

## **Resistance continues to GM crops**

### **Mali: not on my farm**

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Cotton is the main currency earner for Mali, one of the world's poorest countries. Before Mali would allow the introduction of GM cotton, it asked a citizen's jury to evaluate its potential advantages and dangers. After deliberation, the jury voted against GM.

By Roger Gaillard

A tall, thin man jumped to his feet and grabbed the microphone. In a resonant voice, his forefinger raised towards the fans that struggled to mitigate the midday heat, he addressed the meeting in Bambara, the local language: "We're just poor farmers. Why are they asking us to accept GMOs if the rich farmers in northern countries don't want them?" There were murmurs of agreement from the audience. The microphone was passed to a young farmer with her baby: "What's the point of encouraging us to increase yields with GMOs when we can't get a decent price for what we already produce?"

This happened in the south of Mali, one of the poorest countries in the world. Sikasso is a quiet town in a rural province that produces two-thirds of Mali's main currency earner, cotton. For five days in January, 43 small farmers, many of them women, met for an extraordinary exercise in participatory democracy. The Sikasso Regional Assembly, the provincial parliament, invited cotton growers from across the region to form a citizens' jury to evaluate the potential advantages and dangers of introducing GM into Malian agriculture. The Citizen's Space for Democratic Deliberation (Ecid) took its name from a form of public debate that is already well-established in Mali. For the first time in West Africa, the jury was supported by European partners promoting participative methods as a means of assessing technological choices and development policies (1).

The Sikasso forum was a response to the strong pressure being exerted upon African countries by food-processing multinationals, led by the United States company Monsanto and the Swiss Syngenta Foundation, which aspire to industrialise the agricultural sector and open markets to transgenic crops. They are promoting Bt cotton, which produces an effective toxin against certain pests, theoretically allowing the reduction of pesticide use and guaranteeing higher yields to farmers. Since West Africa is the world's third-largest cotton-producing area, there is much at stake for these companies, which enjoy the support of the US Agency for International Development and its \$100m budget to encourage biotechnologies in the developing world.

African responses have been varied. Despite the threat of famine, Zambia has refused aid from the World Food Programme, which notoriously peddles surplus US GM maize. Benin has accepted this double-edged gift, despite declaring a five-year moratorium on GMOs in 2002. South Africa, the food industry's bridgehead, has grown transgenic cotton and maize for almost 10 years, with controversial results. In Burkina Faso, Mali's neighbour, full field trials of GM cotton have been under way since 2003 despite opposition.

In Sikasso, the citizens' jury members listened with sustained concentration to expert witnesses from western and southern Africa, India and Europe. Molecular biologists, agricultural engineers, members of NGOs and representatives of farmers' movements answered wide-ranging questions about the benefits and dangers: environmental and health risks, real productivity increases, socio-economic factors, ethical and legal issues, and cultural implications, all the more relevant for often being unspoken. The Bambara expression for GM is Bayere ma'shi ("transformed mother"): in a country where animism remains a powerful force beneath a veneer of Islam, the reality of genetic engineering - transferring genes from one species to another - is enough to disturb.

There was much discussion of the crucial problem of intellectual property rights and the patenting of living organisms. As the Beninese geneticist Jeanne Zoundjehkpon, from the NGO Grain, pointed out: "Bt seeds are protected by patents that give companies absolute control over growers. Small farmers have always kept seed from the harvest to re-sow the following year, but now the threat of legal action will deprive them of that right." This is a telling argument in an area of Africa where, as Mamadou Goïta, director of the Coalition to Protect Mali's Genetic Heritage, reminded the assembly, the cotton industry is in crisis. The Malian Textile Development Company, 60% of which is owned by the state and 40% by the French company Dagrif, is losing money following the devaluation of the CFA franc and the collapse of the global market in white gold, despite the fact that between 1994 and 2005 annual production rose from 320,000 to 600,000 tonnes.

The World Bank has made the company's privatisation in 2008 a necessary condition for any financial aid to Mali's government. At a time when the cost of imported chemicals is rising, the company's losses have driven down the price it pays to producers from 210 CFA francs per kilo in 2004 to 160 (approx 30 US cents) in 2006. Cotton is no longer profitable and many farmers who grow it exclusively are considering diversifying into food crops such as millet and maize. But Goïta has another suggestion: "Organic cotton could be a passport to markets in European countries where there is opposition to GMOs. In Mali there are 3,000,000 people who depend on cotton, so we simply can't compete with a power like the US, which practises a policy of dumping by paying massive subsidies of \$4bn a year to just 25,000 growers."

The multinationals refused to put their case to the jury. "We sent several invitations to Syngenta and Monsanto," explained Barbara Bordogna, a biologist with RIBios and a member of the Ecid steering committee, "but they seem reluctant to engage in an open and transparent debate that they are unable to control." But Monsanto did recommend farmers who supported its cause. A Zulu farmer, TJ Buthelezi, who has been growing Bt cotton since 1996, insisted that the results were conclusive: ever since fields sown with transgenic cotton withstood a flood that devastated conventional crops, he has exclusively grown GMOs, including maize which he eats himself without any ill-effect on his health. "Copy me," he told the Malian farmers. "Get rich!"

PV Satheesh, from the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, put the counter-argument with the results of a methodical three-year study showing that traditional cotton growers in his region had obtained higher yields than those testing transgenic seed, and that pesticide use with Bt varieties was only marginally lower than with conventional varieties. The higher price of Bt seed, combined with disappointing yields, eventually ruined many small farmers. Following Monsanto's refusal to agree compensation, the state of Andhra Pradesh recently banned it from operating within its borders.

Other witnesses expressed less polarised positions. Ouola Traore is an agronomist and head of the cotton programme at the Institute for the Environment and Agricultural Research in Burkina Faso, where Bt cotton has been undergoing tests since 2003 with a view to starting commercial production after 2010. He said: "The only way to determine whether GMOs are a future solution for West Africa is to carry out in-depth research into local varieties adapted to our climate." But his call for independent public research didn't go down well with an audience suspicious of the notorious dependence of Africa's scientific institutions upon funding from lobbies promoting biotechnological development.

The members of the jury finally separated into several committees (one all-woman) based on the size of their holdings. After deliberating for a day, they returned their verdict: no. The Sikasso farmers unanimously rejected the introduction of GMOs to Mali, their primary concern being to prevent dependence upon multinationals by preserving local varieties and traditional know-how. As Brahim Sidebe, put it: "We want to be the masters of our own fields, not slaves."

Birama Kone emphasised the preservation of a cooperative way of life: "Our farmers are used to helping each other. The danger is that GMOs will destroy that sense of friendship and solidarity. If I have a GM field and my neighbour doesn't, contamination problems are bound to create conflict between us."

For the women, Basri Lidigoita called for research into using traditional agronomic techniques to improve local varieties, and for better training for small farmers, especially in organic farming.

The jury's recommendations were passed to the Sikasso Regional Assembly on 29 January and broadcast by local radio stations (which had relayed the debate daily) and by Malian television. The result is not binding, but it is likely to prove influential since Mali is a signatory to the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety (2). Under proposed legislation there would be public consultation at a national level before the introduction of any GMO, even for testing.

"We don't want GMOs, ever," said Lidigoita, "and we are calling upon the government to prevent them entering the country. If farmers grow them illegally, we'll set fire to their fields."

Translated by Donald Hounam

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(1) The Biosafety Interdisciplinary Network, which organises courses in biosecurity at the universities of Geneva and Lausanne, will soon offer one in the Malian capital, Bamako.

(2) The Cartagena Protocol on the prevention of biotechnological risk, adopted as part of the Convention on Biological Diversity, is intended "to contribute to ensuring an adequate level of protection in the field of the safe transfer, handling and use of living modified organisms resulting from modern biotechnology that may have adverse effects on the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity, taking also into account risks to human health, and specifically focusing on transboundary movements". By the set date of 4 June 2001, 103 countries had signed.