

'LET NATURE'S HARVEST CONTINUE'

Statement from all the African delegates (except South Africa) to FAO negotiations on the International Undertaking for Plant Genetic Resources, June 1998

During the past few weeks European citizens have been exposed to an aggressive publicity campaign in major European newspapers trying to convince the reader that the world needs genetic engineering to feed the hungry. Organised and financed by Monsanto, one of the world's biggest chemical companies, and titled "Let the Harvest Begin", this campaign gives a totally distorted and misleading picture of the potential of genetic engineering to feed developing countries.

We, the undersigned delegates of African countries participating in the 5th Extraordinary Session of the Commission on Genetic Resources, 8 - 12 June 1998, Rome, strongly object that the image of the poor and hungry from our countries is being used by giant multinational corporations to push a technology that is neither safe, environmentally friendly, nor economically beneficial to us.

It is time to look at some of the facts about the company behind this campaign:

Monsanto is one of the world's largest pesticide companies. During the past two years only it spent over US\$6000 million to take control over other seed and biotechnology companies and is now the major industrial player in this field. Its major focus is not to protect the environment, but to develop crops that can resist higher doses of its best-selling chemical weedkiller "Roundup".

Rather than stretching a helping hand to farmers, Monsanto threatens them with lawsuits and jail. In the USA, the company employs detectives to find and bring to court those farmers that save Monsanto soybean seeds for next year's planting. Backed by patent law, the company demands the rights to inspect the farmers' fields to check whether they practise agriculture according to Monsanto conditions and with Monsanto chemicals.

Rather than developing technology that feeds the world, Monsanto uses genetic engineering to stop farmers from replanting seed and further develop their agricultural systems. It has spent US\$18000 million to buy a company owning a patent on what has become known as Terminator Technology: seed that can be planted only once and dies in the second generation. The only aim of this technology is to force farmers back to the Monsanto shop every year, and to destroy an age old practice of local seed saving that forms the basis of food security in our countries.

In "Let the Harvest Begin" the Europeans are asked to give an unconditional green light to gene technology so that chemical corporations such as Monsanto can start harvesting their profits from it. We do not believe that such companies or gene technologies will help our farmers to produce the food that is needed in the 21st century. On the contrary, we think it will destroy the diversity, the local knowledge and the sustainable agricultural systems that our farmers have developed for millennia and that it will thus undermine our capacity to feed ourselves. In particular, we will not accept the use of Terminator or other gene technologies that kill the capacity of our farmers to grow the food we need.

We invite European citizens to stand in solidarity with Africa in resisting these gene technologies so that our diverse and natural harvests can continue and grow.

We agree and accept that mutual help is needed to further improve agricultural production in our countries. We also believe that Western science can contribute to this. But it should be done on the basis of understanding and respect for what is already there. It should be building on local knowledge, rather than replacing and destroying it. And most importantly: it should address the real needs of our people, rather than serving only to swell the pockets and control of giant industrial corporations.

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Additional statement by Zimbabwean delegate:

"Africa should not be used as a testing ground for technologies and products which have been developed elsewhere. We reserve our sovereign right to test these technologies ourselves, examine their effectiveness and compatibility to the environment in our region."