Summary

Biosafety in Danger - How industry, researchers and negotiators collaborate to undermine the UN Biodiversity Convention

Corporate Europe Observatory, June 2018

New 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 bans.

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 expert groups of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and its Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety 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.

The emails released by the Dutch authorities illustrate how industry, researchers and some regulators have been coordinating themselves ahead of UN negotiations of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and its Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety (CPB) to promote weakened oversight of GMOs and new genetic technologies.

Through dedicated email lists, the sharing of political intelligence, the mobilisation of student groups to participate in lobbying activities and side events at the UN negotiations, as well as attempts to influence the outcome of online consultations run by the CBD Secretariat, biotech lobby group the Public Research and Regulation Initiative (PRRI) has been pooling the efforts of the biotech industry and GMO-sympathetic governments and academics.

Key actors of the PRRI network include regulators from the Dutch, Brazilian, Honduran and Canadian delegations to the UN talks, some of whom hold prominent negotiating roles, as well as lobbyists from Bayer, Monsanto, Croplife International, the J Craig Venter Institute and representatives of corporate-backed organisations like the International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI) and the International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-biotech Applications (ISAAA). PRRI members speak of their circle as a “like-minded” group, and refer to NGOs and less industry-friendly regulators the “precautionary types” that will “demonize” synbio or new techniques.

Implicated in these activities is also an official from the Health Ministry of the Netherlands who chaired EU talks on the endorsement of biosafety guidelines for GMOs in the context of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, and discussed these closed-door talks within the lobby network run by PRRI. PRRI encouraged the people on their email list to actively share negotiation positions with Glandorf.

Documents released by the Canadian authorities revealed how several regulators, including the above-mentioned Dutch official and representatives from Canada, Brazil and the USA, took part in a covert meeting at the headquarters of the International Life Sciences Institute in Washington DC in February 2016. Their aim was to stop the endorsement of an important UN guidance document on the risk assessment and 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.

At the following Conference of the Parties, important work on GM risk assessment was terminated under pressure from some of the same delegations participating in the PRRI groups. This meant that the Guidance document, which many developing countries had called for and actively supported, was not officially endorsed, that ongoing biosafety work would be stalled for at least four years, and that work on new topics like Synbio and GM fish stopped.

PRRI's attempts to also influence the outcome of online consultations by the CBD were reinforced in 2017 when the lobby firm Emerging Ag was paid 1.6 million dollars by the Gates Foundation to skew a consultation on Synthetic Biology, as shown by the *Gene Drive Files*. This has led to calls for the CBD Secretariat to put in place conflict of interest rules.

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.

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.

The released emails demonstrate how a small group of "like-minded" officials of a few countries teamed up with the biotech industry and its advocates in order to influence the outcome of UN biosafety talks. With the rapid pace of development of new genetic engineering techniques including SynBio and gene drives, it is crucially important to have international decisions to counter any potential damage to biodiversity or risk for food safety.