
Ecuador: Commercial exploitation of forest peoples

"People in the Rainforest of Ecuador" is an exhibition currently running in Frankfurt's municipal botanical garden, the Palmengarten. The exhibition describes some of the vast knowledge indigenous people have of plants and ecosystems in the rainforest. The posters advertising the exhibition are sponsored by Aventis CropScience and feature the company's name and logo. As a piece of public relations it is brilliant. Aventis CropScience hopes to gain from having its name associated with indigenous expertise.

Dr Wolfgang Faust of Aventis CropScience, explained that the sponsorship is part of the German Ministry of Education and Science's "Year of Life Sciences", which is also sponsored by Aventis CropScience. He said, "The Palmengarten has a certain link with our products, in that it is about plants. It's better than sponsoring a football club, say."

The Palmengarten exhibition includes a display by GTZ, the German government's technical cooperation agency. Beate Weiskopf, Senior Advisor in the Rural Development Division of GTZ said, "GTZ was not informed about Aventis' involvement in the exhibition. We got to know about Aventis sponsoring the exhibition when the posters were published."

Aventis CropScience is part of the Aventis group, which was created in December 1999 through the merger of Hoechst of Germany and Rhone-Poulenc of France.

Aventis CropScience's research includes developing genetically modified (GM) crops. The company was the first company involved in the UK government's farm-scale GM crop trials, and now has more field trials of GM crops in the UK than any other company. In October last year, Aventis CropScience admitted it had grown GM sugar beet without permission at two trial sites in the UK.

In February this year, Aventis CropScience fired Maurice Delage, the head of its US division, and two other top managers, after traces of the company's GM StarLink corn were discovered in taco shells and other food products. Starlink corn has not been approved for human consumption. In an attempt to prevent further contamination Aventis CropScience spent at least US\$92 million to buy up the StarLink crop.

As well as developing, marketing and selling GM crops, Aventis CropScience owns patents giving the company exclusive rights to knowledge, genetic material and processes. Dr Faust said, "Patenting has existed for more than 100 years. We have to patent seeds to recoup our money invested in research. It has nothing to do with the Third World, the GM crops we are developing are for herbicide resistance in Northern climates."

One such herbicide is glufosinate. AgrEvo (whose parent company was Hoechst before it became part of Aventis CropScience) developed the herbicide from a soil bacterium derived from Cameroon. As the NGO, Rural Advancement Foundation International, points out, "Hoechst has not offered any compensation to the donor country."

The herbicide is marketed under the tradenames Basta, Ignite, Finale and Challenge. In Australia, the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) has developed *Eucalyptus camaldulensis* trees genetically modified to be resistant to Basta.

Aventis CropScience is planning commercial production of GM rice in South America and in 1998 obtained permission from the Brazilian authorities to test GM rice in field trials. The company aims to introduce GM crops such as rice and corn in the Philippines. In Thailand, Aventis CropScience has a turnover of approximately US\$116 million.

Throughout the world, indigenous and other farmers have for generations saved seed and developed local landraces, thus increasing agricultural biodiversity. Aventis CropScience's research is aimed at monoculture, dependency on chemical inputs, and ultimately in increasing corporate profits.

Dr Matthias Jenny of Frankfurt's Palmengarten confirmed that he sees a conflict between Aventis CropScience's approach to crops and farmers' approaches. However, when asked whether the Palmengarten has a position on GM organisms, Dr Jenny replied, "Being a municipal institution, the Palmengarten has very limited possibilities to express political opinions." In other words, to reject Aventis CropScience's sponsorship would be a political opinion. To accept it, according to Dr Jenny, is not.

The organisation Klima Buendnis, which links European towns with indigenous peoples' groups in the Amazon in climate protection schemes, also contributed a display to the exhibition. Lioba Rossbach de Olmos of Klima Buendnis said, "For us the logo of Aventis on the poster is contrary to the whole idea of the exhibition because the aim was not to advertise Aventis CropScience but to raise awareness on traditional knowledge of indigenous peoples of the tropical rain forests."

Lioba added, "The Palmengarten was just looking for funding for a good poster without taking into further consideration the whole problem related to traditional knowledge on one side and biotechnology on the other."

Through sponsorship, Aventis CropScience aims to promote its products and to increase its profits. The Palmengarten appears happy to help. In the process, the people in the rainforest of Ecuador and their vast knowledge of their environment, are being exploited for commercial gain.

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