

1. BIOCOLONIALISM, GENETIC ENGINEERING & FREE TRADE AGREEMENTS

Many Indigenous peoples strongly oppose genetic engineering (GE) and genetically modified organisms (GMO). Some describe it as a form of biocolonialism - a further wave of colonisation over lifeforms and the commodification of our genetic materials which Indigenous Peoples are inextricably connected to and dependent on for our cultural survival. Most of the world's remaining biodiversity is on Indigenous lands, therefore biocolonialism poses threats to biodiversity conservation and sustainable development by disrupting traditional practices and undermining the resilience of Indigenous communities and our environments.

OUR RESPONSIBILITIES IN AOTEAROA

In Aotearoa, the duties, responsibilities and rights at the heart of Mana Motuhake, rangatiratanga and kaitiakitanga over taonga, including our whenua, [species] and mātauranga, are sourced in our intrinsic, enduring and inalienable place as tangata whenua, confirmed in He Whakaputanga me Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Biocolonialism is the 21st century threat to our ability to meet our duties and responsibilities now and for future generations.



WHAT IS “BIO-COLONIALISM”?

The first wave of colonisation took our Indigenous land, our waters and our language. This next wave of colonisation, located at the genetic level, seeks to manipulate the genetic material or DNA of a lifeform and steal Indigenous knowledge. Debra Harry, a Northern Paiute woman from Pyramid Lake in Nevada, explains that:

“Biocolonialism extends the reach of the colonial process into the biomes and knowledge systems of Indigenous peoples in the search for marketable genetic resources and traditional knowledge”.

GENETIC ENGINEERING (“BIOTECH”) IS THE MUSKET OF BIOCOLONIALISM

Genetic engineering is a Western scientific process that can change or modify the ancestral instructions that make living things what they are. Just like how we have our own traditional ways of living and passing down knowledge, genetic engineering places power with biotech scientists to make changes to the instructions of plants or animals. The Indigenous Peoples Council on Biocolonialism (IPCB) describes these technologies as “an invasive and destructive assimilation against Indigenous peoples”. The IPBC describes GE as “a global threat, not only to the self-determination of all Indigenous peoples, but also to the non-Indigenous world and the earth itself”. Dr Vandana Shiva refers to it as “biopiracy”, rooted in the extractive logic of colonialism and capitalism - the plunder of nature and knowledge.

WHO ARE THE BIOCOLONISERS?

Biocolonialism is the exploitation and misappropriation of biological resources, genetic material and Indigenous and traditional knowledge from Indigenous communities by those outside of Indigenous communities, typically corporations, governments, universities and private interests. Some of the world's most powerful corporations are granted private intellectual property rights over these biotech "discoveries", which displaces traditional food production and lets them dominate food systems around the world. The largest biotech corporation, Syngenta Group, reported USD33 billion in sales in 2023. These corporate giants perpetuate the colonial power dynamics and inequalities between those who extract and profit from these resources and the Indigenous communities who have traditionally stewarded them as a part of nature.

HOW IS BIOCOLONIALISM LINKED TO FREE TRADE AGREEMENTS?

The biotech giants rely on FTAs to cement in their "intellectual property rights" globally and to lock open other countries doors to GMOs. The US is their main champion. It pushes mis-named "trade" rules on other countries, eg to restrict or prohibit bans, GM labelling, raise minimum allowed levels of contamination, and demand really high levels of Western scientific proof which tends threat Indigenous knowledge with contempt. At the same time, their rules make it really hard for organics.

BIOCOLONIALISM IS RESPONSIBLE FOR:

- the violation of Indigenous Peoples' fundamental duties and rights, including the right to self-determination, cultural integrity, and control over our Indigenous resources;
- perpetuating a system where Indigenous communities and our traditional knowledges are marginalised;
- the commodification of knowledge and resources for profit by powerful actors;
- threats to biodiversity conservation and sustainable development by disrupting traditional practices; and
- undermining the resilience of Indigenous communities.

INDIGENOUS SOVEREIGNTY MOVEMENTS ARE RESISTING THE GENETIC FRONTIERS

GE extends the battle for sovereignty to the molecular level for Indigenous Peoples who have been opposing these new technologies in their territories for decades. Indigenous resistance to GMOs is global and takes place at government levels and has seen a return to rebuilding sovereign Indigenous food ways. That includes Indigenous-led resistance to biotech rules in the World Trade Organization and other free trade treaties. In Aotearoa, Te Waka Kai Ora (National Māori Organics Authority of Aotearoa) joined the WAI262 claim in 2007 as a claimant group to specifically oppose GMOs.

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Efforts to address biocolonialism include:

- enabling Indigenous communities through capacity building, legal recognition, and inclusive decision-making processes to challenge and mitigate the impacts of biocolonialism, including in FTAs. That is urgent and imperative as the new government plans to reverse the ban on GMOs;
- strengthening Indigenous rights, promoting community-based governance of genetic resources, and ensuring equitable benefit-sharing;
- effectively implementing other international agreements like the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the Nagoya Protocol (which the Crown has not signed up to) to protect traditional knowledge, ensure participation in decision-making, and establish fair and equitable access and benefit-sharing mechanisms.