the **UN Guidance on Risk Assessment**, an important guidance document on risk assessment and risk management of genetically modified organisms. A representative from the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) also attended this meeting. The meeting was financed by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), even though the US is not a party to the CBD.

In particular, the documents show how the Dutch regulator asked members of the PRRI group to share information with her about **other countries’ positions**, one month before the CBD/CPB Parties met in Cancún in 2016. Glandorf explained that she would be chairing the EU discussion on this matter, and that thus she could be better prepared with arguments against endorsement of the Guidance on Risk Assessment. PRRI encouraged the people on their email list to actively share negotiation positions with Glandorf.

The lobbying efforts were quite successful. At the official UN CBD/CPB meeting in December 2016 in Cancun, Mexico, an important working group which had undertaken crucial work on GMO risk assessment **was closed down due to pressure from roughly the same countries** as those active on the PRRI email list. This meant that the Guidance document, which many developing countries had called for and actively supported, **was not officially endorsed**, that ongoing risk assesment work would be stalled for at least four years, and that work on new topics like Synbio and GM fish stopped.

Another key objective of the PRRI group in 2016 was to **counter the call for a global moratorium on gene drive experiments** due to concern about threats to biodiversity, peace and food security, signed by 160 organisations worldwide. In December 2017, following Freedom of Information requests made at two US universities, the **Gene Drive Files** revealed how lobby firm Emerging Ag was paid $1.6 million by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to skew the outcomes of an official online CBD consultation on synthetic biology. Emerging Ag covertly recruited 65 seemingly independent scientists and officials to stack the forum with pro-biotech voices.

Following the release of the Gene Drive Files, civil society organisations called on Dr. Cristiana Paşca Palmer, Executive Secretary of the Convention on Biological Diversity, to take urgent measures to **address conflicts of interest** in the CBD and its processes. The CBD Secretariat has taken an important step by proposing to formalise procedures to avoid and manage conflicts of interest.

At the last meeting of the CBD Parties in Cancún in 2016, 93 industry lobbyists were registered as attending from a wide range of firms including biotech, pharmaceuticals and cosmetics. The PRRI delegation was at least 50 strong, in addition to 30 students, and people with accreditation via PRRI were registered as “NGO”, not industry.

At the upcoming meetings in Montreal, SynBio, gene drives and conflicts of interest are all on the agenda. The documents released to Corporate Europe Observatory have shone a light on the significant level of lobby activity, industry efforts and money which is clearly being spent to influence the outcome of these ongoing biosafety talks, and the extent to which some national regulators seem to be compromised. In this context, it is increasingly urgent for the CBD to develop and implement strong measures to prevent conflicts of interest occuring into the future, for the sake of public health and the environment.