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GM crops: Forget the money, follow the science

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The following article was written as a contribution to the GM debate for the EU news & policy debates platform EurActiv.

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Food & Water Europe questioned in their recent commentary in EurActiv [\[i\]](#) the validity of the International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-Biotech Applications ISAAA numbers on the area of GM crops, “paid for by a host of vested interests”, including several seed companies. More recently, a report by two campaign groups, the Corporate Europe Observatory and the Earth Open Source, accused the European Food Safety Authority EFSA, of “frequent conflicts of interest” [\[ii\]](#).

At the same time, Nina Fedoroff, the president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) and other scientists are drawing the picture of an Anti-science movement that is spreading, uncontrolled [\[iii\]](#), causing fierce reactions by social scientists [\[iv\]](#).

These recent events are symptomatic of the debate framing around science-policy topics and particularly GM. Yet they are dangerous examples for getting side-tracked into those discussions instead of discussing on how our future agriculture and food system should look like and the quality of the sciences used for political decision making.

Only thorough evaluation of the scientific methodology and quality of a finding followed by meaningful weighing of all the arguments can lead to balanced political decision-making. A blown-up debate on ties and conflicts of interests is a frame that distracts from more important arguments like

scientific quality, sustainability, health and environmental safety, economic benefits, societal aspects and others.

Discrediting the 'opponent' is the easy road and sometimes the last resort for those whose seemingly rational arguments fail. Indeed, funding is important for scientists, NGOs, think-tanks and many other involved stakeholders. But although funding and its related possible conflicts of interests contribute to the (non-)credibility of scientific studies, reports and stakeholders, the discussion about money or research agendas should not play such an important role in political discussion. Especially not in the one-sided way it does today. Some of the many reasons for this are:

- Scientific independence primarily lies in the question whether research findings can be independently verified, and not where the money for those studies came from.
- There is no independence of stakeholders lobbying for a certain topic, no matter how transparent they might be or how seemingly good the cause they are fighting for.
- Transparency and a seemingly good reason for doing research can evoke unjustified trust of and support for political agendas, studies and stakeholders, just as much as non-transparency can potentially evoke too early dismissal of very justified approaches.
- Most studies which have been influenced by agendas are not peer-reviewed and show weak methodologies with questionable interpretations. We need to look beyond the abstracts and executive summaries and check the true quality of research approaches.

Moreover, the allegations regarding the credibility of scientists are often one-sided. The funding of NGOs also needs to be questioned. However, there is few mainstream political or media attention given to NGO funding or conflicts of interests around their actions, while they are just as (non-)relevant. Once one dives into the funding of NGOs, one stumbles into a spider web of relations, funding and political and commercial agendas.

Foundations are probably the least surprising funders of NGOs, although one would expect to find more organisations trying to raise individual membership fees. Food & Water Europe discloses their executive director Wenonah Hauter's 2010 salary of 149,653\$ and the additional yearly 15,000\$ "other compensations" and some of the foundations providing the 2009 9.4 Million US Dollar budget of the organisation on their website [\[v\]](#). There are for example the Compton Foundation of New York investment banker Randolph Compton [\[vi\]](#), the Tikvah Fund with its main goal "to promote serious Jewish thought" [\[vii\]](#) and a few others. They did not answer my request for more recent funding information.

Corporate Europe Observatory and Friends of the Earth, also powerful Anti-GM campaigners received, among other sources, funds from Ayman Jallad's Isvara Foundation. Ayman Jallad became an agribusiness millionaire as head of his Lebanese-based tractor company and has, according to Spinwatch, the key motivation to uncover that the 'American Jewish lobby', is responsible 'for all kinds of mass murder and human rights abuse'. [\[viii\]](#) Another key foundation funding Anti-GM-NGOs is the "Fondation pour une terre humaine", which does not disclose its funders. They support for example CRIIGEN, ENSSER, Gentechnikfreies Europa e.V, Combat Monsanto and about 10 other Anti-GMO organisations. [\[ix\]](#)

Other commercial links of NGOs may be more surprising: Professor Gilles-Éric Séralini of the university of Caen and his organisation have been invited at least 4 times to the European Parliament in 2010 and 2011 to present their GM critical views, and have been cited numerous times on Euractiv and in political papers. He is founding member and scientific director of the NGO CRIIGEN. His research, which is the backbone of much of CRIIGEN's activities, has been supported by the retailers Carrefour and Auchan with their GMO-free product lines, as well as by Sevens Pharma, which commercialises products claiming to detoxify the body from toxic residues linked to GM crops [\[x\]](#). Also Anti-GM events are frequently sponsored by companies, especially food retailers and organic farmers. The European Conference "GMO-Free Europe" was sponsored by food retailer Tegut and by the 1100ha organic farmer Wilmersdorf's manor [\[xi\]](#). Tegut, along with major organic farmer Herrmannsdorfer Landwerkstätten and others also sponsor the NGO Testbiotech of Ex-Greenpeace campaigner Christoph Then [\[xii\]](#).

Also political support on the GM cause is significant for both Pro- and Anti-GM stances. The GMO-Free Europe conference partly took place in the European parliament and its organisation was supported by The Greens/European Free Alliance. High-level political support for CRIIGEN and the Anti-GM cause has been coming from ALDE MEP Corinne Lepage, who was as Member of the European Parliament until the September 2010 President of CRIIGEN, and became then leading rapporteur to the European Parliament for amending the 2001/18 European directive on GMOs released in the environment [\[xiii\]](#). Friends of the Earth is reported to have received millions of Euros from different European governments and the European Commission [\[xiv\]](#).

As one of the few NGOs supporting GM-friendly policies, also the Public Research and Regulation Initiative PRRI is not, despite its hundreds of European and international public scientists, conducting its activities without outside support. As with other NGOs, support stems from many sources, concretely from European and North American Governments, a European Commission project, international organisations as the Rockefeller Foundation and the private sector [\[xv\]](#).

But does all of this really matter? Is there true independence by any lobbying or fundraising organisation? All of them rely on funding by their peers, the pressure to keep them engaged stays. What about personal independence? Are Food & Water Europe's arguments any more or less valid or important than the ones of Greenpeace or the ones of the industry association Europabio, which both disclose less financial details on their websites? How open-minded on the environmental impact of GM was Corinne Lepage when she took over the important function as rapporteur for the European Parliament? How independent is the Austrian government, where the proportion of organic farms is the highest in the world, when it supports GM-critical positions? Or the US government putting pressure to accept GM with their important farm lobby? Or scientists that want to bring new GM products to the market? How much David against Goliath is there really left with the amount and variety of support to different NGOs by foundations, organic and conventional farmers, GM detection labs, governments, retailers, ... ? And which standards are realistic to ask from organisations to be able to conduct their activities?

All involved stakeholders – the decision-makers, journalists, even industry and NGOs would benefit from looking beyond funding related defamations of conflicts of interests and anti-science allegations and enter into a serious scientific dialogue.

GM, climate change, all scientific issues deserve a more thorough look and discussion process, beyond the funding of a study, an institution or a person. For GM, that could be an IPCC-like process

on sustainable agriculture and food security. Focussing on the quality of the science and the arguments of all actors, not on the money.

[i] <http://www.euractiv.com/cap/gm-crops-follow-money-analysis-510724>

[ii] <http://www.euractiv.com/cap/food-safety-agencys-reliability-faces-fresh-criticism-news-510827>

[iii] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2012/feb/19/science-scepticism-usdomesticpolicy>

[iv] <http://jackstilgoe.wordpress.com/2012/02/21/anti-anti-science/>

[v] <http://documents.foodandwaterwatch.org/Form990-2010.pdf>

[vi] <http://www.discoverthenetworks.org/funderprofile.asp?fndid=5371&category=79>

[vii] <http://www.tikvahfund.org/about/>

[viii] <http://spinwatchwatch.wordpress.com/millionaires-funding-spinwatch/>

[ix] E.g. <http://www.terrehumaine.org/subventions/projets-subventionnes/criigen-comite-de-recherches-et-d-180.html>

[x] <http://www.sevenpharma.com/actu-page.php?id=1>

[xi] <http://www.gmo-free-regions.org/conference2010/sponsors.html>

[xii] http://www.testbiotech.de/sites/default/files/Jahresbericht%202010_public.pdf

[xiii] http://www.criigen.org/SiteEn/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=326&Itemid=75

[xiv] <http://www.gmobelus.com/news.php?viewStory=145>

[xv] <http://www.ppri.net/about-ppri/foundation/funding/>

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