



News Release:  
9 November 2001  
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## US Government's \$2.5 Million Biopiracy Project in Mexico Cancelled

### *Victory for Indigenous Peoples in Chiapas*

After two years of intense local opposition from indigenous peoples' organizations in Chiapas, Mexico, the US government-funded ICBG-Maya project aimed at the bioprospecting of Mayan medicinal plants and traditional knowledge has been "definitively cancelled" by the Project's Chiapas-based partner, ECOSUR – El Colegio de la Frontera Sur. The US government confirmed today that the ICBG-Maya Project has been terminated.

*"The definitive cancellation of the ICBG-Maya project is important for all indigenous peoples in Mexico. Indigenous communities are asking for a moratorium on all biopiracy projects in Mexico, so that we can discuss, understand and propose our own alternative approaches to using our resources and knowledge. We want to insure that no one can patent these resources and that the benefits are shared by all."* – Antonio Perez Mendez, indigenous doctor and secretary of the Council of Traditional Indigenous Doctors and Midwives from Chiapas (Consejo de Médicos y Parteras Indígenas Tradicionales de Chiapas - COMPITCH).

*"We see the cancellation of the ICBG-Maya as a victory, but we also realize that we must develop capacity to respond with our own economic alternatives. If not, we will continue to see foreign projects which seek to privatize our resources and knowledge."* – Rafael Alarcón, advisor to COMPITCH

ECOSUR's decision to withdraw its support for ICBG-Maya is the final blow for the ill-conceived biopiracy project – which not only faced widespread opposition from indigenous peoples organizations in Chiapas, but also last year failed to get regulatory approval from the Mexican government (that is, permission to conduct bio-assays on collected plant materials).

The \$2.5 million dollar ICBG-Maya project, entitled "Drug Discovery and Biodiversity among the Maya in Mexico," was funded by the US government in September 1998, and included the University of Georgia-Athens (UGA), USA, the Colegio de la Frontera Sur (ECOSUR), Mexico, and Molecular Nature Limited (MNL), a Welsh biotechnology company. The International Collaborative Biodiversity Group (ICBG), is a US government initiative involving the National Institutes of Health, the National Science Foundation and the US Department of Agriculture (USDA).

**No Means No!** "Despite all the talk about 'prior informed consent' and the 'right to say no,' it took two years for the indigenous peoples of Chiapas to convince the ICBG-Maya that no means no. The Project was unacceptable to many indigenous communities in Chiapas that oppose commercial exploitation of their genetic resources and traditional knowledge," explains Silvia Ribeiro of ETC group. "ECOSUR has made a responsible decision and now seeks to re-build community support for its public research programs," adds Ribeiro.

**Slow to Go:** The ICBG Maya Project was staunchly defended by its director, anthropologist Brent Berlin of the University of Georgia. Failing to win consensus at the local level, and facing increasing criticism internationally, Berlin sought to redesign the project and salvage it. In August 2001 Berlin proposed to ECOSUR that a re-designed project would seek to define the risks and benefits of bioprospecting, train indigenous leaders on ethical norms related to prior informed consent, and develop an informational campaign on the risks and benefits of bioprospecting for indigenous communities. Although ICBG approved the new project, to be financed by a re-direction of funds from the first ICBG Maya proposal, the advisory board of ECOSUR rejected it. On 7 October 2001, perhaps in a last-ditch effort to win approval for the project, a representative from the US Embassy in Mexico travelled to Chiapas to meet with representatives from COMPITCH, the indigenous group in Chiapas most active in protesting the project. Again, the local communities said no.

**Lessons Learned?** The decisive rejection of the ICBG-Maya, and the continuing struggles of indigenous peoples in Chiapas to defend their collective rights over biodiversity and traditional knowledge, offers valuable lessons for bioprospectors worldwide, including the US-government's remaining ICBG projects in Latin America, Asia and Africa.

Ultimately, neither well-meaning anthropologists nor civil society organizations can make decisions for indigenous peoples; nor can outsiders appoint organizations to determine who will legitimately represent the interests of indigenous communities. The collective rights of indigenous peoples must be respected, as well as the fundamental right of local communities to veto projects that target their resources and knowledge.

In a world where biological products and processes are being privatized and patented, and where Farmers' Rights are being trampled by intellectual property and trade agreements, it is not surprising that proprietary rights are confounding negotiations at the local, national and international levels. Equity-based bioprospecting is a myth in the absence of regulatory mechanisms that safeguard the rights and interests of farmers, indigenous peoples and local communities.

**Unanswered Questions:** What will happen to plant materials collected in Chiapas prior to the termination of the Project? While it is understood that bio-assays were not conducted on these plants, how will the University of Georgia and ECOSUR insure that any plant collections are repatriated to the local communities?

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<p>The Action Group on Erosion, Technology and Concentration, formerly RAFI, is an international civil society organization headquartered in Canada. The ETC group (pronounced Etcetera group) is dedicated to the advancement of cultural and ecological diversity and human rights.</p>
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