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Do Not Betray Africa on SynBio and Gene Drives

37 Civil Society Organisations urge African Governments

As representatives of a broad range of African civil society organisations (CSOs), we do not feel represented by the delegations of Nigeria and South Africa - speaking on behalf of African Group - in their attempt to speak on behalf of the people of Africa on the issue of synthetic biology (Synbio) and gene drive organisms (GDOs).

Throughout the history of the United Nations (UN) Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the UN Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, African delegates have championed the defence of our biodiversity, protection of our seeds, indigenous agroecological practices and culture. They have always advocated the need for a precautionary approach.

In the past, African delegates have strongly defended our ecological life-support systems from threats, such as Terminator technologies (seeds designed to be sterile).

We are now alarmed at what is going on at COP14 and how our concerns for our environment, biodiversity and communities are being betrayed and threatened by delegates from some African nations. In particular, they are not representing our concerns about gene drives and synbio.

Most countries in Africa are still grappling with the threats from basic genetic engineering and associated agro-toxics and do not even have experience or capacity for basic regulation of the risks for those first-generation genetic technologies, let alone synbio and GDOs.

Gene drives, such as those being promoted by *Target Malaria*, aimed at releasing gene drive mosquitoes in Burkina Faso, are a deliberately invasive technology

designed to propagate genetic material across an entire population - potentially wiping out entire species. As Africans, we are forced to confront this new and serious threat to our health, land, biodiversity, rights, and food supply.

African government delegations appear to have been neutralised. They have fallen from grace on the altar of the multi-national corporations, gene giants and private foundations. The African group's position at the CBD slavishly replicates the position of these interest groups.

As Africans, we do not wish to be lab-rats for Target Malaria's experiments. We refuse to be guinea pigs for their misguided disruption of our food systems and ecology.

We call on the African and all other delegates to put the brakes on this exterminating technology. We reject any form of representation that is against the interest of our peoples and biodiversity. We call on the governments of Africa to call their delegates to order and avoid acquiescence to unfolding intergenerational crimes.

Signed by 37 CSOs from Africa and around the globe.

See all signatures at www.etcgroup.org/content/do-not-betray-africa-synbio-and-gene-drives

UN aviation proposals threatens biodiversity goals

Almuth Ernsting (Global Forest Coalition)

Aichi Target 3 requires the phasing out or redirection of subsidies and other incentives for practices that harm biodiversity. A draft decision about “Milestones for the full implementation” of this target “notes with concern the limited progress made in implementing” this target.

Not only do harmful incentives remain in place, but in many cases new ones have been put in place since the Nagoya Conference, many of them aiming to scale up the use of bioenergy regardless of its commonly disastrous impacts on biodiverse ecosystems, including forests and on agrobiodiversity.

A specialist UN organisation is now developing a global policy which threatens to undermine efforts to conserve biodiversity: the International Civil Aviation Organisation’s (ICAO) - known to the CBD also as its meeting venue in Montreal. In 2016, ICAO adopted a resolution in favour of a single global *Carbon Offsetting and Reduction Scheme for International Aviation* (CORSIA), in order to achieve ‘carbon neutral growth’ of civil aviation from 2020.¹ CORSIA has been heavily criticised by civil society groups: In September 2016, 80 groups warned that ICAO’s plans would make it impossible to keep global warming in 1.5° Celsius.² In June 2017, 96 organisations called on ICAO member states to oppose the Council’s – and the aviation industry’s promotion of large-scale aviation biofuels.³ And in June 2018 as many groups urged countries to reject the CORSIA mechanism entirely.⁴

CORSIA’s threat to biodiversity is threefold:

Firstly, through CORSIA, ICAO and the aviation industry seek to remove member states’ right to keep or introduce measures to regulate greenhouse gas emissions from aviation. For example, unless EU member states lodge a reservation regarding CORSIA by 1st December, they and the EU as a whole could face legal challenges to a broad range of current and possible future policies, from EU-ETS with its exclusion of international carbon offsets post-2020, to policies aimed at phasing out palm oil in all biofuels.⁵ Aviation is one of the fastest growing emitters of greenhouse

gases and there are no credible ways of reducing its emissions other than ending and reversing the industry’s growth. CORSIA will thus make it harder to prevent warming of more than 1.5°C, with all the catastrophic biodiversity impacts that entails.

Secondly, CORSIA involves committing countries to participating in a new global carbon offset market, even though a study published by the European Commission shows that such offsets may not reduce emissions in 98% of cases (leaving aside the fact that the best possible outcome is a ‘zero sum game’, with such reductions wiped out by the ‘offset’ extra fossil fuel emissions).⁶ Even worse, it is widely expected that CORSIA rules, once finalised, will allow carbon offsetting schemes to qualify which have few or no safeguards, including for biodiversity and the rights of Indigenous Peoples and other communities. Many CORSIA offsets are expected to involve forests and tree plantations.

Finally, CORSIA allows airlines to claim greenhouse gas reductions by using ‘alternative aviation fuels’, especially biofuels. Until now, aviation biofuels can not compete in price with biofuels used in cars, let alone with fossil fuel kerosene, so only tiny volumes are being used. However, CORSIA will increase pressures on governments to implement subsidies and other incentives for such fuels. Most biofuels that are used for cars are not compatible with plane engines. The only type of aviation biofuels which can be produced in significant quantities are ones made, using oil refining technology, from vegetable oils and animal fats, although the availability of the latter (tallow) is quite limited. Palm oil is both the cheapest and the most suitable feedstock for aviation biofuels that is available on a large scale.⁷ Companies such as *Neste Oil* already use large volumes of virgin palm oil and a fraction of Crude Palm Oil which they controversially claim to be a ‘residue’ to make biofuels which can be very easily upgraded for aircraft.

The use of standards to try and prevent adverse impacts of biofuel use is highly controversial and there

is very little evidence of their effectiveness. However, whether or not such standards can protect biodiverse is academic in this context: the ICAO Council has proposed just two criteria for ‘sustainable’ biofuels, both of them related to carbon emissions (based on a highly controversial methodology) - and no standards aimed at protecting biodiversity at all.⁸ If countries agree to adopt CORSIA, they will be under far greater pressure to boost aviation biofuels, including from palm oil.

ICAO’s CORSIA scheme will thus undermine efforts to conserve biodiversity and efforts to achieve Aichi Target 3 on a global scale.

- 1 icao.int/Meetings/a39/Documents/Resolutions/10075_en.pdf
- 2 fern.org/sites/default/files/news-pdf/Final_September.pdf
- 3 biofuelwatch.org.uk/2017/aviation-biofuels-open-letter
- 4 biofuelwatch.org.uk/2018/icao-letter
- 5 transportenvironment.org/news/eu-urged-stand-firm-aircraft-emissions
- 6 ec.europa.eu/clima/sites/clima/files/ets/docs/clean_dev_mechanism_en.pdf
- 7 See biofuelwatch.org.uk/2017/aviation-biofuels
- 8 transportenvironment.org/sites/te/files/publications/2018_01_ICAO_CORSIA_draft_%20SARP.pdf

Mainstreaming

Statement by Friends of the Earth International, Econexus, Ecoropa, Global Forest Coalition, ICCA Consortium

While we recognize the importance of this agenda item, we feel the current mainstreaming document is extremely weak and will do little to nothing to protect biodiversity from the systemic impacts of the energy and mining, infrastructure, manufacturing and processing sectors.

All these sectors are set to expand over the coming decades – for example infrastructure is projected to grow by 300% by 2050. Their further growth is absolutely not compatible with living within planetary boundaries. We need quantitative measures to reduce growth in these sectors, including through redirection of perverse incentives and stronger regulations, but in capitalist economies, corporate actors cannot accept such limits to their growth strategies. Thus solutions cannot be expected from the same actors who are causing destruction. Discussion on mainstreaming, including talks in side events and business forums, must not engage with these destructive sectors on their terms.

The CBD has the responsibility to regulate the conservation of biodiversity, at a global level, and urge that Parties implement this at the national level. Only firm regulation can contain the continued impact of these sectors. Yet the mainstreaming text does not talk about regulation. Rather, it **replaces** regulation with all kind of tools and incentives, including market based ones. Several of these

tools have been used in the past for greenwashing.

Moreover, if Aichi Target 3 were implemented, it would address the perverse incentives that are driving much of this development.

In efforts to mainstream biodiversity, Parties and others must also mainstream human rights, including the rights of indigenous peoples, local communities, women and youth. Too many industries in the sectors mentioned have been proven to be involved in the increasing number of killings of indigenous peoples, peasants and other environmental activists who defend nature in their areas against destructive projects.

One of the elements referred to in the text is the mitigation hierarchy, which basically starts from the idea that planned projects will take place. While some impacts may be avoided, in practice we see that it quickly runs down the hierarchy towards counterproductive attempts at offsetting. It is now urgent to completely avoid destructive projects overall.

By approving the current text on mainstreaming, the CBD would be giving the impression to the world that we are actually doing something, while we are definitely not doing enough.

Are we talking about the same planet??

How can we reconcile hours of self-praising declarations by parties on implementation and mainstreaming with global reports that biodiversity is collapsing?

Addressing conflicts of interest in CBD processes

Nina Holland (Corporate Europe Observatory, CEO)

The topic of Conflicts of Interest is on the agenda at COP14 in Sharm-El-Sheikh. The proposed outcome on disclosure of interests is an important first step in the right direction as it will contribute to the transparency, inclusiveness, integrity and credibility of processes under the Convention and its Protocols. The decision needs to be strengthened, and should be the start of a comprehensive mechanism in the CBD fora. Its application should be extended beyond technical experts groups.

Two things are important to keep in mind. First, any mechanism to address conflicts of interest should be focused on preventing private, financial and vested interests which conflict with the public interest. These types of interests are measurable and it has been shown for example that the source of funding has an impact on the conclusions of published studies. Second, conflicts of interest should be assessed against the objectives, purposes and principles of the Convention and its Protocols.

The issue of conflicts of interest has already been addressed extensively in other international processes such as the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, the World Health Organization, the Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). This is because international governance of critical issues often see vested interests at play, with industry funding and participation sometimes not fully disclosed.

The *Gene Drive Files*¹ that were published nearly one year ago demonstrated that the CBD is not free from undue influence from industry and vested interests. A private agriculture and biotechnology PR firm called Emerging Ag recruited at least 65 people to participate in the CBD Online Forum on Synthetic Biology, intending to skew the outcomes; a project for which Emerging Ag had been paid \$1.6 million by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. In addition, evidence was published of appointees to the expert group having relevant financial interests through the institutions they represent that had not been declared in CBD forums.

Where issues of the utmost importance like protection of biodiversity, access and benefit sharing of genetic resources, or international biosafety regulations are concerned, it is absolutely necessary to take all appropriate measures to prevent commercial and vested interests from unduly influencing the processes of the CBD and its Protocols.

1 www.etcgroup.org/content/gene-drive-files

extinction rebellion

On the day that COP14 opened, thousands of demonstrators blocked five bridges over the River Thames in London (UK) to protest against government inaction on climate change and biodiversity loss. It was the biggest act of civil disobedience in the UK for years. Those who participated are part of an emerging movement called extinction rebellion.

They say the UK government has failed in its obligations to the people, so they feel compelled to come out on the streets and commit acts of civil disobedience in order to draw attention to the multiple crises we face and the need to take real action.

On 26th October this year, 94 people, many of them professors in UK academic institutions, signed a letter that was sent to the Guardian newspaper. In it they said:

“We will not tolerate the failure of this or any other government to take robust and emergency action in respect of the worsening ecological crisis. ...

We are in the midst of the sixth mass extinction, with about 200 species becoming extinct each day. Humans cannot continue to violate the fundamental laws of nature or of science with impunity. If we continue on our current path, the future for our species is bleak.

Our government is complicit in ignoring the precautionary principle, and in failing to acknowledge that infinite economic growth on a planet with finite resources is non-viable.”

The message from the writers of this letter and from the protesters is clear. We have to stop our headlong rush to disaster. And there are many ways to do this. Ask the Indigenous Peoples and the peasant farmers.

www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/oct/26/facts-about-our-ecological-crisis-are-incontrovertible-we-must-take-action