

**Food Activism: Agency,
Democracy and Economy**

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Cultures of Corn and Anti-GMO Activism in Mexico and Colombia

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Without corn there is no country. (Sin maíz, no hay país.)

—Slogan from Mexican anti-GMO network In Defense of Maize

We [the Zenú] are maize seeds, we are people of corn. We have more than thirty native varieties that are the legacy of our ancestors who for hundreds of years conserved them for us, their children.

—Statement posted on website of the Red Agroecologica del Caribe (RECAR),
Colombia (November 4, 2009)

In Colombia activists have organized a campaign against transgenic or genetically modified (GM) seeds and crops. Much like their counterparts in Mexico, activists use maize (or corn) as a symbol of national sovereignty, as well as campesino (peasant) and indigenous cultures, which they believe are undermined by transgenic varieties of corn. Genetically modified organisms (GMOs) are “global objects of contention” (Müller 2006) that take on specific characteristics and meanings in particular times and places. In Latin America, activists see transgenic maize as an embodiment of contemporary imperialism or neoliberal capitalism—a foreign threat to political autonomy, native varieties and genetic resources, national and regional cultures, and economic independence.

This chapter argues that when activists mobilize narratives about the cultural importance of traditional corn varieties (*criollos*),¹ they highlight the specificity of place on the one hand and participate in transnational activist networks to share information and strategies on the other. Among the Colombian anti-GMO activists and indigenous leaders I spoke to, maize represents indigenous culture. In Mexico maize is a symbol of indigeneity but also of the nation, with its complex history of cultural and racial mixing (*mestizaje*).² Activist slogans and statements such as “We are a people of corn” and “Without corn there is no country” emphasize maize as a *place-specific* way of life, food, agricultural crop, biological resource, and cultural practice.

This sense of place and culture is multiscalar. In other words, maize involves, at times, elements of shared culture across different scales of place, from the small rural community or region to the nation-state to indigenous and rural Mesoamerica.

By looking at narratives about maize we also see how activist groups *share* strategies and information. During my interviews I learned that maize became a strategic focus of the anti-GMO campaign in Colombia based, in part, on lessons learned from the 2001 controversy in Mexico over gene flow between transgenic and native varieties of maize, which was seen by activists as the world's first case of "genetic pollution" in a crop's center of biological diversity and origin. Narratives about maize as culture threatened by transgenic varieties resonate differently in these two countries, however. Part of the reason why the public response to GMOs in Mexico and Colombia differs so greatly, I suggest, has to do with the degree to which maize is an effective symbol of home or cultural identity for people beyond activist circles.

I explore agency in three related ways. First, Mexican and Colombian campesinos and indigenous maize farmers are not simply the victims of globalization, as they are sometimes portrayed. The farmers discussed here have collectively organized and teamed up with professional activists in an effort to raise awareness about how agricultural biotechnology affects them, to save and use criollos and to bring about policy changes at the community, government, and even international levels. I should also point out that in a previous phase of research among a community of indigenous campesinos and migrants in the Tehuacán Valley of Mexico, I found that even though residents were not involved in antiglobalization or anti-GMO activism, they had adapted to and strategized around the effects of neoliberal globalization on their lives and livelihoods, and that this too is a form of agency (Fitting 2011).

Second, I illustrate that agency is enacted through "globalization from below" as it is built *horizontally*, initiated between groups from the Global South, rather than just from Global North to South. Globalization from below refers to the transnational "linking of knowledge and political action in hundreds of civic initiatives" (Falk 1997: 19) that challenge what is sometimes referred to as "globalization from above," or the neoliberal policies of international institutions and national governments and the influence of transnational corporations. These activists are agents of change in sharing information and building networks horizontally.

Third, I suggest that as a powerful symbol of place (albeit to differing degrees), maize has catalyzed anti-GMO activism and forged or deepened links between non-governmental organizations (NGOs), activist organizations, and individuals. Activists in Mexico and Colombia voice not only the concerns about GMOs that are heard in other parts of the world but also ones that are specific to their region. By framing transgenic maize as a cultural issue (in addition to the environmental concerns and often scientific discussion about gene flow and biological diversity) activists generate solidarity among different types of groups and individuals. They connect and enroll actors and political struggles *beyond* the question of agricultural biotechnology and thus express a third form of agency.

This chapter is based on interviews with activists and indigenous leaders in Colombia (from the fall of 2011 to the spring of 2012); ethnographic research in Mexico with maize producers; interviews with participants in the GM corn debates, such as activists, biologists, and regulators (2000–2002, with extended visits over the next six years); and analysis of national media coverage on GMOs in both countries (particularly newspapers, activist Listservs, and websites). I begin by providing a brief discussion of the importance of maize in the two countries, some background information about the regulation of GMOs, and the reasons for activists' concerns about them. I then turn to how Mexican activism and the controversy over transgenic corn influenced anti-GMO activism in Colombia.

Cultures of Corn

Maize is such a powerful symbol because of its multifaceted economic, cultural, and political importance. Corn continues to be grown among campesinos because it is a traditional crop and a mainstay of the rural diet in various corn-based foods and beverages, such as *tortillas*, *tamales*, and *atole* in Mexico and *arepas*, *tamales*, and *mazamorra* or *peto* in Colombia. These maize-based foods are regularly consumed in cities, but in the countryside every part of the corn plant is put to use. The shelled cobs are burned as fuel for fires, the leftover stalks are given to animals as feed, and in Mexico the dried husks are used to wrap tamales. When cash is needed in emergencies, the grain can be sold in small amounts (although often at a loss). Additionally, because traditional varieties of corn tend to be well adapted to local conditions and environments, corn is considered hardier than other cash crops.

In Mexico, maize is cultivated on nearly 20 million acres (8 million hectares), most of which is rain fed and involves nonindustrial farming (Turrent Fernández, Wise, and Garvey 2012: 7). The farming, milling, and cooking of maize are a key part of everyday life in the countryside. The crop is so central to the rural diet that a meal is considered incomplete without tortillas. In many indigenous regions of the Americas, maize seed retains a strong spiritual significance and is the focus of a variety of rituals involving the blessing of seed, celebrating of the harvest, and so on. For many indigenous peoples, like the Zapotecs of Oaxaca, maize has a soul (González 2001).

In rural Colombia, while maize is also regularly eaten in both rural and urban areas, generally speaking it is not required to complete a meal. It is grown on approximately 460,000 hectares (in 2010), largely along the Atlantic Coast in the department of Córdoba, followed by Sucre and Cesar, but also in the interior departments of Tolima, Meta, Valle, and Huila (Federación Nacional de Cultivadores de Cereales y Leguminosas [Fenalce] 2011). While maize represents a way of life for indigenous groups like the Zenú who grow the crop, it is not as central to the idea of the nation as a whole—what it means to be Colombian—as it is in Mexico.

Transgenic Crops: Transgressing Nature, Trespassing Territory

Transgenic or GM plants contain DNA material inserted from other plants or species. They are products of biotechnology, a set of recombinant DNA techniques first developed in the 1970s that use organisms, their parts or processes, to modify or create living organisms with particular traits. Conventional plant breeding and farming practices also produce new gene characteristics in plants, but unlike genetic engineering, they work at the level of the whole plant. While biotech corporations portray biotechnology as the latest accomplishment in a long history of human intervention and improvement of nature (Levidow 1991), anti-GMO activists often suggest that such technology transgresses or defiles nature because it moves genetic material across species.

The “most intense, sustained, and effective” campaigns against agricultural biotechnology have taken place in western Europe, where anti-GMO activism has successfully mobilized consumers around issues of food safety, ideas about preserving rural society, and ethical concerns about genetic engineering as “playing God” or the defilement of the natural boundaries between species (Schurman 2003: 9–10). In the Global South, resistance to this technology tends to focus on a different set of issues: property rights and the effects of GMOs on the environment and small-scale farmers’ livelihoods (11).

Anthropologists have shown that foods that blur distinct cultural categories are often seen as impure or dangerous (Douglas 1966). GM foods and crops carry this sense of danger because they are undetectable by appearance; they are indistinguishable from nontransgenic varieties in the field and from traditional foods at the grocery store. With the expansion of the industrial food system and the related rise in food scares from the 1990s on (such as salmonella, *E. coli*, and bovine spongiform encephalopathy), consumers are increasingly worried that they do not know where their food comes from nor what they are eating. The portrayal of GMOs as “Frankenfoods”—a term used by activists around the world—reflects this consumer anxiety about foods made from a technology that can transfer genes from one species to another (Whatmore 2002). Activist campaigns employ the image of Frankenfoods in very different places, such as Europe and across the Americas.

Anthropologists have also found that in places like Mexico, France, and Costa Rica GMOs have come to represent neoliberal globalization or U.S. economic and political dominance that threatens regional or national sovereignty (Fitting 2006a,b, 2011; Heller 2002; Pearson 2009). Among Mexican and Colombian activists, transgenic corn in particular is seen as a foreign threat. In my interview with a Pijao community leader from Tolima, Colombia, he explained what he saw as the problem with transgenic corn: his community wants to protect native varieties from seed that both “come[s] from outside our culture” and “runs counter” to it (February 2012, Bogotá).

Controversy erupted in 2001 when Ignacio Chapela and David Quist published the results of their study that three different transgenic DNA sequences were found

in traditional corn from the highlands of Oaxaca, Mexico.³ The likely source of such corn was imports from the United States, where at the time 25 percent of the crop was transgenic and unlabeled as such. Today 88 percent of U.S. maize is transgenic (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service 2012). Scientists and activists found similar evidence in other parts of the country, including the government’s corn supply (Ezcurra, Ortiz, and Soberón 2002; INE-CONABIO 2002).

The finding of transgenic maize in Mexico garnered considerable media and activist attention around the world as the world’s first case of “genetic pollution” in a crop’s center of biodiversity and origin. It became a cause célèbre for international environmental NGOs like Greenpeace, seed and food groups such as the small international nonprofit GRAIN, and the transnational peasant and farmer group Via Campesina. The controversy was debated at activist-organized events like press conferences, rallies, and seed exchanges and in academic and scientific research papers, government debates before Congress, government and activist working groups and conferences, and the national and international media.⁴

The unintentional gene flow between transgenic corn and native varieties in Mexico was discussed by activists as contamination, a kind of genetic pollution or trespassing of unwanted living material that has, or could have, negative environmental impacts (Cleveland, Soleri, and Aragon 2003; Soleri et al. 2005). Such impacts include increased herbicide tolerance and pest resistance, unforeseen negative consequences for nontarget organisms, and the loss of traditional seed varieties.⁵

In addition to the environmental impact of transgenic seeds and crops, activists in both Mexico and Colombia tend to raise concerns about the effect of GMOs on cultural autonomy and practices related to food and agriculture (particularly in the case of maize) and the commodification of the seed, which have economic and political ramifications for farmers’ livelihoods. Not only are small-scale producers and peasants facing more expensive inputs or costs (at a time when state financial and technical support for such farmers has been cut), but they have been largely excluded from regulatory decisions and frameworks for GMOs.⁶

The Neoliberal Food Regime: Biotechnology and Biocapital

The commercial planting of biotech crops around the globe went from 1.7 million hectares in 1996 to 160 million hectares in 2011 (International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-Biotech Applications 2011). Food scholars have suggested that genetic engineering and its regulation are central to an emergent neoliberal food regime—the institutional structures, norms, and practices of food trade, governance, and political economy (Pechlaner and Otero 2008). This new food regime and phase of capitalism (what some have called biocapitalism) involves the harnessing and management of biological processes and resources in order to generate profit. Transgenic seed is often accompanied by intellectual property rights (IPRs) that require

users to pay a licensing fee in addition to the initial cost of purchasing seed. IPRs run counter to peasants' and farmers' widespread practice of saving and exchanging seed for replanting and provide another way to overcome the free reproduction of seed, or seed's "biological barrier to commodification" (Kloppenborg 1988). The commercialization of seed, including IPRs, contributes to "accumulation by dispossession," or the accumulation of capital by undermining a group's access to and control over the resources it needs to maintain its livelihood (Harvey 2003: 147–148).

One of the striking features of this food regime is that countries from the Global South now import staple foods that they themselves produce. Both Mexico and Colombia have seen rising corn imports in recent years for animal feed, food, and industrial purposes. In Mexico imports have reached 8 to 9 million metric tons per year (or higher in years of production shortfalls).⁷ In Colombia imports have increased since the 1990s, reaching 3.3 million metric tons in 2010, although a new government program hopes to reduce imports (Fenalce 2011: 4). Trade agreements and the World Trade Organization tend to protect farm subsidies in the Global North, "while Southern states have been forced to reduce agricultural protections and import staple, and export high-value, foods" (McMichael 2009: 148). However, as Gabriela Pechlaner and Gerardo Otero importantly point out, "despite prevailing trends, sufficient local resistance to the technology could modify, or even derail, the technology's role in individual nations, and accordingly, in the unfolding food regime as a whole" (2008: 352). Indeed, many anti-GMO activists act as policy watchdogs, and in places like Mexico have been quite successful in raising public concern around the import, testing, and commercial production of transgenic maize.

Scientists and government regulators began to debate the risks and benefits of transgenic maize in Mexico during the mid-1990s with the impending commercial release of GM corn in the United States. The Mexican Ministry of Agriculture started to grant permits in 1988 for scientific field trials of GM crops, advised by an ad hoc committee consisting of scientists from various disciplines and government agencies, which became the National Agricultural Biosafety Committee (Comité Nacional de Bioseguridad Agrícola, CNBA) in 1992. In a period of ten years, Mexico approved the commercial release of over thirty-one agricultural GMOs for human consumption, including alfalfa, canola, cotton, tomatoes, soybeans, potatoes, and maize (Pechlaner and Otero 2008). In late 1998 the National Agricultural Biosafety Committee—now the Specialized Agricultural Subcommittee of the Inter-Ministerial Commission on Biosafety (Comisión Intersecretarial de Bioseguridad de los Organismos Genéticamente Modificados, CIBIOGEM)—imposed a de facto moratorium on GM corn trials because the traits most commonly tested were not of any particular benefit to Mexico (Alvarez-Morales 1999: 91) and the committee had concerns about the possibility of transgenic corn hybridizing with or displacing native varieties and *teosinte*, a wild relative of maize (Serratos 1999).

In Colombia the regulation of GMOs began in the late 1990s, under Decree 4525, which was modified in 2005, establishing three technical committees (on health,

agriculture, and the environment) to evaluate GMOs. The National Agricultural Institute (Instituto Colombiano Agropecuario, ICA), a branch of the Ministry of Agriculture and Development, is responsible for "ensuring the quality of agricultural inputs and seeds used in Colombia, while regulating and controlling the use of living modified organisms by genetic engineering to agriculture."⁸ Colombia's first GMO approved for commercial production was the blue carnation in 2000, followed by cotton in 2003, transgenic corn in 2007, and soybeans in late 2010. As in Mexico, approval is given on a case-by-case basis. The cultivation of maize requires a buffer zone between the plot and any other crops, which is monitored by the ICA.

In Defense of Maize: Mexican Anti-GMO Activism

The anti-GMO campaign and network In Defense of Maize was established in 2002 in response to the scandal over transgenic corn. The network consists of over 300 environmental, food activist, peasant, and indigenous rights organizations, most of which are Mexican.⁹ Two transnational organizations with offices in Mexico City, Greenpeace Mexico and the Action Group on the Environment, Technology and Concentration (ETC Group), are important participants and founding members of the network. Mexican members of Via Campesina have also been active in the network, as are numerous academics, researchers, and scientists unaffiliated with activist organizations or NGOs. Members are involved in an enormous variety of projects that include running media campaigns, promoting criollo seed exchanges and fairs, establishing seed banks, hosting workshops for campesinos on seed saving, organizing a network of GMO-free tortillas, testing for transgenes in fields, participating in government consultations on biodiversity and biosafety (for example, in the making of the Biosafety Law of 2005), and conducting various types of research (environmental, legal, sociocultural, etc.) on the impacts of transgenic varieties.

Activists from In Defense of Maize argue that the regulation of agricultural biotechnology needs to be politically transparent and socially inclusive and that transgenic corn should not be cultivated, imported, or tested in the crop's center of biodiversity. Furthermore, as one maize scientist explained during the height of the controversy, "Promoters of biotech say how wonderful it is that Bt corn was found in Oaxaca because it's going to help peasants. But this is incorrect because in Mexico we don't have the pests that Bt was designed to attack" (Dr. José Antonio Serratos, interview, January 28, 2002). In my interviews, scientists who were involved in the network emphasized that they were not against agricultural biotechnology per se but rather against the testing and cultivation of transgenic corn *in Mexico*, where it is unsuitable and even a risk.

Corn continues to dominate the debates over biotechnology in Mexico because of its importance. Other transgenic crops like cotton have been grown in the country

without the same level of public attention or concern. Mexico is the crop's center of origin and biological diversity. Maize is a key element of the Mexican diet and culinary traditions, the main crop grown throughout the country, the cornerstone of rural livelihoods, and, as suggested by the slogan "Without corn there is no country," a powerful and longtime symbol of the Mexican nation.

At the various workshops and forums organized by In Defense of Maize groups in Mexico City that I attended over the years, I heard campesinos and indigenous farmers speak about the importance of maize in their lives and communities. An activist from the National Support Center for Indigenous Missions (Centro Nacional de Ayuda a las Misiones Indígenas, CENAMI)¹⁰ got up to the microphone to explain how the government views small-scale corn producers: "[the government perspective is that] we don't need peasants, nor do we need indigenous communities. We need people that can work in the *maquiladoras* [factories]. This is the solution that the neoliberal government wants to propose to us." The ways policies displace rural farmers were discussed at length. Participants in the network frame the import and regulation of transgenic maize as part of a broader critique on the effects of neoliberal policies and global capitalism in rural Mexico, a critique that forges and deepens connections between environmentalists, anti-neoliberal activists, peasant and indigenous groups, and concerned scientists and academics both within and across national borders (Fitting 2006b, 2011). With this broadening of focus, activists suggest that the appropriate experts for evaluating potential harm are *not only* biotechnologists and other scientists but also consumers and Mexico's large number of small-scale corn producers or campesinos. As a symbol of place, maize represents numerous struggles that Mexico—particularly rural Mexico—faces under neoliberal reforms and the expansion of agribusiness. Notably, however, this shift from a focus on the risks of gene flow to a broader debate still uses scientific studies about gene flow to advance the cause, and some of the most public figures in the anti-GMO network are scientists, such as members of the Union of Concerned Scientists Committed to Society.

Ana de Ita, from the Center for Studies of Rural Change (Centro de Estudios para el Cambio en el Campo Mexicano, CECCAM),¹¹ is an activist based in Mexico City who was involved in the network from its origins. In an interview she explained what she saw as the successes of the anti-GMO campaign:

We [CECCAM] were involved in organizing workshops, making links between different groups, testing corn for evidence of transgenes, outreach to rural communities. I think one of the successes of [the] In Defense of Maize campaign [and network] is the level of indigenous involvement. Communities wanted to know how to protect their seed. Another success is the pressure we put on DICONSA [a government agency that distributes food to rural communities] to stop buying corn imports that included transgenic corn. . . . Another success is the level of public awareness on the issue. Not to the extent that we wanted, but still the issue is out there. (July 24, 2006)

Despite the efforts of anti-GMO activists, the moratorium on field trials of transgenic corn ended in 2009. Since the end of the moratorium, six permits have been granted to corporations to grow pilot plots of transgenic corn in northern Mexico (two in Sinaloa, four in Tamaulipas). Corporations and research institutes are required to take a phased approach. First they plant experimental plots on less than one hectare and destroy all the corn produced. If these plots did not harm the environment or contaminate native varieties, they then grow pilot plots of ten hectares, and after that, they submit applications to commence commercial planting.

As of early 2013, the commercial cultivation of transgenic maize is still prohibited. However, there have been reports of farmers growing transgenic maize illegally in the north for several years (Center for Latin American and Border Studies 2009). And Monsanto, Dow Chemical, and DuPont's Pioneer seed units have all applied to enlarge their small experimental plots of transgenic corn, with the goal of planting the first commercial plots in northern Mexico shortly (Reuters 2011). Monsanto and Pioneer have filed applications to plant 1.4 million hectares in Sinaloa and over 1 million hectares in Tamaulipas (GRAIN 2012: 3). Mexican activists and their international supporters have been intensifying their efforts to pressure the new government of Peña Nieto to reject these corporate applications to grow transgenic corn. The National Union of Autonomous Peasant Organizations (Unión Nacional de Organizaciones Regionales Campesinas Autónomas, UNORCA), which has been involved in the anti-GMO network for years, held a sit-in and hunger strike against transgenic corn at Mexico City's Angel of Independence monument in early 2013. Farmers' organizations in Oaxaca have named 2013 "the year of resistance to transgenic maize."

While Mexican activists organize protests and press conferences and write letters of protest calling for the rejection of commercial production of transgenic maize, Colombia had a record year for the planting of transgenic corn, reaching close to 50,000 hectares during the first half of 2012 (Birkett 2012).

Semillas de Identidad: Anti-GMO Activism in Colombia

The first indigenous *resguardo*¹² in Colombia to declare itself a transgenic-free territory (TFT) was San Andrés de Sotavento of the northern departments of Córdoba and Sucre in 2005. This Zenú territory is also home to the Caribbean Agroecology Network (Red Agroecológica del Caribe, or RECAR), which has been the driving force behind the national Seeds of Identity campaign to promote the conservation and exchange of criollo varieties of seed in Colombia. Initiated in 2002, the campaign is the work of RECAR, the Bogotá office of SwissAid, and the Colombian NGO Grupo Semillas (the Seed Group), the most active groups to challenge the cultivation of GMOs and the privatization and commercialization of seed, and to promote the saving and exchange of criollo varieties. In their declaration, the Zenú point to

Colombia as a center of biological diversity of maize and to its cultural, alimentary, and socioeconomic importance for the Zenú. They also contend that the import of transgenic maize and other products from the United States generates “negative impacts on our seeds, our agriculture and our food sovereignty.” Since the declaration, at least five other TFTs have been declared: in the resguardo of Cañamomo y Lomapieta in Caldas; the Municipio de Natagaima in the Resguardo Indígena de Palma Alta, Tolima; in a resguardo of la Guajira; and two in Huila (Mauricio García A., interview, April 12, 2012; Orlando Pamo, interview, February 11, 2012).

The Zenú began the process of declaring their resguardo—a territory of approximately 20,000 hectares¹³—“free of transgenics” more than a decade ago when they started an initiative to recuperate criollos, particularly maize. They also worked on developing the Seeds of Identity campaign with the Bogotá office of SwissAid. In this campaign, criollo varieties of maize are a marker of place—indigenous, rural Colombia. Representatives of the Zenú see corn as embodying the essence of their culture. The 2005 TFT Declaration states, “We conserve and cultivate twenty-five criollo varieties of corn, and possess an ample culinary culture based on this sacred food; for these reasons, we consider ourselves ‘children of corn.’” Activist publications similarly discuss maize as the heart of indigenous Colombia, representative of indigenous culture, peoples, and biological/productive resources.¹⁴

Food sovereignty, mentioned in the Zenú declaration, is a term that was coined by the transnational peasants’ rights group Via Campesina in the mid-1990s and denotes a level of control, autonomy, and self-determination. It calls for food “security” in the sense of sufficient access to food but also for producers’ control over their productive resources, such as land, water, seeds, and so on (Wittman, Desmarais, and Wiebe 2010: 3)—precisely those resources that face, on a global level, increasing levels of commodification and usurpation by corporate interests. Food activists employ the term to refer to various scales of experience and analysis, from the household to the national and even transnational. In both Mexico and Colombia, where maize is representative of the “nation”—be it the nation-state or an indigenous people and territory—the import and cultivation of transgenic corn are seen as undermining political, economic, cultural, and food sovereignty.

By speaking at regional and national indigenous congresses about their experiences and strategies in declaring their territory transgenic free, the Zenú have provided an example to other indigenous communities in Colombia. For example, when I asked Efren, who was involved in declaring his resguardo in Caldas a TFT, why it was important to make this declaration, he explained:

Because of the loss of our seed, the introduction of technical packages [of improved seed], and the lack of respect for our traditions and regulations we decided to shut the door to this seed. In 2007 or so, the mayor’s office received a proposal for technical extension work [from a seed company] to establish some parcels of land with transgenic soybeans. This was taking advantage of indigenous peoples’ need. The packet included

everything for the producer [initially at no charge...]. The first TFT was in Córdoba [and Sucre] and we talked to the Zenú about their experience. We had heard about their declaration through the indigenous network and congress. The campaign Seeds of Identity also helped us a lot. It was a difficult process [because our mayor was initially against the idea]. It generated a discussion in the community about what is a gene, what is improved seed. And when it understood, the community helped with the process [of declaring a TFT]. We started to promote seed exchanges, and at all of our meetings we started to put aside an hour to exchange seed. According to our internal norm of 2009, the use of improved seed [including GM varieties] is now prohibited. (interview, February 2012)

In addition to mentioning how his community heard about the first TFT in Córdoba, among the Zenú, Efren points to concerns about the displacement of traditional seed, and the attempts of seed companies to “take advantage of indigenous necessity” by offering technical packages of transgenic soy at no or low cost. Although producers from Efren’s home in Caldas first learned about GMOs through offers of transgenic soy, anti-GMO activists from indigenous resguardos like his, and in Bogotá, have focused on corn as the key crop in their campaigns. For indigenous groups, maize is traditionally a much more meaningful crop than soy, and as I discuss, several pivotal activists in the anti-GMO campaign in Colombia looked to the Mexican campaign for information and strategy.

The Zenú TFT declaration in 2005 had an impact beyond setting an example for other indigenous groups. Because their declaration preceded any government approval of transgenic corn, when the ICA did decide to approve “controlled plots” of Monsanto and DuPont varieties of transgenic corn in 2007, they took the declaration into consideration: The ICA approved GM maize under the condition that it would not be grown in indigenous territories and must be grown at a minimum distance of 328 yards (300 meters) from any resguardo. Activists are concerned about the growth in area of these controlled plots: from less than 15,000 acres (6,000 hectares) in 2007 to more than 123,000 acres (50,000 hectares) in the first half of 2012 (Germán Vélez, interview, December 15, 2011; Birkett 2012).

Corn as Culture: A Transnational Activist Strategy

Corn is cultivated by indigenous peoples, and in reality by most rural peoples.... It is the most traditional crop.... Corn is, let’s say, because of its reproductive cycle, its cultural importance, for the foods made from it, for all of these factors plus the threat of transgenic seeds, *it became a strategic crop*.

—Mauricio García A., SwissAid, Bogotá, April 27, 2012¹⁵

As Mauricio from SwissAid Colombia explains above, maize “became a strategic crop” in the Colombian campaign against transgenic agriculture because of its

cultural importance as a key food and crop. Following the height of the controversy over transgenic corn in Mexico, Mauricio, along with Edenia Montaña, a leader from RECAR, and indigenous leaders from the Zenú territory, traveled to Mexico to learn about the experience of indigenous peoples with the issue. The “contamination” of corn and the anti-GMO campaign in Mexico struck a chord with activists and indigenous leaders in Colombia, where maize is also central to rural livelihoods. Mexican activists tell a compelling story about why transgenic corn is inappropriate technology and too great a risk for Mexico. Their focus on corn as a symbol of sovereignty and the difficulties faced by rural producers resonate with activists and indigenous producers in Colombia.

Transnational advocacy and activist networks exchange information and strategies in an effort to influence policy at the international level as well as in specific countries, and to try and “transform the terms and nature of the debate” (Keck and Sikkink 1999: 93). Often these connections are made between groups from the Global South and North. While anti-GMO organizing in Mexico, and to a lesser extent Colombia, has involved organizations from the Global North (such as the ETC Group, Greenpeace, and SwissAid, who have Mexican or Colombian offices and staff), the case of transgenic corn raises the issue of how information is shared *between* activists from the Global South. Colombian and Mexican activists discussed and shared perspectives and studies on the perceived risks associated with transgenic crops, details about their regulation in the two countries and internationally, and strategies for raising awareness and organizing campaigns. The Mexican focus on maize as a symbol of place—its people, culture, and biological resources—clearly resonated with activists in Colombia. In turn, the Zenú declaration of a TFT provided an example to other Colombian indigenous groups.

Following Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink’s terms, there are two kinds of politics relevant to understanding the debates over transgenic maize in both the countries under discussion. The first is “information politics,” or when activist groups try and influence public debate in the media both at home and abroad by moving “politically usable information quickly and credibly to where it will have the most impact.” The other is “symbolic politics,” or the “ability to call upon symbols, actions or stories that make sense of the situation or claim for an audience that is frequently far away” (1999: 95).

The cultural and symbolic significance of maize in parts of Colombia, much like in Mexico, is deeply connected to the everyday experience and livelihood struggles of rural peoples. Activists point out that Colombia is home to a considerable diversity of criollo varieties (although not a center of origin like Mexico) and that these varieties are put at risk by policies that undermine small-scale agricultural production and the free exchange of seed and foster dependency on imports. Colombia went from being self-sufficient in maize in the 1990s to importing some 85 percent of corn for domestic consumption in 2010 (Germán Vélez, interview, December 15, 2011), much of which is transgenic. Mexican activists had also highlighted this connection

between GMOs, trade liberalization, and increasing corn imports in their country based on their experience with the North American Free Trade Agreement.

The Colombian anti-GMO campaign has had an impact on regulation, as the ICA qualified its approval of transgenic corn with the stipulation that its cultivation must be accompanied by a buffer zone, and it is prohibited in *resguardos*. In interviews, however, activists and a representative from the biotechnology advocacy group (the Colombian office of AgroBIO) confirmed my observation that the issue of GMOs is not discussed or debated much in public forums. Media coverage on agricultural biotechnology in Colombia is sparse and often positive (with the exception of activist publications and websites).

In comparison to the effects of armed conflict in rural Colombia, the issue of GMO cultivation can seem minor in media coverage and public debate; it is a challenge for anti-GMO activists to generate support for their cause outside of activist circles or indigenous *resguardos*. A form of “biohegemony” may also be at work in which “the benefits and value of agricultural biotechnology acquire the status of common sense and go largely unquestioned” (Newell 2009: 38). In contrast, GMOs have generated more critical press coverage and mobilizations in Mexico than in Colombia, where images of Mexico as a people and culture of corn resonate beyond activist networks and Mexican activists regularly publish research and opinion pieces in national newspapers (notably in, but not restricted to, the leftist *La Jornada*).

Conclusion

Resistance to agricultural biotechnology (as well as support for it) is found in many different countries around the world, but *why* and *how* it is resisted (or supported) may differ. In Mexico and Colombia, activists oppose transgenic seeds, particularly transgenic maize, because of its potentially harmful effects on *criollos* and *campesinos* and indigenous livelihoods. I have argued that these campaigns against transgenic corn illustrate how indigenous maize farmers and *campesinos* help shape “globalization from below” by sharing information and strategies *horizontally* through networks between regions and countries of the Global South. I have also suggested that while they share concerns and strategies with anti-GMO activists internationally, their campaigns highlight the cultural meaning of maize at various scales of place from the local village to the transnational region. Maize is a symbol of cultural uniqueness or difference, threatened by neoliberal globalization.

Activists strategically focused on maize as a powerful symbol of *their* region, its peoples, and its cultures. Although this focus has different degrees of success and resonance in Mexico and Colombia, I hope the comparison serves as a reminder to look for influences and connections horizontally between activists of the Global South and to ask whether activists engage symbols and narratives that have histories, broader meanings, and a wider audience than their own activist circles.

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Notes

1. *Criollo* is commonly used in Spanish to refer to “traditional” varieties, which are landraces and creolized varieties.
2. Maize has a long history as a symbol of indigenous and rural Mexico, and a more recent history as a symbol of mestizo (or racially/culturally mixed) Mexico, particularly in the twentieth century. Associations with the rural and indigenous have been positive and celebratory at times (among environmentalists and anti-GMO activists today, for instance), while at other moments corn production has been portrayed by government officials and rural experts as a backward, traditional, noncompetitive crop. See *The Struggle for Maize* (Fitting 2011), *¡Que vivan los tamales!* (Pilcher 1998), and *Corn and Capitalism* (Warman 2003 [1988]).
3. The *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt) toxin gene, the cauliflower mosaic virus (CaMV) gene promoter, and the nopaline synthase (NOS) terminator sequence (Chapela and Quist 2001; Quist and Chapela 2002).
4. See the Mexican In Defense of Maize (<http://redendefensadelmaiz.net/>) and the Argentina-based Biodiversity in Latin America (<http://www.biodiversidadla.org>) for lists of key activist websites. For posts in support of agricultural biotechnology see AgroBio Mexico (<http://www.agrobiomexico.org.mx>) or the international site AgroBio World (<http://www.agrobioworld.org>).
5. Non-GMO seed that is improved through plant breeding can also contribute to the loss of traditional varieties.
6. Other issues raised are food safety and a call to adhere to the precautionary principle in biosafety assessment, which states that the absence of scientific knowledge about a risk should not hinder actions to reduce a risk (National Research Council of the National Academies 2002: 64). This principle has been employed in various international treaties and declarations like the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety.
7. This rose in 2011 to 12 million tons due to production shortfalls in Mexico. Most imports are used for animal feed or industrial uses. Recent figures are from Rodríguez 2011. Mexico imported corn in years previous to the neoliberal period

of austerity measures in the 1980s and trade liberalization in the 1990s but not at the current levels.

8. From the ICA website, <http://www.ica.gov.co/El-ICA.aspx> (accessed August 15, 2012).
9. These include the Environmental Studies Group (Grupo de Estudios Ambientales, GEA), the National Association of Rural Commercialization Enterprises (Asociación Nacional de Empresas Comercializadoras de Productores del Campo, ANEC), National Support Center for Indigenous Missions (Centro Nacional de Ayuda a las Misiones Indígenas, CENAMI), the Union of Concerned Scientists Committed to Society (Unión de Científicos Comprometidos con la Sociedad, UCCS), and Seeds of Life (Fundación Semillas de Vida).
10. CENAMI is a nonprofit based in Mexico City that works to support indigenous pastors and churches in various regions of the country. Beyond this, their mission includes supporting indigenous projects to defend and promote indigenous culture, territory, and rights. See <http://www.cenami.org>.
11. CECCAM is a Mexican nonprofit founded in 1992. It is a link (*punto de enlace*) for exchanging information and research. It services campesinos and indigenous groups from distinct backgrounds in sharing experiences and challenges in confronting rural modernization. See <http://www.ceccam.org>.
12. *Resguardos* are indigenous territories based on communal landholdings. Under the Colombian Constitution of 1991, indigenous peoples were given the right to manage the political and administrative affairs of their territories. There are currently 710 legally recognized *resguardos* located in 27 departments and 228 municipalities (ABColumbia 2010: 16).
13. The Zenú have colonial title to approximately 165,560 acres (67,000 hectares) of land, but they have recuperated only 49,421 acres (20,000 hectares) of noncontiguous parcels, located in municipalities such as Córdoba and Sucre.
14. See RECAR's website and Grupo Semillas's magazine *Semillas* (no. 22/23) from November 2004.
15. Translation and emphasis mine.

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Peasants' Transnational Mobilization for Food Sovereignty in La Vía Campesina

Delphine Thivet

The concept of “food sovereignty” was introduced for the first time in a public arena in 1996:

Food is a basic human right. This right can only be realized in a system where food sovereignty is guaranteed. Food sovereignty is the right of each nation to maintain and develop its own capacity to produce its basic foods respecting cultural and productive diversity. We have the right to produce our own food in our own territory. Food sovereignty is a precondition to genuine food security. (La Vía Campesina 1996)

From that time forward, the concept of food sovereignty has been identified as the key motto of La Vía Campesina.¹ This transnational social movement was born in May 1993 in Mons (Belgium) to oppose the negative social impacts of the neoliberal economic globalization of agriculture. Since then it has continued to grow, attracting more and more organizations from all over the world. Organized into nine regional secretariats, a rotating International Operative Secretariat,² an International Coordination Committee (ICC), and various commissions or working committees, La Vía Campesina has a rather heterogeneous membership (Borras 2008: 274). It is now comprised of 163 rural organizations made up of peasants, small- and medium-scale farmers, organic farmers, rural women, rural workers, and indigenous and landless people from the Americas, Asia, Europe, and Africa; it represents about 200 million members from seventy countries. The term *food sovereignty* was originally coined by farmer and landless activists during the Second International Conference of La Vía Campesina, held in Tlaxcala, Mexico, in 1996. The term offered an alternate concept to *food security*, which was advocated and promoted by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Bank. Since 1996 food sovereignty—broadly defined as the right of each nation or people to define their own agricultural and food policies—has been adopted by various nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), development advocates, environmental groups, academics, and even certain nation-states and governments, such as Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, Mali,³ and Nepal, as a strategic goal to promote change in the current food system.

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