

ASK-FORCE, part of a new communication strategy

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Introduction

The strategic situation is difficult, but not desperate, particularly in Europe – this is an evaluation shared by lots of experts of the debate about agricultural biotechnology. We have reached in Europe the peak of hysteria since the introduction of the new technologies, the next years should lead to appeasement. We encounter the same dynamics as described for previous technology introductions by (Showalter, 1997). It is interesting to note, that despite of the ‘hystories’ on the introduction of new technologies described by Showalter, no real damage has been reported in their subsequent introductory phase – or – the benefits were so overwhelming that the debate was soon fading away. This demonstrates clearly that it is the socio-cultural environment ultimately steering the risk debate (Adams, 1995). It's the basic mistrust against new technologies where everybody feels it will change their own life, and this often happens in a phase where the benefits are not yet clearly visible, especially for the consumers / users. It is not appropriate to reduce those difficulties to a naive scheme of the so called ‘deficit model’ (Sturgis & Allum, 2004; Sturgis et al., 2005a; Sturgis et al., 2005b) where the opponents just have to be educated and then they would refrain from negative emotions. Latest developments strengthen the critical view of the ‘deficit model’: (Osseweijer, 2006a, b).

This said, we should not create misunderstandings: There is no room for an appeasement politics today when it comes to the professionally organized opponents like Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth, or websites like ISIS and GM-Watch. Those professional activists are not interested in a debate on socio-cultural issues based on science.

Basically, many of the first generation GM crops should be today subject to a professional debate on deregulation, and there is good and sturdy reason to state that many of these GM crops should not have been treated in such a special way in the first place, they can be compared in their risk potential to many crops created with traditional methods. The absolute novelty on the molecular level has been contested already by Werner Arber, who was awarded with the Nobel Prize 1978 for his introduction of the restriction enzymes, making a targeted manipulation of DNA possible (Arber, 2000, 2002, 2003, 2004). Recent publications demonstrate, that transgenesis e.g. has less impact on the transcriptome of the wheat grain than traditional breeding (Baudo et al., 2006). For more details about this debate see (Ammann, 2007, 2008).

This should not be misunderstood as a plaedoyer for general deregulation of GM crops, rather for a strict and science based risk based regulation. This actually includes a critical questioning about some basic rules of the United Nations Cartagena Protocol Principles: transgenic crops of the first generation should not have been subjected to regulation purely based on the *process* of transgenesis alone; rather it would have been wiser to have a close look at the *products* in each

case, as John Maddox already proposed in 1992 in an editorial in Nature (Anonymous, 1992). This is also roughly the view of Canadian regulators (Andree, 2002; Berwald et al., 2006), where the *novelty* of the crop is the primary trigger for regulation. This transatlantic contrast can be resolved insofar, as in a first phase some of the widespread transgenic crops like transgenic maize with the Cry1Ab endotoxin should be exempt from regulation, which is indeed possible according to art. 7.4 in the Cartagena Protocol. In MOP5 it would be possible, to amend the protocol with the introduction of a dynamics which allows to start the regulatory process with an initial phase focussing on the process of transgenesis, but in due time shifting the focus on the product, making it possible to abbreviate the regulatory process wherever possible and feasible.

In the case of the Golden Rice this tedious and costly regulation solely based on the process of transgenesis has serious ethical consequences, because each year lost to unreasonable and unscientific regulation causes hundreds of thousands of deaths due to severe vitamin A deficiency, especially among the children of developing countries of S.E. Asia (Humphrey et al., 1992). In Europe, but also in the developing world, this kind of unscientific regulatory basis hinders the development of transgenic crop breeding for the benefit of a more ecological production. In particular, it hampers public research considerably, more information in www.pubresreg.org. Last but not least it should be emphasized that specifically in the developing world we should refrain from the old myths that international corporate companies are dominating the field (Cohen, 2005) and that patenting rules are seriously hampering the spread of helpful biotech crops in poor countries (Atkinson et al., 2003; Beachy et al., 2002).

Shoot back, ASK-FORCE and Long Term Discourse, supported by a website of current scientific networks in the biotech debate

The current argumentarium of GM crop opponents is often an absurd mix of anti-American, anti-global, post-modern and even anti-science notions, (Borlaug, 2000), a strategy which has now been taken over very successfully by NGOs like Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth as global actors. These leading protest forces have helped, particularly in Europe, to build up a negative post-modern negative picture of biotechnology as a whole (Hemming, 2006). In this light it is easy to act as 'opinion leaders' with pseudo-scientific arguments. The feedback mechanisms through the media and a network of citations of all the flawed stories make it possible for the global opponents to maintain confirmation of negation mechanisms. We are in a situation where the opponents already claim victory, penetrate highest political levels in governments and international organizations.

And worst of all, there has been recently a tendency to mollify peer review for the sake of politically correct so-called "critical views" of genetic modification of crops, with some blatant examples of flawed pseudo-critical papers having passed for publication in highly respected scientific journals – a few examples have been commented by (Miller et al., 2008).

It is only in 2007 that a certain fatigue of new negative arguments against GM crops is emerging. This might be the reason why a desperate routine of repetitious negative GM crop stories creeps in and lots of events which have been clearly rebutted scientifically since years, but they are rehashed again, uncontested due to a weird

mix of short memory effects of uninformed people of all kind, or worse: purposefully repeated by activists counting on short memory of press and public.

Nevertheless, for some years basically no new arguments popped up against agricultural biotechnology. Some more critical journalists begin to question the strategies and behavior of the global opposition players. In a kind of last hurrah questionable studies are published, either containing lots of negative *assumptions* (Hilbeck & Schmidt, 2006) or containing flawed data and statistics of various kinds: Ermakova in (Marshall, 2007) (Rosi-Marshall et al., 2007; Seralini et al., 2007), often in disrespect of the internationally approved rules of biosafety experiments established by the OECD (OECD, 1998a, b).

So, what can we do?

Foremost, it is important to *shift from pro-reactive to proactive mode*. Its time for action – as far as a strict scientific view is allowing this. We should not, as it often happens, in our struggle against the negative pseudo facts focus on the risk alone and thus trap ourselves in the same negativistic perspective.

Rather we should address much more the obvious benefits. But this alone will not provoke a turnaround. This shift must be embedded in a dialogue with concerned people and organizations and it must clearly oppose untruthful strategies of the global protest corporates and thus also refrain from using the same counter tactics. One of the appropriate organizations for this activity will be the Public Research and Regulation Initiative PRRI <http://www.pubresreg.org/>, where mainly public science will get a more important place in the international regulatory debate. In several scientific meetings organized by PRRI this platform was well received. The ASK-FORCE project was later embedded as a blog in the website and has started with the first few rebuttals and comments. The project outline can be described as follows:

1. ASK-FORCE organization

In order to become more pro-active, we need to develop forward looking strategies. It is up to the scientists to ask questions to the opposition, and in particular to the professional distorters of the scientific facts. This must escalate into public campaigns if (what is to be expected) those specific questions are ignored. Carefully built contacts with science writers are important here.

Some time ago ASK-FORCE has been opened as a blog on the website of the European Federation of Biotechnology, some sample products can be opened under <http://www.efb-central.org/index.php/forums/>, see among others:

Blog on Greenpeace false propaganda in India:

<http://www.efb-central.org/index.php/forums/viewthread/13/>

<http://www.efb-central.org/index.php/forums/viewthread/24/>

Later, an EU project has been granted and was subsequently launched on the PRRI website www.pubresreg.org under the guidance of the author and help of Kim Meulenbroeks with the name ASK-FORCE. A list of about 130 items has been put together with international help and will be entered step by step in the grid of 6 chapters:

(1) General (2) Human & Animal Health (3) Environmental Safety (4) Agriculture (5) Public Perception (6) Developing Countries.

The AS-FORCE blog has been launched on the PRRI website (http://pubresreg.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=blogcategory&id=70&Itemid=71) with the first three items on the following topics:

under (2) Human Health:

- The experiments of A.Pusztai with rats on GM potatoes
http://pubresreg.org/index.php?option=com_smf&Itemid=27&topic=11.0
- Are rat organs damaged after feeding on GM soybeans as Ermakova claims
http://pubresreg.org/index.php?option=com_smf&Itemid=27&topic=13.0

under (3) Environmental Safety:

- Are GM crops killing honey bees?
http://pubresreg.org/index.php?option=com_smf&Itemid=27&topic=4.0
- Are Bt toxins killing aquatic insects?
http://pubresreg.org/index.php?option=com_smf&Itemid=27&topic=9.0
- Is Bt maize harmful for a larvae of monarch butterfly?
http://pubresreg.org/index.php?option=com_smf&Itemid=27&topic=16.0

A list of experts will be established, basically containing names of the steering committee of PRRI and the Executive Board of EFB.

There is close collaboration foreseen between the major active networks, such as (list still incomplete) Prakash's and Andrew Apel's / Prakash's AgBioView

<http://www.agbioworld.org/> and <http://www.gmobelus.com/index.php>

Kristina Sinemus' and Gerd Spelsperg's GMO Safety <http://www.gmo-safety.eu/en/>, English and German, supported by the German ministry of Science, and related to it the independent EU-funded news website GMO compass <http://www.gmo-compass.org/eng/home/>

Doug Powell's AGNET <http://www.foodsafety.ksu.edu/en/>,

David Tribe's GMO-Pundit <http://gmopundit.blogspot.com/>, (ca. 5000 per month)

Robert Derham's CheckBiotech Green:

http://www.checkbiotech.org/green_Home.aspx (more than 1 million visitors per month, including pharma)

A possibility is also to create closer ties to www.senseaboutscience.org, which contains lots of similar elements as the ones ASK FORCE wants to cover.

2. Long term discourse and decision making processes

Let me first be quite clear that I think a dialogue with the professional protest corporates (specifically Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth, not to mention some other websites) is a waste of time. Their only interest is to keep the pot cooking and make sure that the population remains in a state of fear. They should be addressed with a confrontational strategy, which is also included in ASK-FORCE.

But otherwise we will have to address all segments of the public having concerns, interests etc. This should be done according to the discursive rules of the management strategies of the second generation, the *Systems Approach*. As a reference with description and citations see: (Churchman, 1979). If we follow some ground rules, this should not be too complicated:

Instead of making naïve concessions (example: "lets not talk about transgenic crops" as done by Nestlé and Unilever), the dialogue should be organized in an atmosphere of active listening, understanding, in which, apart from the strict rules of scientific

argumentation we should send signals that the new technologies also trigger socio-economic and cultural feedbacks. This also means to seriously strive for the “symmetry of ignorance” (Fischer, 2000).

Its not about old-fashioned stakeholder meetings, this is about instigating modern planning processes of the second generation (in evidence decision making processes with open end, contrary to linear planning with pre-determined targets and contrary to the mainly deontic thinking of the biotech corporations). These new strategies should dissolve the old stakeholder concept in favor of a much more efficient system respecting different kinds of knowledge.

This seems to be a rather theoretical approach with lots of restrictive rules, but actually it is in contrary opening for much more freedom in dialogue. Also it is more practical and efficient in creating results and contrasts with the fuzzy stakeholder concept where hidden agendas prevail in often obscured authoritarian structures. It does not help progress. Such processes are described in detail in (Ammann, 2004; Ammann & Papazova Ammann, 2004; Rith & Dubberly, 2007a, b; Rith et al., 2007; Rittel, 1984; Rittel & Weber, 1973; Rittel & Webber, 2005).

See also Patrick Moore, <http://www.greenspiritstrategies.com/index.cfm>.

These discursive decision making processes need time: Patrick Moore has gone successfully through such processes in the difficult task of reconciliation between the needs of timber production and environmental constraints, he needed months of debate and decisions to come to reasonable decisions.

It helps, if you prepare carefully *scenarios* before people start the process, a method which has been successfully applied to the reconciliation processes in South Africa after abolishing apartheid by Adam Kahane as one of the principal mediators (Kahane, 2004). He also followed another wise rule: Should only people participate in such processes who are part of the problem.

3. “Inter-NET-GM”

a network of networkers, a special kind of website platform

All those website activities need professional support. There is no use to establish another group of loosely organized dedicated people, if there is no person pushing the case 100%, with some secretarial/managerial help (webmaster, editor, secretary). We need to concentrate on organizing knowledge on green biotechnology in a way it can be easily accessed. We must work out comprehensive but easy to read rebuttals on all the myths, facts and benefits in the debate on green biotechnology.

The website should not just be another one among those roughly 20 pro(re)active promoters of agricultural biotechnology, it should be a *network of networks*. This can nowadays be achieved with new linking technologies such as RRS Really Simple Syndication (RSS 2.0), <http://www.xml.com/pub/a/2002/12/18/dive-into-xml.html> :

“RSS is a format for syndicating news and the content of news-like sites, including major news sites like Wired, news-oriented community sites like Slashdot, and personal weblogs. But it's not just for news. Pretty much anything that can be broken down into discrete items can be syndicated via RSS: the "recent changes" page of a wiki, a changelog of CVS checkins, even the revision history of a book. Once information about each item is in RSS format, an RSS-aware program can check the feed for changes and react to the changes in an appropriate way.”

RSS or other appropriate technologies. should not result into a dominating, so called 'leading' new website taking over, rather should it be a website which is helpfully sitting in-between all those structures and linking them together, giving automated alerts when new contributions pop up. Personal experience in dialogue with many networkers reveals that sometimes important networks are only known in specific clusters, these lacunas should be closed for many reasons. Knowledge exchange, jumping over national fences and coordination will be a follow-up effect, without even declaring it to be the goal of such activity. As for now, this is just an idea and needs to be discussed with internet and website specialists. After all, the leading webmasters and coordinators agree, that it is time to **enhance collaboration**.

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