

REPORT BACK FROM THE PHILIPPINES ON GOLDEN RICE

FRAN MURRELL ~ MADGE

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3CR INTRO: Last month over 80 delegates, farmers, scientists and development workers from the Asia Pacific region joined peasant farmers in the Philippines for a 5-day conference with the aim of stopping the introduction of so-called Golden Rice, which is a genetically modified organism, which the proponents claim will significantly address hunger and vitamin A deficiency.

The conference was organised by MASIPAG and the Stop the Golden Rice Network in the Philippines, and facilitated by the Anti-Poverty Commission.

Fran Murrell, co-founder of the group MADGE, attended the meeting and when we spoke yesterday, I asked her about MADGE, its aims and research work.

FM: It stands for Mothers Are Demystifying Genetic Engineering, but also Mothers Advocating Deliciously Good Eating. We started in 2007 when the Victorian Government were thinking about lifting the ban on growing GM canola, which they did, but we just thought we needed to let people know what they were eating, and give them a choice if they wanted to avoid it.

3CR: And who's we?

FM: We've got a committee, and we've got people in our networks via Facebook, we send out a digest and we're on Twitter as well. Whoever takes an interest in food. We do know people have been writing to their politicians and organising their lives so they can protect themselves from this stuff. I think that's pretty good.

3CR: What was your interest that led you to this, where did it come from?

FM: It was when my kids were born in the mid-1990s. I was doing a Grad Dip at Melbourne

University in Environmental Studies. I found out about pesticides and that completely freaked me out because I realised how toxic they are and how, even though we know they are harmful, they are all around us. And I thought, 'GM crops... They will reduce pesticide use, they'll be really good!' So that's about my interest. Then I started looking into GM crops and I realised that actually they're just another way to sell pesticides.

3CR: Has this taken you outside Australia, your work with MADGE prior to this?

FM: Yes, it has. I've been to Toronto, to Canada, and I went to California to talk at a heritage seed festival and I've just been to the Philippines.

3CR: Tell me about the Philippines – a very troubled place.

FM: Yes, well I just whizzed in and whizzed out in five days. But it was incredibly interesting because it was the Stop Golden Rice! Network Conference and Golden Rice is a GM rice. It was organised by MASIPAG, which is a Philippine organisation of farmers and scientists that was established when they saw how disastrously the green revolution was sweeping away their agriculture. There were 80 people from all over Asia, about 30 groups, people were from India, Indonesia, Taiwan, Sri Lanka, China.

3CR: And the Pacific?

FM: No, no one from the Pacific, but anyway it was a really broad... And people from Vietnam couldn't come but they did send a Powerpoint presentation.

3CR: Where does the name Golden Rice come from?

GM: Well, it's this rice that is slightly golden in colour. The idea is that it's got beta-carotene in it which is a precursor to vitamin A. The stated aim is to ensure that people with vitamin A deficiency can eat this rice and get vitamin A. It's a GM rice and it's been in development for about 20 years by the International Rice Research Institute, which is called IRRI, and that gets money from Syngenta, the Gates Foundation, and other big biotech companies. It's been held up as this poster child for genetic engineering in that we can stop children dying and make sure they don't go blind. However, you actually don't need rice to get vitamin A, you need vegetables and fruits and a little bit of fat, a varied diet. If you eat a varied diet then you will get all your other nutrients as well, not just vitamin A. Vitamin A in too high doses can be toxic, just like anything. By

concentrating on one little thing in a diet is really symptomatic of what's wrong with industrial approach to food. You need variety, you need a cuisine, not just rice.

It's been promised to be ready in 20 years and it hasn't appeared... and looking at the IRRI website you can see there have been problems with yields, and there are other problems with performance. Finally, our regulators, Food Standards Australia New Zealand [FSANZ], received an application to approve this rice. Australia is not going to grow it, we are not going to import it, but it's been approved so that if rice imported into Australia is contaminated (with the GM rice), then it won't be a trade issue. We were looking at this as a trade issue.

FSANZ approved it. They said it was safe. They said they didn't need to look at whether it worked or not. They just had to decide whether it was safe. Their decision about whether it was safe or not was taken using information from the developer of the rice. There are no feeding studies, and the data they have received is full of holes. They've approved it, on what I think are very sketchy grounds. Not one animal feeding study, and there's no proof that this works. From looking at what they did receive, you can see that you'd need to eat about 4 kilos of the rice a day to get the same amount of beta-carotene as from a carrot. It's a complete furphy if you are saying this can solve the vitamin A problem. You might as well either give vitamin supplements, or make sure people have carrots and mangos and coriander, and other things.

3CR: Well obviously there's a lot of money in this.

FM: Yes, absolutely. What this is, is a kind a smoke screen for people in the West to think, 'Oh yes, this is really good because children aren't going to die or go blind'. No-on to the Philippines and meet people on the ground, and find out what they really thought about all of this.

Because Australia has approved Golden Rice, it means that places like Bangladesh and the Philippines, if they want, can go ahead and plant this rice, without needing to have any further approvals in their country. So, you can imagine, you go over there and their staple food has been potentially contaminated by Australia's approval. I mean, it's pretty awful.

3CR: How did it get to that?

FM: This is a mystery but this is the mystery of regulatory bodies all around the world. You think, 'Who are they regulating for?' They're not really, in my view, regulating to protect public health, because if they were doing that they would actually ask for proper studies. They'd ask for feeding studies, they'd ask for long-term studies looking at fertility, or looking at developmental

issues; all sorts of things. But they don't do that.

It's just a mystery of how our globe works. It seems to work to regulate the public so corporations can do whatever they want.

3CR: Talk about some of the people that were here. Over the five days you must have met a lot of people?

FM: Yes, there were some fantastic people there. One of the organisers, Ana Bibal was from MASIPAG. She was a very dynamic woman and she basically said, 'This rice has been developed by white men in countries where rice is not the staple food, and it's completely outrageous!' And I thought, 'Ana, you are totally right'. She's an incredibly smart woman and what she put together was this *really* interesting group of people from all over Asia.

There were scientists, farmers, women who were working with rural communities and women farmers. There was a broad range of people. What I realised is that the huge issue is a lack of democracy; which means a lack of access to land, a lack of access to resources, and a lack of being heard and taken seriously.

The stories coming out again and again were the same.

I met this wonderful woman from Sri Lanka. She was talking about what is happening, foreign corporations are coming in and doing developments, and the government is very supportive of those developments. When those developments are doing things like cutting off the supply of river water to farmers, which is their irrigation, which means then you can't farm, that is ignored. It appears that the aim is to relocate farmers off the land into the cities, and then that land will be used for corporate farming, and then we'll also have high-end ecotourism in beautiful spots.

I thought, 'Look, I like a holiday, but this getting quite sinister' when what you're doing is moving people off their land into cities, away from an ability to support themselves, so that the wealthier people of the planet can come in and enjoy the natural beauty... I think this is quite sinister.

3CR: And you found that with most of the countries, the people you spoke to, that is what's happening?

FM: I suppose I can't say in every country that is happening, but it was obvious that what's happening is that corporations are coming in — and in Vietnam, the Vietnamese presentation was about the growing of GM corn — which then displaces everybody. The same story is the use of pesticides, people are getting ill, corporations taking the best farm land, and that is a common story.

3CR: Did you get to move around the Philippines at all to meet any of the farmers?

FM: No, we didn't do that. It was really very focused. We had two full days of presentations, you're hearing the stories about what is going on. We would socialise with one another in the breaks. We also went to the Department of Agriculture, there was a farmer and conference demonstration outside saying, 'We do not want Golden Rice', and that was really amazing, because the local farmers were saying, 'We want land reform, we want support for our farming, we want an end to the ownership of our rice, we want an end to pesticide-driven farming, we want health and sustainability... and we want to be heard!'

3CR: What's going to happen to their rice supplies that they have now if they get this Golden Rice in?

FM: One of the concerns is that it will contaminate. It's been presented as, 'We are going to give this rice to the poorest farmers'. But there's always a catch. One is that the poorest farmers actually don't want it; they want their own rice. But two, is that if it starts out-crossing with all the local rice varieties, does that rice then become patentable, because it's now out-crossed? It's said the rice is free to farmers who don't earn more than a certain income. Okay, so when they do start earning more than a certain income, or when commercial rice varieties are contaminated with Golden Rice, what happens then?

The irony about all of this is that Dr Debel Deb, a scientist and farmer from India, was at the conference and he gave a fantastic presentation. He was saying he had tested the rice seeds in their seed bank and he'd found 515 varieties that had high levels of beta-carotene in the bran. As long as it was eaten as brown rice, then vitamin A would be available.

3CR: And you think, what is this going to do to those traditional brands of rice if they bring in and saturate the market with so-called Golden Rice...

FM: Well, exactly. It will be contaminated and it will be patented. You can see this is building on the back of the green revolution which, in the West, is portrayed as 'Everyone got fed and it was a

massive increase in rice'. Yes, it was a massive increase in rice yield but it also got rid of rice straw as feed for animals. It also meant that farmers had to use pesticides and fertilisers, and it required more water. It sent a lot of people bankrupt; it poisoned a lot of the ecosystems, and people are absolutely furious that they were duped... or forced out of growing their local rice.

The common story across this conference is that people are trying to re-build seed banks. They are trying to re-establish traditional ways of farming; traditional in the way of sustainable so you can keep farming on the same patch of earth and keep farming it year after year.

People are very clear about what happened with the Green Revolution, which was basically their Indigenous seeds, that were really well adapted, were taken away from them and they had sub-standard seeds, which might yield more than their old seeds, but it doesn't mean they're more nutritious. It pushed out a whole lot of other crops that were needed for their food and nutrition.

3CR: There's a fightback?

FM: Yes, there's definitely a fightback. It was just amazing because you also had the national Anti-Poverty Commission and farm unions and all these dynamic people who were networked on the ground and who were really clear that change is needed because their people are suffering poverty. What is presented as solution... they've already seen that and know that it fails and they do not want that anymore.

That was the other interesting thing. The national Anti-Poverty Commission organised a public dialogue about Golden Rice and we were spectators. They had people from four government agencies, and they were in conversation with farmers, women, consumers, academics, scientists and international organisations. For example, there was a woman from Indian groups of organic farmers basically saying we do not want this. We have consulted our members — several hundred thousand or more farmers not wanting Golden Rice. We were told there hasn't really been much public discussion about GM rice. Setting up this meeting between all these groups and government was actually good because it's quite amazing that you're having the staple food genetically modified without public discussion. This was apparently one of the first times people came together... and there was a lot of passion in the room, because this is people's livelihood; it's their culture and it's their health and it's their future.

3CR: Is it likely that conferences like this could take place in other parts of the world where people are having this rice forced upon them?

FM: Yes, definitely. One of the aims of this conference was basically to reach out and network and make links. I think it was really successful at that and what it really brought home for me is that everywhere is facing the same problems. It manifests differently in each country but In Australia we are having farmers forced off the land. In Australia, we have one in five children who are sometimes missing meals. We are a wealthy country and yet we are allowing children, people to be impoverished like this. This is a choice. I think we have to acknowledge that. I'm not saying you and I directly decide to do it but the policies, as set by our governments, are allowing this to happen and to go unchecked. To blame it on some kind of personal failing of people, individually, rather than the system that is not allowing people to provide for themselves and to have a life of dignity. That was really what was very clear.

It was fantastic to meet people from all over the place. It was really interesting to meet people from China and Taiwan and see that everywhere what's happening is that people want to be in control of their food again. Because that means being in control of your land, your food, being able to make decisions, and to be able to build a community and a culture. The barriers to this are the excessive powers given to corporations to come in and do what they want, effectively with no checks or balances... And with governments frequently actively supporting them and regulators actively supporting them.

I think there is this disconnect, if we seriously are democracies then we should we should start actually listening to people and have a variety of conversations. Not just this one-sided view that corporations are wonderful and they can do whatever they want. We actually need to have some discussions — and some real evidence.

This is what gets me. I've been looking at GM crops for 20 years now. And when I started, all the things we thought... that they might end up resulting in more pesticide use, and they might end up causing pests to evolve resistance, and they might end up with control over the seed. All of these things have happened. We've increased pesticide use, we have these super pests, super weeds. Farmers are furious about the lack of choice of the seed they use. There's also evidence of people getting sick from this.

Three years ago we brought Dr Michelle Perro out from California. She's worked as a paediatrician for 30+ years and she's seen really sick kids in her practice — and things that weren't even in the textbooks when she started — so you're seeing very new illnesses. She said you start off by cleaning up the gut. Once you clean up their diet, and clean up their gut, then you can then start looking at any underlying issues. Sometimes the problems will go away but you

can't even start until you clear up the food. I'm thinking, how many people do you know with digestive issues? How many people do you know that have kids with all sorts of problems? And to say, 'Well, that's what it's like now' is no good. We need to look at what's changed. And one of the things that's massively changed is the corporate takeover of our food system. GM crops, pesticides and all sorts of weird additives and processes in our food.

3CR: In the countries that you've talked about, mainly poorer countries, are they quite aware of all those things?

FM: You can see there's different levels of awareness in different countries. I think the Philippines is actually very politically aware and very well networked. India has a huge amount of knowledge and networks. What you can see is that countries which have experienced this are not swayed at all by the rhetoric. But I think who *is* swayed are the people who aren't the peasant farmers; the people in government, the people who are at one remove, to whom it becomes a 'story'. They either believe the peasants, or they listen to these slick corporations who are waving white coated scientists around — and yes, of course the money.

You can see it's actually very important that people meet up and hear each other's stories. I think people were quite surprised to hear we had a problem with hunger and poverty in Australia. Also in Asia, there's disquiet about Australian milk and meat exports coming in and undercutting their farmers. I was thinking, well, in Australia, you have produce imports undercutting our farmers. What you're really seeing are farmers being told to focus on exports, because really who wins in exports are big corporations. But farmers are not being encouraged to supply their own domestic market, or supply a varied market. They're being encouraged to supply commodity crops... crops that can be transported. But other things that go into a diversified diet for a local area are not what people are being encouraged to grow.

3CR: Just focus for a couple of minutes on the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. We're being told that these two people are going to save the world, but there's another side to that story, isn't there?

FM: Yes, there is another side to that story. You can google Global Justice Now who have done a report on the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. There's also AGRA Watch that's looking into them. What they're saying is, is that there's thing called philanthro-capitalism, it's philanthropy which is actually capitalism. It's said that the Gates Foundation owns shares in a lot of companies and the income from those shares is actually greater than what it dispersed in its various grants. But the money dispersed is enormous. What it is pushing is a very technological solution to

everything. Because the money that they're putting into agriculture and health is so enormous, it basically swamps everyone else's ideas. Some of their projects might be okay... I don't know, I haven't looked at all of them. But what has happened is that there's no democratic discussion of what do we actually need to do. And he is pushing... or the Foundation is pushing GM crops in Africa and Asia, and it is extremely clear that people and farmers on the ground, are just like you and me; they want to know their food is safe and they want it grown locally by farmers with decent living conditions. Yet neither of these conditions are met by GM crops. People all over the world are really resistant to this. I think it is a massive imposition and extremely rude of Bill Gates to be behaving like this.

3CR: Then of course you have got the major, the ginormous pesticide companies behind this...

FM: Yes, huge multinationals. In the 1970s there were something like 7000 commercial seed companies worldwide. Up until recently that had conglomerated into six companies worldwide... and now it's turning into four. And then you think, well that's going to consolidate as well because in capitalism you either have to grow your own market, which is more people, or you have to take over somebody else's market. I think we need to be extremely, extremely clear that what is happening is GM crops have saturated North America — in the commodity crops. Europe doesn't want them and Australia has kept most of them out. The target now for them is Africa and Asia. This is not about saving Africa and Asia. This is about making money for the corporations who want to control agriculture in those places. Because up until now farmers have been in control of their seed, more or less... not exclusively, because obviously you had the green revolution, which failed in Africa, because they were too smart and held onto things.

There are an awful lot of myths out there about who's feeding who, and really, it's the third world, poor farmers, feeding the big corporations.

3CR: What was the agenda at the end of the conference, after five days... What was the result?

FM: Well, there's a statement that's still being fine-tuned and finalised... but there's a conference declaration, and it stated... and this is just one section, and I'll read it out if you don't mind: “..the past Green Revolution and current GMO commercialization peddled by the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) Monsanto - Bayer, Syngenta (now ChemChina) and other giant agrochemical corporations in the last three decades has not solved but exacerbated the bitter state of rural poverty, hunger and malnutrition in Asia. It has robbed our farmers' of sovereignty

our seeds, poisoned our ecosystems, grabbed our land, chained our farmers to debt and deaths, eroded our genetic diversity and trampled the sanctity of Life.”

FM: Which I think, basically, sums it up. This is not just an esoteric discussion. This is people's lives, their homes. Are they going to be poisoned, are they going to be pushed off what little they have? To be presenting this as some kind of western saviour is just the complete reverse of the truth.

The positive is going and meeting people, and listening, and thinking, ‘Yes, If there is a future, it is a future of us, as people, discussing with people, all over Asia... because we all have the same needs for good food, clean water, access to resources, access to community. We can sort it out. We just have to talk to each other, and not be frightened and scared into believing certain things, and to really pick apart the myths.

3CR: And that's the way forward?

FM: Yes, definitely. Solidarity, basically and listening and talking to one another and just being considerate. I think we need an awful lot more talking. I think we need to really challenge the governments and the corporations. They haven't delivered. If this system was working there wouldn't be any poverty anywhere. If the promises were true, we'd all be living in Nirvana. To say, ‘Oh yes, the system's great, but you're all wrong and that's why you're poor’, I think it's a complete cop out.

3CR: Just finally Fran, I'm just wondering about the feeling at the conference of a woman, or maybe more than one woman from the first world coming to a conference with people from the developing world, the south. How did you fit in?

FM: Well, I was a bit taller than everyone! And a lot whiter. And so I did feel, kind of like, oh gosh...

3CR: I didn't mean it in that sense [laughs]

FM: Well it is true though, because there are many layered things going on. Everyone was extremely kind and hospitable. I did think, ‘Wow, everyone speaks English incredibly well, and has a huge grasp. And I don't know this...’ But there are historical imbalances that go back. I could also see there are some countries that had great representations from women, which was really

encouraging, and the women there were fantastic, because obviously, they were doing great work in their communities.

There was one country there that didn't have any women representatives. I did think it showed there was a bit of a gap and it's quite clear that diversity is really important. All sorts of diversity because the more, different people that we can hear from the clearer the picture that we get, and the bigger the understanding that we get of what's going on. Therefore, the bigger the solutions and the better the solutions, and the more likely those solutions are going to last because everyone's been consulted. I think that's what a democracy is and if we're going to aspire to that, then that's what we need. We need diversity, we need to listen, we need to respect each other. And we need go forward thinking about, 'What is the most joyous future we can imagine, what is the most just future, what is the most beautiful future, what is the most enjoyable, fair and delightful place for us all?

3CR: And that was Fran Murrell from MADGE...

INTERVIEW END