

Annual Report 2024

Overview of ENSSEER's activities

This year, ENSSEER organised or co-organised eight events, of which one was on-site, six online and one both on-site and online:

- Reports from the second meeting of the AHTEG (Ad Hoc Technical Expert Group) on Risk Assessment of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) in Montreal, 12 March, online, for ENSSEER members. Nicolas Defarge, Ricarda Steinbrecher and Eva Sirinathsinghji (Third World Network, TWN) reported their experiences; Christophe Boëte (French government) commented.
- Workshop "Problems of scientific practice", 22 March, online, for ENSSEER members. Five papers written by members of our working group "Science vs Belief Systems" were presented: on scientific technofixes; scientific advice to policy-makers; the relationship between science and power; harassment and intimidation of scientists; polarisation and lack of debate.
- Event "Integrated Pest Management: Cultivating resilient farming systems for a sustainable future", 26 June, Brussels; co-organised with Pesticide Action Network Europe, Friends of the Earth Europe and Agroecology Europe. András Székács, in ENSSEER's name, was one of the speakers.
- Public webinar on "Hot button issues at CBD SBSTTA meetings in Nairobi: Synthetic biology, artificial intelligence, risk assessment of gene drives", 4 September, online. Ricarda Steinbrecher and Angelika Hilbeck reported their experiences. (SBSTTA = Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice)
- Annual General Meeting of ENSSEER members, 9 November, Bern and online.
- Webinar on the World Health Organisation's proposed Pandemic Agreement and International Health Regulation amendments, 3 December, online, for ENSSEER members. Speaker: Dr Amrei Müller, Sutherland School of Law, University College Dublin.
- Reports from the 16th Conference of the Parties (COP 16) of the CBD and the 11th Meeting of the Parties (MOP 11) of the Cartagena Protocol in Colombia, 11 December, online, for ENSSEER members. Speakers: Angelika Hilbeck, Nicolas Defarge. Comments and additions from further COP participants Sarah Agapito, Ricarda Steinbrecher, Eva Sirinathsinghji (TWN), Lim Li Ching (TWN), Christophe Boëte (French government) and Hartmut Meyer.
- Webinar "Problems that may be encountered in a scientific career", 16 December, online, for students and aspiring scientists. The same five papers of our working group "Science vs Belief Systems" that were presented in our internal workshop on 22 March, were now presented to students and aspiring scientists.

Much work has gone into preparing the next ENSSEER conference in May 2025 in Athens, entitled "Science and policy in times of multicrisis and dissent", co-organised with the Mariolopoulos-Kanaginis Foundation for the Environmental Sciences (MKF) and Critical

Scientists Switzerland. As a followup to our 2023 conference "The integrity of science", this conference will consider the troublesome relationship between science and policy.

A political decision about the deregulation of the New Genetic Modification Techniques (NGMTs) for plants, which the European Commission (EC) proposed in 2023, has still not been taken. ENSSER continues to support members of the European Parliament (EP) and NGOs with scientific insights (see Annex 1). We still hold the view that the proposal is so contrary to the scientific facts and the precautionary principle, that no amendments can repair it and it should be rejected entirely. The EP unfortunately accepted the EC proposal, although it has demanded amendments to it. The Council of the EU, despite many efforts, has still been unable to decide about it. (The EC, EP and Council need to come to an agreement before the proposal is accepted or rejected.) Meanwhile, more countries in the world are preparing to deregulate NGMTs or have already done so.

However, in two countries the opposite impulse could be seen. First, the Philippine Court of Appeal, after hearing witnesses including ENSSER board member Ricarda Steinbrecher, ruled that commercial propagation of GM eggplant and GM golden rice must stop until the relevant government agencies "submit proof of safety and compliance with all legal requirements". Second, in South Africa, after nine years of litigation by the African Centre for Biodiversity (ACB), the Supreme Court of Appeal sent the authorisation of Monsanto's drought-tolerant GM maize back to the government for making the legally required environmental impact assessment. This was a precedent-setting judgment, as it highlighted the rubber-stamping nature of GMO decision-making in South Africa. ACB acknowledged the indispensable roles of ENSSER members Jack Heinemann and Angelika Hilbeck as expert witnesses in the long chain of lawsuits. Both the Philippine and the South African courts thus forced their governments to apply the precautionary principle in GMO decision making.

ENSSER members attended five events of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and its Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety (CPB) in Canada, Kenya and Colombia, providing expert input and networking a lot with other delegates (see Annex 2). Nicolas Defarge, Angelika Hilbeck, Sarah Agapito, Ricarda Steinbrecher and Hartmut Meyer were involved. In Colombia, at the 16th Conference of the Parties (COP 16), they held a side event about gene drive risk assessment. Together with some representatives of like-minded organisations and a representative of the French government, they reported their experiences to our members as well as to a wider audience in several zoom meetings (see above).

The World Health Organisation, with its proposals for a Pandemic Agreement and for amendments to the International Health Regulations, intends to make the policies which it advised for COVID as permanent as possible for future pandemics. This continues to worry ENSSER, since a solid scientific basis for these proposals is missing. After finding an excellent paper about the scientific responses to SARS-CoV-2 in the light of the human right to science (in the International Journal of Human Rights), the coordinator and two board members of ENSSER contacted the author, human rights lawyer Dr. Amrei Müller of University College Dublin, and invited her to give the webinar mentioned above for ENSSER members. ENSSER will keep contact with Dr. Müller. Further hopeful news in this respect is that the US Congress, after a two-year investigation, published its final report on COVID,

titled "After Action Review of the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Lessons Learned and a Path Forward". The report is very critical of the American COVID-19 policy, exposes high-level corruption in America's public health system related to COVID and, crucially, confirms the most likely origin of the pandemic as a lab escape event of the virus. It also "serves as a road map for Congress, the Executive Branch, and the private sector to prepare for and respond to future pandemics."

The ENSSER working group "Science vs Belief Systems" continues to work out its assessment of current mainstream science, after the two webinars mentioned above.

ENSSER is part of a coalition of NGOs (including Sciences Citoyennes too) who discuss potential input to the EU's future 10th Framework Programme (FP10) for research and development. Angelika Hilbeck represents us.

The NGOs Secrets Toxiques and Pesticide Action Network Europe, whose experts Gilles-Eric Seralini and Angeliki Lysimachou are ENSSER members, have started legal proceedings at the EU Court of Justice to revert the 2023 renewal of the herbicide glyphosate's licence for 10 more years. On the ENSSER email list, Seralini has requested and obtained support from other ENSSER members in collecting evidence.

ENSSER continues to support the NGO lobby for an EU ban on the export of pesticides already banned for use within the EU (popularly called 'chemical colonialism'). The pressure was renewed with an open letter from the NGOs (including ENSSER) to the Council of the EU, urging its commitment to the ban in the next strategic agenda of the EU.

Reflection

In the field of genetic modification (GM), the past few years have seen a slow but steady process of corporate capture of the chief global regulatory body, the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and its Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety (CPB). This concerns not only the agrochemical and pharmaceutical companies, but also the big ICT companies (Google, Microsoft, Amazon) and the banking sector. The main factor giving rise to this has been the appointment of the two latest Executive Secretaries of the CBD, who, instead of being genuinely devoted to the goals and spirit of the CBD, like their predecessors, have given ample space to the industry lobby undermining it. The result is that the output of the Convention and the Protocol (binding global guidance for biodiversity protection and GMO regulation) now shows a tendency away from risk assessment and risk management, towards enabling unproven GM applications. This happens despite more than 40 years of commercial GMO failures, and with unsubstantiated promises of an ever wilder character, like gene drives (genetic modifications which are forced into whole populations).

An example of this undermining activity which ENSSER was confronted with, was the participation of the leader of the Target Malaria research consortium in the AHTEG on Risk Assessment (RA) in Montreal. This AHTEG focuses on the RA of gene drives. Target Malaria develops gene drives and is funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which has close ties to industry. In other words, Target Malaria is helping to write the RA guidance

that will apply to Target Malaria: a very obvious conflict of interest. However, the majority of the AHTEG, including representatives of the EU and Germany, did not object to this. Therefore, this conflict of interest was formally addressed by a letter of Third World Network, endorsed by ENSSER, to the CBD Secretariat. No action was taken by the Secretariat, however.

With the 16th Conference of the Parties (COP 16) of the CBD and the preparatory meetings for it, ENSSER has been much involved in CBD matters this year, and has held internal strategy meetings to reconsider its attitude and focus in view of the corporate capture. We have decided to continue participating in the CBD and CPB, but to emphasise two characteristic facts about GM: that, on the one hand, its practical application in plants and animals cannot but fail from a scientific point of view, and on the other hand that four decades of commercial attempts have not shown a single lasting success that was economically effective and efficient. A standing working group of ENSSER members will monitor and elaborate this strategy. Among the many participants of CBD events whom we meet and speak to and hope to inspire, are also young and unbiased scientists.

In September, the non-profit newsroom Lighthouse Reports (collaborating with news media from various parts of the world) announced that it had obtained a collection of derogatory profiles of more than 500 environmental advocates, scientists, politicians and others seen as opponents of pesticides and GM crops or supporters of organic and other alternative farming methods, in Africa, Europe and other parts of the world. The profiles came from a private platform called Bonus Eventus (Latin for "good outcome") and were composed by the American "reputation management firm" v-Fluence owned by a former Monsanto and USAID employee. v-Fluence provided the Bonus Eventus profiles to paying members of its "private social network", who included not only industry advocates but also more than 30 USA government officials, mostly from the US Department of Agriculture (USDA).

The scandal exposed part of the background of several serious cases of obstruction of scientists' work on and NGOs' resistance to pesticides and GM crops. Although we have so far not observed any major direct links to problems experienced by ENSSER or its members, it is quite likely that the 'Bonus Eventus files' have played a role in the obstruction of the work of multiple individual ENSSER members. ENSSER as an organisation and an unknown number of its members are profiled on the Bonus Eventus platform, but due to the EU privacy law only individuals can obtain their own personal files from Lighthouse Reports; ENSSER cannot do this for them. We have stimulated our members to do so, but we do not have much insight yet into the number and character of their profiles. We are continuing our communication with the members about this. The Bonus Eventus file of ENSSER as an organisation contains some sensitive information, but the board does not deem it necessary to take any action. Both Lighthouse Reports and ENSSER can offer assistance in case profiled members would wish to start legal proceedings. Meanwhile, in February 2025, v-Fluence, in response to the public exposé and upon recommendation from its legal team, announced that it has halted its profiling operations.

Assessment of our financial situation

The main financial challenge this year has been to cover the budget of the Athens conference in May 2025. It is nearly completely covered now by a special grant from FPH and support from MKF, Triodos Foundation and Zukunftsstiftung Landwirtschaft. MKF contributes in kind by hosting the conference in the Academy of Athens, including the audiovisual technology and catering.

Participation of ENSSER members in the five events of the CBD and CPB has been financed by Gekko Foundation and the Gen-ethische Stiftung.

The current financial situation of ENSSER is good (cf. Budget Overview 2024). Thanks to the grants received for the big Athens conference, the outlook for 2025 is also good. It should be noted that especially the work of our chair Neni Nicolopoulou plays a great role in this.