

A disclaimer addressed to the attention of GEF CEO and GEF council members by the Coalition for the Protection of African Genetic Heritage (COPAGEN)

Subject: Manipulation of information to serve hidden agendas: Regional (Benin, Burkina Faso, Mali, Senegal, Togo) : West African Regional Biosafety Project.

Dear Madame and Council members,

In annex 10 of the project entitled, **Regional (Benin, Burkina Faso, Mali, Senegal, Togo): West African Regional Biosafety Project**, submitted for CEO endorsement as posted on the GEF website at www.theGEF.org, it is stated that:

“Also of note, civil society groups such as COPAGEN-BF - previously hostile to the Program - were this time noticeably more supportive of its aims, reflecting a shift of opinions similar to that of the above-mentioned ESMF national consultations of November-December. This observed change in attitude further supports the conclusion that public misperceptions have diminished”.

We members of COPAGEN (Coalition for the Protection of Africa's Genetic Heritage¹) wish to distance ourselves from these claims and to clearly state that our perceptions and reservations on this project have not changed. In fact the current version of the project, despite the changes in objectives and content, following some of the objections raised by COPAGEN (especially during the Burkina consultations), does not convincingly address the salient reservations we raised as contained in the declaration made during a press conference we organised on the subject in Cotonou, Benin on July 4th 2006, and as re-echoed by our different representatives at the different national consultation events where we were invited (Burkina Faso, Mali, Senegal, Togo, Benin).

Moreover, we were only selectively invited to the consultations. In Benin, for example, due to the position it defended during the initial consultation, COPAGEN Benin was carefully kept away from the second round of consultations and another NGO with very little experience in matters of biosafety co-opted to sit in for civil society. In Mali, one of our members had a brief (approximately one hour) meeting with the focal point at a hotel in Bamako and that was it. We were never invited to the different public consultations. We note that there were conscious efforts to keep us out of the consultations in the different countries especially where our presence was considered embarrassing.

Our participation in the different consultations to which we were invited, a sign of our openness to dialogue, is being misconstrued as synonymous to our support for the project. In fact, our reservations and opposition to the project remain based on the following:

The different versions of the full project document exist in English only, yet all the countries of the WAEMU region (except Guinea Bissau), have French as their official business language. This amounts to a total disregard for the principles of effective participation of the public in the debate when materials are rendered

¹COPAGEN is a broad based coalition of local, national and regional organisations present in all countries of the WAEMU region and Guinea Conakry, opposed to the introduction of GMOs in African agriculture and working towards the recognition of the rights of communities over their genetic resources. Members in different countries include: farmers' organizations, consumers' organizations, trade unions, women organizations, youth groups, national and international NGOs, cultural groups, academics, artists' organizations, and individuals

inaccessible through the language barrier. Consultations were organised, based on translated extracts of portions of the project document as could easily be sold to the audience. We consider this as pure manipulation which does not speak well of the image of the World Bank, WAEMU and even the consultants who were hired to sell "those selected extracts" of the project document :

1. In the WAEMU region, 6 of the 8 countries have ratified the CPD but only one country (Burkina Faso) has biosafety legislation in place. It is not too clear why the project aims at harmonising laws that do not exist. . Harmonisation here may simply mean using the Burkina Faso pro-GM legislation as a template to be imposed on other countries in the region. This in fact, is a strategy to side-line the sovereignty of each country and to push ahead the GMO agenda of translational companies by improving the climate for investment in genetically modified seeds in the sub region. As per provisions of WAEMU texts, decisions taken in one country can be enforced in the other, in situations where the regional body endorses such a decision. This is called the principle of subsidiarity.
2. In **part A (STRATEGIC CONTEXT AND RATIONALE)** of the project document, **point 1 (Country and sector issues)**, it is stated that:

"The cotton sector plays a critical role in the economies of the eight West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU) countries,' where 10 million households rely on cotton for their livelihood. As such, it is an important element in determining the rate of economic growth and the level of poverty within the region. The cotton producing countries have been able to gain market share in cotton over the past three decades, but falling prices and increasing market pressures make it imperative that they find ways to improve their competitiveness while seeking more favorable trade conditions ».

Further, in **annex 9 (Economic and Financial Analysis)**, the conclusion that the project shall bring significant financial gains is based entirely on an analysis of Bt cotton.

The fact that cotton is identified as the prime target reveals the stratagem being used. Burkina Faso, under combined pressure from Monsanto, Syngenta, USAID and the US Federal Department of Agriculture, decided to begin trials of Bt cotton in 2003 without any public debate or regulatory legislation. The entire West Africa region is now being targeted so as to enable, these trans-nationals to be better able to reap returns from their investments² at the expense of the millions of smallholder cotton producers in the region.

It is clear to all that the problems of cotton in the sub-region today have nothing to do with seeds, or productivity, or yields. That African cotton is competitive, is no secret to anyone. The problems encountered by African cotton today, emanate from the subsidies that the USA and Europe grant to their own cotton producers, disregarding the rules of the WTO, which they contributed to making. By so doing, the competitiveness of African cotton on the world market is distorted. We are surprised that under such conditions, WAEMU, under pressure from the World Bank is pushing countries of the sub-region towards continuous increases in cotton production.

² As Jacques Diouf said, "...biotechnological research is essentially driven by the world's top ten trans-national corporations, which are spending annually US\$3 billion. By comparison to the CGIAR system, the largest international public sector supplier of agricultural technologies for developing countries has a total annual budget of less than US\$300 million. The private sector protects its results with patents in order to earn from its investment and it concentrates on products that have no relevance to food in developing countries". **Source:** Letter from the Director General of the Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations", 14 June 2004, in response to a civil society open letter in relation to the FAO's report "Agricultural Biotechnology: meeting the needs of the poor?" in the 2003-04 issue of The State of Food and Agriculture.

3. The economic and Financial analyses of the project (**annex 9**), concludes that the project shall generate gains in terms of :
 - “Efficiency gains from regional regulatory and biosafety methodologies” through comparisons of Regional vs. national regulatory cost savings;
 - “Gains from lower levels of technology fees”, as a result of negotiations capacity building activities, in the with-program than in the baseline scenario
 - “Gains from lowered risk of regional biodiversity contamination” which could not be valued due to the absence of data.

The assumptions made to arrive at these conclusions are too simplistic in our view. Savings through pulling resources together in a regional arrangement are obvious. However, it is not clear how this system shall be maintained after the end of the project given the huge running and maintenance costs for the regional and national reference laboratories and other structures that the project shall help to build.

That farmers shall be able to negotiate lower prices for GM seeds, is not feasible in the current situation where the supply of such seeds is monopolised by a few giant trans-nationals working towards recovery of huge investments and at the same time aiming at profit maximisation. In fact, only one company - Monsanto - owns the GM seed technology sown on over 90% of the total world area sown to GM seeds and five companies make up virtually 100% of the transgenic seed market. Building the negotiating capacities of farmers is useless when there is no space for negotiation.

Nonetheless, the attention the project is focusing on the cost of technology is ample recognition (admission) of our reservations that the GMO craze is a drive to further impoverish farmers through high production costs as observed on cotton farms in India and dependency on monopolistic trans-nationals. Yes, it is simply a drive towards taking African agriculture hostage with negative impact on the revenues and livelihood of farmers. This is simply unacceptable.

It is very curious that while the global environment objective (GEO) of the project is to “protect regional biodiversity against the potential risks associated with the introduction of LMOs into the environment”, gains from lowered risk of regional biodiversity contamination cannot be valued. This is an indication that though the objectives of the project have been changed to please the public, the driving force of the project remains “the hidden agenda” of pushing for the introduction of GMOs in the region and beyond. This is simply cynical!

4. Finally, if the economic and financial analyses of the project are made based on a different set of assumptions, for example the opportunity costs of the huge investments to be devoted to the project, the economic in-efficiency in development resources allocation will be so evident:

Besides, the project is a duplication of so many other initiatives in the region with similar or same objectives. These include the biosafety and biotechnology initiatives of CORAF/WECARD, INSAH/CILSS (both funded by USAID), the UNEP/GEF project, and many other projects at individual country level. There is full-scale aggression against West African farming communities in particular, and the West African population in general.

The US\$ 24.3 million (plus the billions spent in developing GMOs by trans-nationals), if directed to farmer-led, participatory research networks, would generate far more equitable, productive and ecologically sound technologies. This will strengthen the role of smallholder farmers in the management of their agricultural biodiversity and improvement of crops vital to their livelihoods. Why then the insistence on costly and risk pruned GMO technology ?

Our concluding call

In conclusion, there is no doubt in our minds that the real beneficiaries of this project are the biotech transnationals, and not the West African populations. The WB and its partners are trying “to find problems to solutions” in our region. As the actual co-ordinator of the project said during a meeting on the project in Mali *“there is money in this project and we can fund most of your initiatives. As poor countries, we cannot refuse this money coming from partners. We should be ashamed of attacking these donors who provide us with funds”*. In response to this, we say: **our countries and our region are not up for sale. Our sovereignty is not tradable.** COPAGEN cannot be supportive of an initiative that is oriented towards destroying the national negotiation processes on biosafety laws in our countries. This initiative of the World Bank and the WAEMU, shall push African agriculture towards a stalemate

On the bases of the above, we call on the GEF CEO and GEF council members not to endorse the project.

Done at Abidjan
August 31st 2007.

Signed

COPAGEN Burkina
GOPAGEN Benin (JINUKUN)
GOPAGEN Togo
GOPAGEN Niger
GOPAGEN Guinea Bissau
GOPAGEN Guinea Conakry
GOPAGEN Senegal
GOPAGEN Mali
GOPAGEN Côte d’Ivoire (CIBIOV)