

ATTACK OF THE MUTANT WATERMELONS:

THE CAMPAIGN AGAINST GMOs IN THE PHILIPPINES

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It has often been said that biotechnology will feed a hungry world. That may very well be the case in the future. But at the moment, biotechnology is only feeding hungry activists. As this paper shows, opposing biotechnology is not so much of a cause these days, as it is an occupation. And anti-biotech NGOs have begun to resemble an industry more than a movement.

As the Philippines case study amply illustrates, genetically modified organisms (GMOs) are being assaulted by a sophisticated, well-resourced and co-ordinated campaign conducted by a small clique of highly-networked, media-savvy, professional activists funded by foreign money. The campaign against biotechnology in the Philippines is not a spontaneous grassroots movement, but a carefully planned and orchestrated effort.

This analysis will illustrate some of the strategies, tactics, international and domestic networks, linkages, key personnel and funding sources of the anti-biotech campaign in the Philippines. The activists' ability to obtain foreign funding helps to show why Third-World NGOs have so aggressively sought to stop any research into, let alone any eventual introduction of, GMOs. Because just as multinationals have a financial motive for developing biotechnology, so too have the activists in opposing it.

While many of these activists may very well be totally committed and prepared to fight against biotechnology for nothing, the indisputable fact is that there are not. They are being generously compensated for their time and money, and opposing biotechnology is every part a job (one they may feel passionately about), just as it is for the scientists who are working to find solutions to the world's great problems like hunger and environmental degradation.

The source of this funding from abroad also raises some fairly interesting questions. For much of Filipino history, the desire to resist various forms of imperialism has been a recurrent theme. The question that must be posed here, which has been first posed by respected scholar Deepak Lal, is whether we are witnessing the emergence of a new form imperialism. Not corporate imperialism, or American imperialism but the ecological or eco-imperialism of western environmentalists as propagated by

their Filipino proxies. And whether western environmentalists are the new colonialists.

Put simply, biotechnology is too important to be used as a fundraising tool for NGOs. Filipinos deserve better than this. For that matter, humanity deserves better than this given biotechnology's enormous potential to do good.

BIOTECH BATTLEFIELD

In the Philippines, SEARICE, GRAIN, MASIPAG, PAN and IPAR are among those leading the crusade against the research, importation and eventual commercialisation of GMO or biotech products. Portraying themselves as the voice of the people, such groups have become ever more strident in their efforts to influence the present administration. Yet nothing about their own structures is transparent. How do they operate? Who are behind them?

The present analysis is not an easy task. After all, in the Philippines – as in most countries of the world – no laws exist requiring NGOs to disclose foreign funding. NGOs in the Philippines apparently do not even need to provide documents to justify their tax-exempt status.

Strategically, the Philippines is an especially important battleground for biotechnology, because of the presence in that country of the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI). IRRI has been among the most important research institutions that developed the technology for the Green Revolution. This role has made it an important symbolic target for the NGOs, with their opposition to GMOs as well as to modern agriculture more generally.

SEARICE

The main anti-biotech NGO in the Philippines is the South Asia Regional Institute for Community Education (SEARICE), which is based in Quezon City.

At a local level, SEARICE is an NGO focusing on community-based conservation and development of plant resources. It engages in policy 'advocacy, lobbying and networking on the issues related to biotechnology, agriculture diversity, intellectual property rights, bio-diversity and plant genetic resources at the national, regional and international levels.' According to what appears to be its website: 'The organisation is an outcome of consultations and exchanges among development workers in Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand who decided to enhance each other's grassroots work in their respective countries.' More information can be found at <http://www.codewan.com.ph/CyberDyaryo/profiles/profiles049.htm>

SEARICE says that it was registered with the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) in December 1981, as a non-stock and non-profit organisation, and re-registered in 1996. The Manila

Times cast considerable doubt over this allegation on 6 November 2000. In that issue, an article by Manolo Jara revealed that 'a diligent search' had produced no evidence for SEARICE having been re-registered in 1996. In the words of the report: 'SEARICE does not have a "legal personality" to speak of.' Admittedly, this report came out at the end of last year. Since then, SEARICE may well have carried out its necessary re-registration (indeed it would have been utterly foolish not to).

Yet such revelations raise many interesting questions, not only about the methods of SEARICE, but about those of other anti-biotech NGOs in the Philippines, and about NGOs in the developing world more generally.

Headed by Executive Director Elenita 'Neth' Dano, SEARICE is governed by a Regional Board of Directors, which meets twice annually. SEARICE's members come from different South-East Asian countries. SEARICE claims to be active to 'varying degrees' in the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam.

SEARICE has relationships with all of the other major anti-biotech players in the Philippines. It also has strong links with the Catholic Church's Justice for Peace organisation, particularly in Mindanao. Though these connections should never be confused with having imprimatur of the Catholic Church. Such connections are not unusual in the Philippines, where elements of the Catholic Church have a fairly distinctively radical character; and where the Catholic Church is a significant donor to NGOs.

Perhaps the next most active SEARICE partner in the Philippines is the Community Based Native Seed Research Centre (CONSERVE). Both SEARICE and CONSERVE are involved in projects funded by the Development Fund of Norway, which appears to be one of SEARICE's most regular donors. <http://www.u-fondet.no/engelsk/index.html>

As far as other countries go, SEARICE is closely affiliated with the Canadian-based NGO Rural Advancement Foundation International (RAFI), one of the leading global anti-biotech NGOs. Former co-ordinator of the SEARICE network on genetic conservation and use, Rene Salazar, sits on the RAFI's Board of Trustees. Moreover, RAFI has been a source of funding for SEARICE. Aside from providing SEARICE with invaluable counsel on technical advice, strategies, research and policies, RAFI is also important to SEARICE because of the potential funding sources that it can put SEARICE's way.

RAFI, though, is not the only source of SEARICE's income. Its other funding comes from a variety of foreign sources such as Diakonia or Diaconia, which is an English Church organisation, as well as the World Wide Fund for Nature and GRAIN (to be discussed later).

A particularly significant donor for SEARICE is the Svenska Naturskyddsforeningen or Swedish Society for Nature Conservation (SSNC). This body gives funds to a number of NGOs (and anti-biotech NGOs specifically) in the region apart from SEARICE. These NGOs are: MASIPAG; Consumers' Association of Penang and Third World Network (both Malaysian).

These projects have been funded jointly with the Swedish International Development Co-operation Agency (SIDA), which is the Swedish Government's aid arm, since 1990 they now they involve 'some

40 organisations and focus on questions of biodiversity, consumer issues and information exchange between the North and the South.’ In 1998 and 1999, the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation gave around US\$1.2 million to NGOs in the developing world through an international program, partly funded by SIDA. <http://www.snf.se/snf/english/international.htm>

The exact amounts which the SSNC supplies are not stated in its annual reports, though SEARICE is mentioned there as receiving special ‘networking’ support from the SSNC, in addition to the programme discussed in the previous paragraph. Such support for networking is important for the developing world’s NGO, not only because of the opportunities networking gives them to exchange ideas, strategies and plans with each other, but because it gives them the chance to raise funds from Western anti-biotech NGOs and foundations.

Catholic Relief Services is yet another source of funding for SEARICE. It has given more funding than any other group in the Philippines for a ‘NO GMO’ campaign, which involves education through mass production and distribution of anti-GMO, anti-biotech propaganda. Some of this material appears in English, but it is also produced in local dialects such as Cebuano, Chavacano and Ilongo. It includes not just conventional pamphlets, but illustrated magazines and comics, also in the local languages. Other donors for this campaign include RAFI and the Development Fund of Norway, both mentioned earlier. There are other possible connections in contributions between SEARICE and groups in nearby lands: including the Consumer International’s Regional Office Asia-Pacific Regional Headquarters (CI-ROAP), which is based in Kuala Lumpur.

The RAFI Annual Report credits a German NGO called GTZ with giving SEARICE aid, though this aid is unlikely to have been financial, and most probably consisted of technical support of some kind (see <http://www.gtz.de>).

The Dutch NGO known as the Humanist Institute for Development Co-operation or, HIVOS admits on its own website to giving support to SEARICE, which it lists as one of its ‘counterparts’, since 1 February 1991. Exactly how much funding, the website does not say (<http://www.hivos.nl/>).

It says that HIVOS provides financial and political support to over 800 local private organisations, which it refers to as ‘counterparts’, in more than 30 countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America and South-Eastern Europe.’ The European Union is a significant funder of HIVOS’ activities.

A particularly interesting NGO, HIVOS is involved in a large number of joint projects such as its Biodiversity Fund, which is funded by the Environmental Department of the Dutch Ministry for Development Co-operation (DGIS). The fund is managed by HIVOS in league with NOVIB, Oxfam’s Dutch affiliate; and it lists the International Federation of Organic Agricultural Movements (IFOAM) as a ‘partner.’ The IFOAM is the worldwide umbrella organisation of the organic agriculture movement (<http://www.hivos.nl/english/framesets/begin.php?set=themes+general>).

GRAIN, or Genetic Resources Action International Network, is an international NGO established in 1990 to fight the spread of genetically engineered plant varieties, which it views as a threat to the environment. GRAIN is a Spanish organisation, based in Barcelona, but has networks all over the world, the Philippines included.

Its principal contact in that country is ostensibly Dr Lina Briones of the University of the Philippines in Los Baños. In fact, operations are actually run by a European: Renée Vellvé, who is listed as GRAIN Philippine's program officer. GRAIN's Spanish headquarters essentially fund the Philippines operations. Moreover, GRAIN is one of the primary funding sources of the SEARICE's campaign against GMO's.

Where GRAIN's Barcelona-based secretariat gets its money from is uncertain. GRAIN has promised to post its annual report on its website (<http://www.grain.org/>) by the middle of 2001, but thus far there has been no sign of it. According to that website, GRAIN's work is financed by grants from 'NGOs, governments and inter-governmental organisations.' Just which NGOs and governments are involved, GRAIN does not say.

GRAIN may be considered an extremist organisation, when it comes to its views on genetic engineering. Together with RAFI, it believes that technology cannot be value-neutral; that there is always an ideology behind even the most innocent-seeming technology, and that genetic engineering represents the ideology of capitalist exploitation. This means that for GRAIN, nothing can be done which will make commercial application of GMOs acceptable.

The two individuals identified most closely to GRAIN in the Philippines are Dr Oscar B. Zamora (who is a member of GRAIN's board) and Dr Lina Briones, mentioned above. Both these figures are also very active in MASIPAG, another anti-biotech NGO (to be discussed later) and also happen to be members of that body. In fact, GRAIN and MASIPAG have a very close working relationship.

GRAIN started with a campaign against the high-yielding rice varieties being developed by the IRRI in Los Baños. As a consequence of this start, GRAIN makes operating in this region of the country a priority.

More broadly, GRAIN is active within the so-called 'anti-imperialist' movement. In 1996, it initiated La Via Campesina, a Honduras-based NGO, comprising an international alliance of peasants, farmers and rural workers in the Third World (<http://ns.rds.org.hn/via/>)

Another member of the same alliance is the Kilusan ng Mga Magbubikid ng Pilipinas, or Peasant Movement of the Philippines (KMP). It describes itself on its own website (http://www.geocities.com/kmp_ph/) as 'the most militant peasant federation in the Philippines', and it lays claim to having 'effective leadership over a total of 800,000 rural people.' KMP is a prominent player in the global movement of 'anti-imperialist' groups. Its website contain numerous references to the evils of American imperialism.

The Chairman of the KMP, Rafael Mariano, enjoys a good working relationship with most of the other anti-biotech organisations. He has regularly criticised companies such as Monsanto, Cargill, Sandoz, Upjohn, Pioneer Hi-bred, Agracetus, Biotechnica, Nestlé and Ciba-Geigy, to name a few.

Like GRAIN, the KMP directs much of its attention to IRRI, which it regularly targets with hostile demonstrations, such as those which it timed to coincide with the IRRI's 40th anniversary in the Philippines. For a self-avowed anti-imperialist organisation, it works very intimately with organisations that operate an imperialism of their own – eco-imperialism.

MASIPAG

The full title of MASIPAG is Magsasaka at Siyentipiko Para sa Kaunlaran [Farmers & Scientists for Development.] A genuine grassroots organisation, MASIPAG has a membership estimated to be as large as 30,000. MASIPAG currently employs seven full-time staff, headed by Emanuel 'Manny' Yap.

The organisation was a product of a 1985 event, the three-day conference of BIGAS (a peasant organisation) that assessed the effects of the Green Revolution. In that conference, participants called for an alternative to IRRI's high-input agriculture. The alleged failure of IRRI and the Philippine government of the time to respond to the farmers' challenge provided the impetus for the emerging coalition of farmers, scientists and NGOs that organised the conference, and thereby formed MASIPAG.

By 1986, the farmers and scientists had launched a campaign to raise funds and their research-partnership. They secured funding in 1987 from Misereor, an agency of the Catholic Church in Germany (www.misereor.de), which gave MASIPAG P6.8 million (US\$130,000) over three years. In 1997, it gave MASIPAC another P2.4 million (US\$46,000) as a bridge fund, before the next three-year program began. The new program obtained for MASIPAG a further P12 million (US\$230,000) from Misereor, and it ended in the year 2000. Since then Misereor has continued to subsidise MASIPAG, as has the aforementioned Swedish Society for Nature Conservation.

Because of the similarity of their organisational aims, their interlocking volunteer and member bases, and their offices' proximity to each other (both are in the same apartment complex), GRAIN and MASIPAG have been collaborating in various projects.

The relationship between GRAIN and MASIPAG is a fairly simple one. GRAIN relies heavily on the wide network of MASIPAG, while MASIPAG depends on GRAIN for funding and international contacts.

GRAIN also enjoys has a strong working relation with FIAN Philippines. FIAN or, Food First International Action Network has its headquarters in Germany, but also maintains offices in Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Honduras, Mexico, Sweden, Switzerland, India and the Philippines (www.fian.org). Like GRAIN, FIAN was involved in the formation of La Via Campesina. FIAN is the 'action and campaigning partner' of Food First

Food First, also known as the Institute for Food and Development Policy is a 'progressive' think-tank founded in 1975. It describes itself as being committed 'to making the world see the human

rights violations through the eyes of the victims of so-called 'development' and technological fixes through the eyes of indigenous peoples, the disabled, the landless, the dispossessed, the women and children...' Food First does this from Oakland, California (<http://www.foodfirst.org>).

The organisation is run jointly by Peter Rosset and Anuradha Mittal. Rosset is a prominent anti-biotech activist. In addition to his duties as a co-director of Food First, he serves on the board of the Pesticide Action Network North America (PANNA).

Although Food First does not provide funding itself, it does provide other forms of assistance to anti-biotech NGOs. This help makes it an important node in the network, particularly in developing countries. Usually the aid takes the form of research, analysis and the construction of action plans for activist networks to implement.

PAN-Philippines

Another contributor to the anti-GMO cause is the Pesticide Action Network (PAN)- Philippines. This group's parent organisation is PAN-North America, and its immediate higher organisation is PAN-Asia-Pacific.

The Pesticides Action Network was established in 1982 by the International Organisation of Consumers Unions (now known as Consumers International) after a conference in Penang (Malaysia) on the dangers of pesticide usage in agriculture. Participants at the conference considered the matter so important that they decided to start a formal network of their own, with a supporting secretariat. Since then, PAN has expanded to include some 300 organisations in about 50 countries, co-ordinated by five regional centres, the one that looks after the Asia-Pacific being Penang-based.

Since its creation to fight pesticide usage, PAN has now added GMOs to its list of targets and campaign globally against them.

PAN-Philippines was organised in 1996. PAN-Philippines' stated objectives are: to prevent or minimise the health and environmentally adverse effects of pesticide use in the Philippines; the establishment of a resource file on pesticide use; the establishment of a community-based monitoring system on pesticide use and their effects in the Philippines; and the conduct of education and information campaigns on adverse pesticide effects on health and the environment. Like other PAN members, the Philippines affiliate has also started vehemently opposing GMOs.

PAN-Philippines is headed by Executive Director Dr Romeo 'Romy' Quijano, who is the most frequent and outspoken anti-GMO speaker before various Philippine congressional committees currently considering various pieces of biotechnology legislation. An associate professor at the University of the Philippines' College of Pharmacy (UP-Philippine General Hospital Manila Campus), Quijano is also on the board of both PAN Asia-Pacific and another organisation known as the Medical Action Group (MAG).

In addition, Quijano is the Philippines director of an NGO called the Health Action International

Network (HAI). To quote its own website, HAI is an ‘informal network of more than 150 consumer, health, development and other public interest groups involved in health and pharmaceutical issues in more than 70 countries around the world.’ HAI, like PAN, is an offshoot of the IOCU. Other such offshoots have included: Consumer Interpol; International Baby Food Network; and Appropriate Products Research and Action Network. If you click on the ‘Pacific Connection’ link of HAI Asia’s website, you automatically get transferred to the IOCU/Consumers International Asia-Pacific’s website. <http://www.haiweb.org/>

PAN-Philippines’ sources of funding are not clear, though the group has definitely received money (about US\$4,000) directly from the California-based Tides Foundation in the past. The Tides Foundation is a very unusual foundation that deserves greater scrutiny. (The best research done on them is by the Washington-based ‘philanthropic watch dog’ Capital Research Center. Go to: <http://www.capitalresearch.org/fw/welcome.html>)

It has also received small amounts of funding (US\$4,900 and US\$1,850) from a subdivision of the Tides Foundation called Global Green Grants Fund (GGF). This body makes small grants to NGOs ‘for whom a small grant will make a significant difference.’ Grants for this scheme are based on recommendations of representatives from the Earth Island Institute, Friends of the Earth, Pesticide Action Network, International Rivers Network and Rainforest Action Network who sit on an advisory board. (www.greengrants.org/asia.grants.html).

Philippine Greens

Philippine Greens was organised in 1995 by Roberto ‘Obet’ Versola, an engineer specialising in computers. He is a key advocate on anti-biopiracy, information technology for the masses and other science-oriented issues. He is also a member of organisations involved in fighting globalisation and other forms of so-called Western imperialism.

From its inception, the Philippine Greens group has had an uphill climb to build up organisation. The organisation’s notably leftist objectives have tended to make recruits scarce.

To date, it has not attracted the broad membership that Versola desired. Indeed Versola appears to be the organisation’s only ‘member.’ Still, he has managed to overcome the problems associated with its lack of a big supporter base, by linking up with other and more powerful organisations espousing the same issues. When it comes to opposing GMOs, Philippine Greens distributes its own literature at protests run by other organisations, and is said to obtain SEARICE funding for doing so.

Despite his difficulty in attracting any members other than its founder, Versola has been successful in being appointed to the National Committee on Biosafety of the Philippines (NCBP), a subsidiary agency of the Department of Science and Technology (DOST).

Last year, Versola was one of several petitioners (and the only member of the NCBP) who urged the country’s Supreme Court to issue a Temporary Restraining Order against biotech testing by Cargill-

Agroseed and the University of the Philippines' (Los Baños) Institute of Plant Breeding. According to the environmental journal *Balik Kalikasan* (21 February 2000), Versola issued a statement saying that the NCBP had made 'a mistake.' SEARICE was another petitioner in the case, and in its own petition, it cited the plight of monarch butterflies.

Philippine Greens is still trying to acquire funds from funding agencies abroad: from the European Union, World Wide Fund for Nature, and other bodies. So far, these bodies have failed to release the much-needed money. It will be interesting to see if they ever change their minds, given the Philippines Greens' lack of members.

IPAR

Integrated and Participatory Agricultural Research, Inc. (IPAR) is a Philippine NGO based in Mindanao. It extends assistance to small farmers in the hinterland barangays (districts) in the province of Bukidnon, by educating farmers on modern methods of farming, lending money to them at extremely low interest rates, lending them fertiliser, and providing a medical mission. IPAR usually organises the small farmers, especially tenant farmers, into a co-operative, in the hope that this will make management more effective, specifically in the areas of loan payment recovery and organised educational strategy.


In many respects, IPAR appears to be a clone of SEARICE, and it also works closely with CONSERVE. This is perfectly understandable, since the person directing and funding IPAR's activities is none other than SEARICE's executive director. Similarly, some members of IPAR's board of directors are also part of SEARICE.

Post Script on the Philippines

Since the so-called 'People Power II' movement deposed President Estrada early in 2001, NGOs and People's Organisations (POs) which boast of their involvement in this movement have been exerting ever more influence on the decisions of Gloria Arroyo Administration, regarding pressing national issues. One such issue is that of GMOs.

Recently Greenpeace is thought to have assumed the leadership in the Philippines NGOs' effort, as a consequence of President Arroyo raising a cautionary note about biotechnology several months ago. Whether this involvement by Greenpeace actually entails funding the anti-biotechnology campaign activities of other anti-biotech NGOs in the Philippines is anyone's guess. After all, Greenpeace is not the most transparent of NGOs.

Greenpeace's growing involvement in the anti-biotech campaign means that the campaign will degenerate further given this NGO's penchant and flair for snappy but simplistic soundbites and arresting but totally meaningless photo opportunities. Hopefully some good may come from this

deterioration in the quality of debate is that people (particularly the media) will start to ask the hard questions of these NGOs that need to be asked. But just as importantly, their press releases and announcements are treated with the scepticism and cynicism they deserve. 

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