

Development: Greenpeace heads global campaign against 'biopiracy'

Rome, 25 Jun (IPS/Jorge Pina) -- Greenpeace International and other non- governmental organisations (NGOs) charged Monday that transnational corporations are "pirating" genetic resources from the developing South, a practice the groups say, threatens global food security.

Private companies and research institutes have been able to patent life forms and their genetic composition since intellectual property laws were passed, which include living organisms within their scope, according to the NGOs.

As a result, the free exchange of seeds and other materials for plant reproduction are at stake, posing a threat to world food security, said the activists.

Delegates from the 160 countries that make up the Commission for Genetic Resources, a body of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), are in Rome this week to study an international treaty that would maintain the genetic content of the world's main food crops within the public domain.

"Open access" to genetic resources means access to food and the means to produce it, said Christoph Then, an expert on patents and spokesman for Greenpeace, in a message intended for the Commission.

In the last 10 years, multinational chemical firms like the US-based DuPont, "world leader in biopiracy," commented Then, have patented seeds and foodstuffs. This has been key in launching an international race to control global food production, he warned.

This, in turn, has led to biopiracy: private companies from wealthy countries pillage genetic resources from the developing South, a practice that harms development and the environment, the activist told a press conference Monday.

Once they have worked out the genetic composition of these resources, or have modified them in the laboratory, the transnationals then claim the plants, seeds, and even the harvested crops as their intellectual property, Then pointed out.

Patents deprive poor countries of access to public domain genetic resources, and define these resources as private property. At the same time, big business is dedicated to reproducing only those plants of particular interest to the markets, he said.

In this way, Then explained, there will be increasingly more plant varieties lost or simply shut away in the genetic banks of the private companies that hold exclusive rights over them.

If the free flow of reproductive materials, such as seeds, is interrupted, the poorest on the planet will suffer, in other words, the small farmers and peasants from the developing South, who are the backbone of global food security, stated Henk Hobbelink, of Genetics Resources Action International (GRAIN).

DuPont has applied for approximately 150 patents on living organisms at the European Patent Office, and has filed other similar applications with patent authorities of the United States, Japan and numerous other countries.

In August 2000, the European Patent Office received a petition from DuPont for a patent covering all varieties of maize that contain specified quantities of oil and of oleic acid, reported Greenpeace and the German Catholic Church's development organisation, Misereor.

The patent application covers the planting, harvesting and any use of these varieties, including their use for food. If the petition gets the green light from the European authorities, DuPont would hold a virtual monopoly over a broad range of maize varieties.

For now, Greenpeace and the Mexican government have succeeded in blocking approval of this maize patent, forcing consideration of the application into a deliberation process within the European Patent Office.

In Mexico and Central America, for example, there is an enormous diversity of maize varieties. It is a plant that has played a fundamental role in the economy and in food production in the region. "The varieties with the characteristics specified by DuPont exist there and have been used for a long time," said Then.

With the approval of the patent, farmers who grow maize with high oil and oleic acid content could be forced to plant different seeds or to pay for the patent rights on their harvests.

Greenpeace and seven other NGOs are demanding an end to intellectual property rights that limit access to genetic resources and an end to patents on seeds and plants.

If the Commission for Genetic Resources reaches an agreement on exempting the world's principal food crops from patents, the treaty would be sent to the World Food Conference to be held in November at the FAO headquarters in the Italian capital.

The United States, Canada and New Zealand have already voiced opposition to the accord. But the Group of 77 - the bloc of developing countries -, most African nations and the European Union are backing the creation of a specialised multilateral body to handle the matter.