

WHY SHOULD THERE BE COMMUNICATION WITH THE PUBLIC?

Contribution by Piet Schenkelaars to FOCUS Workshop "Who should communicate with the public and how?", Brussels, 11 - 12 January 2003, EFB Task Group on Public Perceptions of Biotechnology.

A well recognised communication problem?

- The common background of this workshop and an EU workshop under the aegis of the European Group on Life Sciences (EGLS) in July 2002 seems to be "public concern about the acceptability of new biotechnology products and applications" and "the misinformation, suspicion and hostility that surround their introduction".
- According to the background information of the workshop of July 2002, developments in biotechnology make headlines only if associated with a breakthrough or a controversy. The press quickly moves away from informative coverage to foster debate on possible implications and risks of a biotechnology application or product, which can be very confusing to the public. Starting point of the workshop was therefore a "well-recognised communication problem".
- Workshop participants, including journalists, communication experts and scientists, recognised that the primary objective of science is to produce scientific knowledge, whereas the primary objective of journalists is to write stories that are of interest to the public.
- Workshop participants observed that many communication activities are based on the 'deficit model', that is, the assumption that the public is ignorant and that when they are properly informed, they will agree with scientists.
- Because science journalist have difficulty to find 'reliable' sources of scientific information, they often rely almost exclusively on NGOs and other advocacy groups, which have a political agenda and normally are not directly involved in research. To counter this 'unhealthy' situation, the main recommendation in July 2002 was to further improve and better structure the communication by the 'scientific community' to the media, in order to improve the quality of information provided to the public.
- This outcome of the workshop of July 2002 seems to suggest that 'scientists' have no political agenda. It also suggest that if 'science' improves its public relations through structured communication to the media, the public would be more prepared to accept innovative products from biotechnology.

Who should communicate?

- The central question of this workshop is “Who should communicate with the public and how?”.
- So far, stakeholders interested or concerned by the use of GMOs in the agro-food chain have had a controversial debate (in Europe).
- Within this context all stakeholders have ‘communicated’ their views to the media, politics and the general public.
- As long as their controversy continues, they will seek to ‘communicate’ with the public.

And how to communicate?

- How these stakeholders have communicated and will continue their public communication depends on their interests, concerns and position in the agro-food chain.
- Whether the stakeholders’ debate will advance beyond current controversy depends on each stakeholder’s preparedness to engage in ‘stakeholder dialogues’, on their listening and learning capabilities, that is, their willingness to reconsider own viewpoints, perceptions and positions.
- The dynamics of the controversy will thereby also be influenced by actual consumer behaviour in the supermarket, which in turn depends on the marketing and labelling policies of food manufacturers and retailers for GM and non-GM foodstuffs.
- Meanwhile all stakeholders will share the view that all interested people should be provided with balanced and accurate information and should be involved in open, transparent public debate.
- Yet stakeholders’ views will widely differ on what is meant by balanced information and open, transparent public debate as well as on what to do with the outcome of a public debate.
- As long as stakeholders in the agro-food chain have a controversy over GMOs, they will further develop communication strategies and deploy a wide range of PR and media tactics, in order to win the public’s heart for or against the use of GMOs in the agro-food chain.

- As a consequence, how to conduct a public debate in a democratic, pluralistic society, what its objectives should be and what to do with the outcome have also been put on the agenda of the stakeholder controversy on agro-food biotechnology.
- If journalists feel that this stakeholder controversy is of public interest, they will write stories about it. Whether a 'breakthrough' in this stakeholder controversy, that is, a convergence of their views, will be of public interest from a journalist's perspective, remains to be seen.

Recommendations

- Stakeholders, who wish to 'communicate' with the public, should seek to continue the controversy. Current stakeholder controversy over the use of GMOs in the agro-food chains can easily be continued by sticking to positions taken. Though a standstill in the stakeholder controversy could become of less public interest from a journalist's perspective.
- By contrast, stakeholders, who do not wish to 'communicate' with the public, should seek to end the controversy. This will not be easy because preparedness to reconsider positions taken is a prerequisite, in order to resolve the controversy.

What should be the aim of public communication (by 'science')?

- Should public communication (by 'science') aim at improving public acceptance of innovative products from biotechnology?
- Should public communication (by 'science') aim at improving democratic governance over biotechnology research and product development?
- And would this make any difference?