

Joint Aarhus Convention/Cartagena Protocol workshop on public awareness, access to information and public participation regarding GMOs, 8-9 October 2010, Nagoya

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION CASE STUDY 1

THE “GM NATION?” DEBATE

The United Kingdom's “GM Nation?” debate took place in the summer of 2003 – a time when both the political mood and scientific innovation had moved on a good deal in the eight years since the first UKNCC. Despite the relatively non-controversial introduction of the first GM products (notably a GM tomato paste and GM cheese) in the shops in the mid-1990s, public concerns grew in subsequent years. One particularly influential event was the arrival in the late 1990s of US and Canadian soya beans in Europe, as a mix of conventional and GM product. After that, growing public concern – about practical issues such as labelling, and more general anxieties about possible risks to human health and the environment – was largely instrumental in the introduction of an extended moratorium on commercial growing of GM crops. Now the major biotechnology companies have for the present abandoned hope of growing such products in Europe; by contrast, the area of cultivated GM crops worldwide has grown significantly over that period, with GM crops of major importance in China and the US, for example.

In anticipation of a new regulatory process being put into place EU-wide, the UK Government set up the GM Nation? public debate on what was generally agreed, in retrospect, to have been an over-ambitious timetable of a couple of months. It formed one of three Government-instigated components, running in parallel, the others being an assessment of the ‘science’ of GM, conducted under the guidance of the UK's Chief Scientist, while the other was a review of the economic costs and benefits.

The public debate element involved six major ‘regional’ debates, designed to be the stimulus for a cascade of ‘second and third tier’ open access meetings, of different degrees of informality. Estimates of the number of such meetings range from 400–700 throughout the UK. ‘Stimulus material’ was provided to initiate debate at such meetings, together with what was generally regarded as an uninspiring (and hence largely ignored) videotape, consisting in the main of conversations between farmers, scientists and consumers. Feedback forms, allowing recipients to record their views on GM crops, were provided within the booklets, and in an electronic form on the GM Nation? website. Overall, about 37,000 feedback forms were submitted, with almost 3 million ‘hits’ recorded for the website. A parallel group of 10 ‘narrow-but-deep’ (NBD) focus groups was set up, excluding individuals with significant prior knowledge of or involvement in the GM controversy. Each of the 10 NBD groups met twice, at the beginning and end of the public consultation, with the expressed hope that their deliberations could be compared with the self-selecting, and frequently ‘engaged’ participants involved in the public meetings. These discussion groups were seen as providing a research dimension, acting as a ‘control group’, or a ‘measure of reliability’, to establish to what degree those who actively sought to be involved in GM Nation? open debates might or might not be ‘representative of the general population’. Also, grass-roots discussion workshops, for the

most part with individuals not actively involved in GM issues, played a key role in setting the agenda for the ensuing debate – identifying issues such as choice, need for information, uncertainty and trust and helping to shape the focus of questions on the GM Nation? website.

The general conclusion of the final GM Nation? report, published in 2003, was that while the debate was widely welcomed and valued, ‘people are generally uneasy about GM’, ‘there was little support for early commercialization’ and that many more people are ‘cautious, suspicious or outright hostile (to the use of GM crops) than are supportive towards them’. What was also revealed was widespread mistrust of government and multinational companies, with participants expressing a very strong interest to be ‘better informed’ about GM issues, particularly with regards to generally agreed ‘facts’ that are ‘accepted by all organizations and interests’.

By many measures, the level of ‘engagement’ with the GM Nation? debate was impressively high, but many commentators took issue with what they took to be the strong, GM-sceptic tone of the open meetings. Many such critics argued that the views emanating from such meetings were not representative of the population as a whole. Debates were seen as adversarial and at an inappropriate level of technicality. But in one major respect, one of the confusions associated with the first UKNCC remained. This was a lack of any clear or agreed link between this process of public engagement and the UK Government's emerging policy on the commercialisation of GM crops. This contributed to a sense of cynicism amongst participants about the purposes of the exercise. The separation of the ‘social aspects’ of the controversy from the scientific and economic dimensions was seen as especially unhelpful. So, the purposes of the exercise were unclear, especially how it fed into policy making. Some took the view that the government had already decided a policy on the commercialisation development of GM crops and this was a convenient smokescreen. As mentioned, the timescale of the exercise was regarded as excessively compressed; many thought that the budget for the exercise (£500,000) was too modest – a view that the UK Government contested.

Source: The Open University, United Kingdom

<http://openlearn.open.ac.uk/mod/oucontent/view.php?id=398584§ion=1.4>