

Biosafety seems like a good idea...

Sep 15, 2010 by Marcia Ishii-Eiteman



I'm just back from a week in Rio de Janeiro strategizing on the future of food with an amazing group of activists from Brazil, South Africa, India, the Philippines and Germany. The [event](#) was organized by PAN partner [AS-PTA](#), Brazil's [lead NGO](#) campaigning against agricultural GMOs (genetically modified organisms) and promoting agroecology as the better way forward. As an agroecologist myself, I was thrilled to be invited.

While in Rio, I was inspired by stories of courage, persistence and deep commitment. I talked with mothers and fathers, farmers, ecologists, agronomists, community organizers, health experts and human rights lawyers. Like many of us in the U.S., they are seeking to build healthy, safe, fair and sustainable food systems at home, and want more than anything to leave a healthy legacy for their children and for future generations.

So what is stopping the flowering of sustainable food systems in many of these countries? One major hindrance is Monsanto and the U.S. government, joined at the hip it seems by a shared agenda of expanding global markets for agricultural biotechnology. Many are familiar with the Obama administration's disappointing series of "[revolving door](#)" biotech appointments (Islam Siddiqui, Roger Beachy, Michael Taylor, et al.), but I've seen less coverage of the fact that globalizing biotech is an explicit strategic objective of the [USDA](#) and a declared intention of the U.S. Agency for International Development ([USAID](#)). Not coincidentally, USAID is now headed by Rajiv Shah — who hails directly from the pro-GMO [Gates Foundation](#).

The role that our own government plays in paving the way for Monsanto's global ambitions is astonishing as well as under-reported. USAID has a long [history](#) of using taxpayer dollars to promote transgenic crops and technologies around the world. Since the late 1990s, USAID's [Agricultural Biotechnology Support Project](#) has focused on development and commercialization of GM crops, often in partnership with Monsanto. With time, the agency realized that marketing and release of its GM crops in developing countries was hindered not only by the technology's [failure to perform well](#), but even more by the lack of GMO-supportive "biosafety frameworks" — the rules and regulations governing transgenic technologies — in target countries. While the name "biosafety" gives the impression of attempting to regulate for public safety, what these frameworks do in practice is speed the introduction of new GMO seeds into farmers' fields.

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The absence of biosafety protocols in the 1990s spurred USAID to establish a separate but parallel program, the [Programme for Biosafety Systems](#) (PBS), to “help” targeted developing countries set up regulatory systems that essentially grease the skids for getting GM crops into foreign markets. USAID did exactly this in Kenya with its [failed GM sweet potato project](#). The project — conducted in partnership with Monsanto — laid the groundwork for Kenya’s first regulatory framework for biotech field trials that ultimately evolved into the country’s famously GMO-favorable biosafety rules. Similarly, USAID’s [policy work](#) in Egypt and Uganda led to strongly pro-GMO biosafety frameworks there. In [Brazil](#), the U.S. Embassy brought parliamentarians to Monsanto’s headquarters in St. Louis and then on to a wine-fueled safari in South Africa, achieving the same outcome: opening Brazil’s rich agricultural lands and markets to Monsanto’s wares.

So as it turns out, standing up for [food democracy](#) means not only denouncing GMO crops for their increasingly obvious [failure to deliver](#). We must also pay attention to the wonky, decidedly un-sexy world of “biosafety regulations.”

My colleagues in Rio de Janeiro who came from Brazil, India and South Africa were horrified — and then outraged — to see that their three countries (along with Nigeria) have been [designated by the U.S.](#) as “potential strategic partners” to bring another 20 “focus countries” along in what is essentially the United States’ and Monsanto’s shared agenda of globalizing transgenic crops using the Trojan horse of “biosafety.”

On the long plane ride home, it became more clear than ever to me that breaking up the U.S.-Monsanto-Gates Foundation biotech cartel here at home might just be the best thing we can do to help build sustainable food systems around the world.

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