

## **ASK FORCE, part of a new communication strategy**

**Klaus Ammann, January 2007**

[klaus.ammann@ips.unibe.ch](mailto:klaus.ammann@ips.unibe.ch)

Neuchâtel and Delft

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, 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, 1994). 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 et al., 2005) 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).

### **Shootback, Askforce and Long Term Discourse, supported by a website of current scientific networks in the biotech debate**

It is this absurd mix of anti-american, anti-global, post-modern and even anti-science notions, (Borlaug, 2000) which has now taken over with the help of a clever strategy of 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 picture of progress 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 false 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 and begin to be careless about their argumentation. Since some years basically no new arguments pop up against agricultural biotechnology. Some more critical journalists begin to question the strategies and behaviour of the global opposition players.

*So, what can we do?*

Foremost, its important to shift from pro-reactive to proactive mode. Its time for action – as far as strict scientific and neutral view is allowing this. We should not, as it often happens, in our struggle against the negativistic pseudofacts focus on the risk alone, 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. The ideal organisation for this science communitiy will be the Public Sector Research Initiative <http://pubresreg.org/>, where foremost science will get a

more important place in the international regulatory debate. At the first meeting in Danforth the ASK FORCE project was well received and the steering committee considers to support it for future action. The project outline can be described as follows:

### *1. Shootback organization*

It is proposed to create a shootback organization of dedicated scientists, who are ready, according to their own specialization, to ask questions popping up on very short term. The group will be embedded in the above mentioned Public Sector Research Initiative. There are already schemes developing in Europe to address a few dedicated scientists in some of the important European countries, first contacts and ideas were developed in an email exchange with Prof. Vivian Moses (Moses, 2004). The question will be how we are organizing the filtering process on issues, but I think this is easier than anticipated. I follow up the steady trickling of issues debated in many of the networks and the press, and it can be foreseen that some 1-4 issues per month climb high in the attention and deserve immediate treatment. A central office with one scientist with secretarial/managerial help should be able to organize the filtering process and the distribution activity to get it immediately to the appropriate specialist scientist.

### *2. 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. The domain ask-force.org is already set aside, and this would be the platform used for various purposes described under 1-4. An EU project has been granted and will now be launched on the PRRI website [www.pubresreg.org](http://www.pubresreg.org) under the guidance of the author.

### *3. Long term discourse and decision making processes*

Let me first be quite clear that I think a dialogue with the professional protest corporates is a waste of time. They should be addressed with the strategies 1 and 2. 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: If we follow some ground rules, this should not be too complicated: Instead of making naïve concessions (example: lets not talk about transgenic crops), 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.

Its not about old-fashioned stakeholder meetings, its about instigating modern decision making processes of the second generation, where the old stakeholder concept is dissolved in favour of a much more efficient system respecting different kinds of knowledge.

This seems a rather theoretical approach, but actually it is much more practical and efficient in the outcome than the fuzzy stakeholder concept where hidden agendas, the fear of speaking up about your own interests etc. blurr the pictura and jeopardize success. Such processes are described in detail in (Ammann, 2004; Ammann & Papazova Ammann, 2004; Rittel, 1984; Rittel & Weber, 1973).

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

It helps to prepare carefully scenarios before people start the process, a method which has been successfully applied to the reconciliation processes in South Africa by (Kahane, 2004).

#### 4. A network of networkers, a special kind of website

All those 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 and the help of a webmaster. We need to concentrate on organizing knowledge on green biotechnology in a way it can be easily accessed. We must work out an extensive and easy to read chapter on all the myths and facts 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 is today easily achieved with linking technologies, provided we are not trying to superimpose a so called 'leading' new website taking over, rather should it be a website which is democratically sitting inbetween all those structures and linking them together. Coordination will be a followup effect, without even declaring it to be the goal of such activity.

See the forum ASK-FORCE in the website of the European Federation of Biotechnology: <http://www.efb-central.org/index.php/forums/>

Have a look at the blog on Greenpeace India:

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

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

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