2 July 2019

Civil Society Denounces the Release of GM mosquitoes in Burkina Faso

We, the undersigned civil society organisations from Africa and around the world, denounce the release of genetically modified (GM) "male-sterile" mosquitoes in Burkina Faso. The GM mosquitoes were released in the village of Bana on 1 July 2019 by the Target Malaria research consortium.[i]

The open release is intended to test the infrastructure and systems for future release for as-yet experimental technologies, notably "gene drive" mosquitoes. Target Malaria's ultimate aim is to make open releases of gene drive mosquitoes, with the aim of reducing the population of *Anopheles* mosquitoes, which can transmit the parasite that causes malaria. Their claim is that reducing the mosquito population could reduce the risk of malaria transmission and hence disease incidence.

The release of GM mosquitoes in the village was an unethical experiment, as Target Malaria acknowledges that there are no direct benefits to the local population of this particular GM mosquito release, in terms of malaria control. This was not an early stage trial of the GM mosquitoes intended to be tested later for their impact on malaria, but a release of an entirely different GM mosquito.

Thus, there was no justification for making the releases. According to the World Medical Association's Declaration of Helsinki, which is based on the Nuremberg Code and outlines the internationally agreed ethical principles for medical research involving human subjects, such research "may only be conducted if the importance of the objective outweighs the risks and burdens to the research subjects" (Article 16).

Indeed, the release of the GM mosquito in Burkina Faso poses risks, including the incidental release of some biting female GM mosquitoes during the experiments. While Target Malaria claims that the number will be small, nevertheless, since GM female mosquitoes can bite humans and spread disease, the release of biting females still poses some risk to local people.[ii]

Article 26 of the Helsinki Declaration also requires that research participants are adequately informed about the risks and anticipated benefits of the study, as part of the process of informed consent. Regrettably, despite Target Malaria's claims of "community acceptance" for its project activities, evidence suggests otherwise. Testimonies from a range of people from villages in the areas where Target Malaria is operating explain that they have not been properly informed about the project or its potential risks.[iii]

There is also no published environmental risk assessment (ERA), other than a limited ERA published by Target Malaria and there has been no genuine public consultation, apart from "public engagement" activities conducted by Target Malaria.[iv] The lack of a comprehensive, published ERA, which has been subject to open and transparent public consultation, makes it impossible to implement requirements for fully informed consent, because local people cannot be fully informed about the risks before making a decision on whether to accept them.

The releases in Burkina Faso are the first open releases of GM mosquitoes in Africa. Previous releases of different GM mosquitoes in other parts of the world have been littered

with failures, false claims, lack of adequate risk assessment, and flouting of international and local regulations.[v] We are deeply unhappy that, once again, it appears that Africa has become a testing ground for risky technologies.

Furthermore, this GM mosquito release is viewed as paving the way for possible future gene drive mosquito releases. Experimenting with African lives to prepare the ground for this untested and extremely controversial technology, for which independent scientists have raised serious concerns,[vi] and for which more than 170 civil society organizations have called for a moratorium,[vii] is completely unacceptable.

Signed by:

1. African Centre for Biodiversity, South Africa
2. African Biodiversity Network (ABN)
3. Association Ouest Africaine pour le Développement de la Pêche Artisanale (ADEPA)
4. Biodiversity and Biosafety Coalition of Kenya (BIBA)
5. Coalition pour la Protection du Patrimoine Génétique Africaine (COPAGEN)
6. Comité Ouest Africain de Semences Paysannes (COASP)
7. Community Alliance for Global Justice (CAGJ)
8. Comparing and Supporting Endogenous Development (COMPAS Africa)
9. Eastern and Southern Africa Pastoralist Network (ESAPN)
10. Eastern and Southern Africa Small Scale Farmers Forum (ESAFF)
11. ETC Group
12. Fahamu Africa
13. Faith & Justice Network of the Mano River Basin (FJN)
14. Farm-Saved Seeds Network (FASSNET)
15. Fédération Agroécologique du Bénin (FAEB)
16. Fellowship of Christian Councils and Churches in West Africa (FECCIWA)
17. FIAN International
18. Friends of the Earth Africa (FoEA)
19. Friends of the Earth USA
20. Gene Watch UK
21. Global Justice Now!
22. Groundswell West Africa (GWA)
23. Health of Mother Earth Foundation (HOMEF)
24. Indigenous Peoples of Africa Coordinating Committee (IPACC)
25. Institut Africain pour le Développement Economique et Social (INADES-Formation)
26. Institut Panafricain pour la Citoyenneté, les Consommateurs et le Développement (CICODEV Africa)
27. International Tree Foundation
28. Jeunes Volontaires pour l'Environnement (JVE International)
29. La Via Campesina SEA
30. Network of Farmers' and Agricultural Producers' Organizations of West Africa (ROPPA)
31. Participatory Ecological Land Use Management (PELUM) Association
32. Plate-forme Régionale des Organisations Paysannes d'Afrique Centrale (PROPAC)
33. Réseau Africain pour le Droit à l'Alimentation (RAPDA –Togo)
34. Rural Women's Assembly (RWA)
35. Tanzanian Alliance for Biodiversity (TABIO)
36. Third World Network
37. Thousand Currents (formerly IDEX)

38. Union Africaine des Consommateurs (UAC)
39. We are the Solution (WAS)
40. World Neighbors
41. Zambia Alliance for Agroecology and Biodiversity (ZAAB)

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[i] "Target Malaria proceeded with a small-scale release of genetically modified sterile male mosquitoes in Bana, a village in Burkina Faso". Posted July 1, 2019 by Abdoulaye Diabate. https://targetmalaria.org/target-malaria-proceeded-with-a-small-scale-release-of-genetically-modified-sterile-male-mosquitoes-in-bana-a-village-in-burkina-faso/

[ii] "GM mosquitoes in Burkina Faso: a briefing for the Parties to the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety". 2018. African Centre for Biodiversity, Gene Watch UK and Third World Network. https://acbio.org.za/sites/default/files/documents/GM_mosquitoes_in_Burkina_Faso_A_briefing_for_the_Parties_to_the_Cartagena_Protocol_on_Biosafety.pdf

[iii] "A Question of Consent: Exterminator Mosquitoes in Burkina Faso". 2018. A film by ETC Group. http://www.etcgroup.org/content/target-malarias-gene-drive-project-fails-inform-local-communities-risks-new-film

[iv] "GM mosquitoes in Burkina Faso: a briefing for the Parties to the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety". Ibid.

[v] "Oxitec's failed GM mosquito releases worldwide: Forewarnings for Africa and the Target Malaria project". 2019. African Centre for Biodiversity, Gene Watch UK and Third World Network. https://acbio.org.za/sites/default/files/documents/Oxitec_failed_GM_mosquito_releases_worldwide_Forewarnings_for_Africa_and_the_Target_Malaria_project.pdf

[vi] "Gene Drives. A Report on their Science, Applications, Social Aspects, Ethics and Regulations". 2019. Critical Scientists Switzerland (CSS), European Network of Scientists for Social and Environmental Responsibility (ENSSER) and Federation of German Scientists (FGS/VDW). https://genedrives.ch/report/

[vii] "Common Call for a Global Moratorium on Genetically-engineered Gene Drives". 2016. http://www.synbiowatch.org/gene-drives/gene-drives-moratorium/?lores