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### The exploitation of plant genetic information: Political strategies in crop development

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## Preface

The time that plant genetic information was dealt with exclusively in scientific circles is definitely over. Business people, politicians, lawyers, environmentalists, farmers, indigenous communities, and consumers have also involved themselves in the exploitation and conservation of genetic information. To them, genetic information does not only refer to DNA, but is also related to food security, health care, cultural survival, new markets, or intellectual property rights. The stakes are high, and this explains why the exploitation of genetic information has become a controversial issue in international politics. Scientists in the crop development industry can no longer operate in a quiet corner of society. The many new stakeholders have formulated views on how genetic information should be exploited and are lobbying forcefully for the implementation of their views.

For quite a number of years we have been fascinated by the attempts to regulate the exploitation of genetic information and the international conflicts that were triggered by these attempts. We have reported on new developments in the *Biotechnology and Development Monitor*, a journal produced at the Department of Political Science of the University of Amsterdam, which has been our base for the past ten years. We have also been involved in various academic and policy-oriented projects related to the conservation and intellectual property protection of genetic information. Over the years, this work inspired us to start a more integral research project in which conservation and plant-related intellectual property protection issues are framed into their most obvious context, i.e. that of agricultural politics.

A great deal of the motivation to write this book came from what we increasingly considered as shortcomings in the existing literature on conservation and intellectual property protection. First, there is the problem of disciplinary orthodoxy. Academic discussions on regulating the conservation and protection of genetic information seem to take place within the various disciplines involved, while there is relatively little exchange of ideas and knowledge among them. Plant breeders tend to perceive the issue basically from a biological and agronomic point of view; lawyers follow the legal path; molecular biologists have a biotechnological approach; economists focus on the cost and benefits of mining genetic information as industrial resource; and political scientists are preoccupied with national and international power relations. It was our intention to navigate between these disciplines and to unlock and combine the valuable knowledge from all the various sources. Nevertheless, we have always been aware of our 'guest' status in other disciplines. We had the ambition to write a *political* analysis of the exploitation of plant genetic information, which implied an analysis of the power constellations behind apparently neutral technological, economic and legal developments.

Another motivation to write this book was an ambition to offer the reader some tools to take the plunge into the highly complex conflict on genetic information. We

find most social science contributions on the issue unsatisfactory, as they explain the controversies surrounding genetic information in terms of a simple bi-polar confrontation between the “North” and the “South”. We attempt to present the conflict in terms of clashes between different types of agriculture. Actors involved are not just Northern or Southern governments, but a whole range of interest groups, such as governmental departments, business associations, farm and consumers organizations, environment-oriented NGOs, and indigenous peoples organizations. As the reader will notice, alliances and conflicts between these groups are far more complex and fluid than the inter-governmental or hemispheric blocks on which most analyses rely.

Many people inspired, assisted, or in some other way enabled us to complete this work. Very much appreciated have been the comments on earlier versions of parts of this book from Jos Bijman, Jean Carrière, Don Duvick, Huib Ghijsen, Henk Hobbelink, Gerd Junne, Niels Louwaars, John Komen, Volker Lehmann, C. Mastenbroek, Dwijen Rangekar, Hans Raven, Rob van Tulder, Bert Visser, and two anonymous reviewers. A part of the interviews were carried out in collaboration with or with the assistance of Félix Moreno, Rodolfo Alvarado, and Marta Rueda in Colombia, and with Verónica Paeile in Chile.

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