

DIOGEN pro culture magazine & DIOGEN pro art magazine -ISSN 2296-0929; ISSN 2296-0910

Publisher online and owner, Sabahudin Hadžialić, MSc

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By Albaro Tutasig

## Patent Rights to Mother Nature? Monsanto's Overreach in Paraguay: Planting the Seeds of Injustice

### Introduction

Monsanto, the American-based multinational chemical and agricultural biotechnology corporation, is the world's leading producer of genetically modified (GM) seeds. Monsanto manufactures 90 percent of the world's supply of GM seeds, and has moved to secure patent rights, further solidifying its monopoly on the product. [1]

Many critics are deeply troubled by Monsanto's attempts to secure the intellectual property rights to nature's resources, which the corporation's critics insist are endowed to all humanity. Monsanto's efforts showed promise this past January when the U.S. Supreme Court upheld their ownership of genetically engineered seed patents. This decision legitimizes the company's ability to sue American and Canadian farmers whose fields were unintentionally contaminated with Monsanto materials. The court's decision is one of many instances in which Monsanto has displayed its sheer political grip—one that is choking the life out of local farmers in the United States, Canada, and Latin America. [2]

Corporations are entities that tend to behave in a manner that suits their best interests. Monsanto is no different from other corporations in this way; it has made great efforts to influence policymakers through lobbying, contributions to election campaigns, and multimillion-dollar investments. These endeavors promote the company's agenda and subsequently maintain its dominance over agriculture on a global scale. In 2013, Monsanto's federal lobbying expenditures added up to approximately \$7 million USD. [3]

Although countries across the globe differ in their political structure, the parallels between the corporate world and politics exist beyond geopolitical borders. As in the United States, private industries in Paraguay maintain a strong presence on the political scene. The vast majority of Paraguayan land is owned by less than three percent of the population, a staggering statistic even by unbiased South American standards. Monsanto's presence in Paraguay's agrarian economy perpetuates a malignant status quo, fostering an aristocratic oligarchy that tampers with national policies at the expense of *campesinos* and the exploited working class.

## **Political Turmoil**

The Colorado Party is an extreme right-wing political party that dominated Paraguayan politics for more than six decades. Analysts describe Colorado politics as primarily serving the interests of the country's local oligarchy, as well as the interests of transnational corporations that control various markets within Paraguay. [4] Standing atop these facilities are Monsanto and rice farming corporations that fumigate the fields of Neembucu with pesticides and causing respiratory diseases to the local population, which has converted much of Paraguay's arable land into industrial-sized plantations growing GM crops. [5]

Former President Lugo was unsuccessful in finishing his presidential term, yet his open opposition to the usage of GMOs made him a powerful adversary against Monsanto's gradual takeover of Paraguay's agricultural economy. Still, alliances between landowner groups, such as the Union of Associations of Producers and Monsanto, demonstrate the omnipresent influence of private industries.

It is important to note that while Paraguay is a difficult country to manage, not everything is solely dependent upon the president. Corruption on a corporate level tends to spill over onto federal departments and local governments; wrongdoings that metastasize into a malicious plague that threatens the well-being of the rest of the population.

One example is Monsanto's influence in Alto Paraná, a department in Paraguay. The history of Monsanto in Paraguay begins in 1998, after the Paraguayan Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock authorized the company to conduct its first field trials with GM soybeans. One year later, Monsanto's subsidiary firm in Paraguay was formally registered. Additionally, Monsanto has made multiple offers of large sums of money to the current governor of Alto Paraná, Justo Zacarias Irun. Why so much interest in Alto Paraná? In Felipe Filomeno's *Monsanto and Intellectual Property in South America*, Filomeno argues that in 2011, Monsanto initiated an experimental station in Santa Rita, located in the Department of Alto Paraná. This location would serve as a focal point for "...breeding operations and manipulation of seeds from Argentina and Brazil." [6]

[7]

## **Tainted Bureaucracy**

Under former President Lugo's administration, Paraguay's National Service for Plants and Seeds Quality and Health (*Servicio Nacional de Calidad y Sanidad Vegetal y de Semillas*, SENAVE) was strongly opposed to the approval of GMOs, due to the lack of approval from the Ministries of Health and Environment as required by law. However, directly after Lugo's impeachment, the head of an agrochemical company, Francisco Regis Mereles, was put in charge of SENAVE and did not hesitate to include Monsanto's GM cotton in the National Registry of Commercial Plant Varieties (*Registro Nacional de Cultivares Comerciales*, RNCC). [8]

Within months, the new government of Franco fast-tracked the approval of Monsanto GM corn and cotton, a move seen by many as proof of Monsanto's firm grip over Paraguay's domestic affairs. Franco approved Monsanto's GMOs without any of the preliminary safety studies that are customarily required by Paraguay's Ministries of Health and Environment. Analysts speculate that President Franco was pushed by the Colorado Party leaders to make this happen. [9]

## **Paraguay's Agrarian Economy and GMO Impact**

As of 2012, Paraguay was the sixth largest producer and fourth largest exporter of soya, ranking first worldwide with an average of 8,350,000 metric tons per year. Between 1996 and 2006, the land that was granted for soybean cultivation went from less than one million hectares to two million, translating to a 10 percent increase per year. These cultivations included GM soya.[10] [11]

## **Rapid Expansion of Genetically Modified (GM) Soya**

By 2007, GM soya was already covering half of the cultivated land area. Not surprisingly, by this time, the growth and cultivation of GM soya was still unlawful in Paraguay. Why is this? The rapid expansion of roundup ready (RR) soya, a kind of GM soya, is primarily due to cooperation between the Argentine Association for Large Soya Producers (*Asociación Argentina de Productores en Simbra Directa*, AAPRESID), an organization allegedly tied with Monsanto, and its Paraguayan counterpart, the Paraguayan Chamber of Exporters and Traders of Grains and Oil Seeds (*Cámara Paraguaya de Exportadores y Comercializadores de Cereales y Oleaginosas*, CAPECO). [12]

## **Monsanto Faces International Opposition**

Some local farmers throughout the globe have demonstrated their vehement opposition to GMOs. Protests, lawsuits, and alarming suicide rates among farmers are but some of the outcomes that have followed Monsanto's titanic presence.

*Brazil:* Brazil ranks as the second-largest producer of GM crops, with 85 percent of its soybean crop produced from GM seeds. With Monsanto monopolizing the seed industry, farmers in Brazil—as in many other countries—face great difficulties trying to claim rights over their own seeds. In April 2012, a judge in the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul ruled in favor of five million Brazilian farmers. The farmers sued Monsanto on the grounds of unfair royalty extractions from the farmers. Monsanto claimed royalty rights after the Brazilian farmers were caught using seeds produced from crops grown from Monsanto's GM seeds without authorization. After the ruling was issued, the judge ordered Monsanto to return all royalties paid since 2004 or pay a minimum of \$2 billion USD. [13] [14]

*Argentina:* Within the last few decades, Argentina has established itself as the world's third-largest producer of soya, most of which is genetically modified. In recent months, protestors across the country have taken to the streets in opposition to the corporate giant. Specifically, a group of protestors in Argentina's province of Córdoba have successfully halted the construction of a new corn-seed production plant. According to Antonio Riestra, a member of the Unidad Popular party, the usage of pesticides near a town or local school poses an immediate threat to the lives and well-being of citizens. Activists and local farmers hope to generate enough support from the Argentine government to oust Monsanto from Argentina.[15] [16]

*India:* Between the years 1995 and 2011, nearly 300,000 Indian farmers committed suicide. Linked to these deaths were the unanticipated crop failures resulting from Monsanto's GM cottonseeds. Following this setback, farmers across India endured radical change in economic status, extreme poverty, and bankruptcy. Ironically, many of the recorded incidents report that farmers chose to kill themselves by consuming their own Monsanto pesticides.[17] [18]

## Conclusion

The socio-political struggles in Paraguay, as in other agricultural-based economies, are a clear manifestation of the hardships endured by local farmers and consumers. In addition, it reflects the strong corruption ties that exist between government leaders and the corporate world, a striking example being Zacarias Irun's relations with Monsanto. Although some argue that the usage of GM seeds has benefits, it is also valid to assert that the costs outweigh these benefits. Despite efforts to combat Monsanto, the prevalent usage of GMOs seems to be relatively unaffected. Though Monsanto has experienced a five percent decrease in sales over the last few years, its net profits have improved by nine percent. With agribusiness expanding its spheres of influence on a global scale, it begs the question: Will the efforts of local farmers across the globe bear fruit, or will corporations continue to plant their seeds of injustice? [19]

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