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Are EU GMO rules starving the poor?

Published: Friday 23 February 2007 | Updated: Monday 26 February 2007

A debate organised by Friends of Europe, an EU policy think-tank, explored whether the EU's strict authorisation procedures on genetically modified food are preventing developing countries from investing in potentially lifesaving technologies.

Related Documents:

 [LinksDossier: Genetically Modified Organisms](#)

 [LinksDossier: Life Sciences & Biotechnology](#)

Background:

On 20 February 2007, EU environment ministers voted against a Commission proposal to lift a ban imposed by Hungary on MON810 GM maize, which the country claims has harmful effects on European plants and animals.

This is the third time that member states have rejected Commission attempts to lift national bans on the growing of certain GM crops, despite assurances from the European Food Safety Authority's (EFSA) technical experts that they are safe.

EU ministers also failed to authorise the marketing of a genetically modified carnation - a sign that getting GM products approved in the EU has not become much easier since the EU's general moratorium - which effectively prevented any GMOs from being marketed in the EU for a five-year period - was lifted in 2003.

Large-scale GMO producers, such as the US, Argentina and Brazil, as well as large biotech companies including Monsanto, Sygenta and Bayer have been pushing for the EU to ease its authorisation procedure and let more GM crops in, resulting in a case at the World Trade Organisation ([EurActiv 22/11/06](#)).

Issues:

A key argument put forward by GM producers is that GM technology could be the key to solving developing countries' hunger problem.

- Does Europe have the right to systematically reject GMOs – even those that fulfil their own safety requirements?
- Is Europe, through its stance on GMOs and strict authorisation procedures, stifling the development of a technology crucial to boosting food production and breaking the cycle of malnutrition and starvation in developing countries?

In a debate organised by think-tank [Friends of Europe](#), green NGOs rejected this idea.

Positions:

Danish Environment Minister Connie Hedegaard said that the EU should not dismiss all GMOs automatically, because the technology could help to solve developing countries' hunger problem.

"In a global world, the EU's actions impact on other countries," she said, explaining that developing countries' inability to export to the EU discourages them from investing in and producing GMOs.

She believes that the scepticism in Europe about genetic engineering in agriculture stems from the fact that few GMOs "have brought unquestionable benefits to the European table". But she underlined the fact that the

EU must assess each GMO on its own merits, because crops that can resist diseases and insects can be grown in the third world.

"Like it or not, GMOs are here to stay," she said, adding that the EU has a special role to play in the debate because it can contribute to ensuring that GMOs are used in a safe and beneficial way for consumers by, for example, investing public research in this field.

Per Pindstrup-Andersen, Senior Research Fellow at the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), stressed: "Not a single person has died or become sick because of GM foods." Nevertheless, he agreed that more studies should be carried out on allergies, etc... "The EU could have generated a lot of information on GMOs during the moratorium, but it simply sat on its hands," he complained.

Although he conceded that Europeans have the right to know about the benefits and risks, he criticised the EU's dogmatism in refusing all GMOs.

"The debate in Europe is very one-sided," he said, adding: "If millions of farmers in India and China are willing to break laws to get genetically engineered food, there must be a reason."

He underlined the importance of understanding the risk-benefit trade-off for developing countries, saying that for many the question is not "Is genetic engineering the best solution?" but rather "Is there any other solution?"

For the moment, he said, Europe is standing in the way of developing countries solving their own problems because of its straight-out rejection of GMOs. "Developing countries are scared of losing their export market to Europe if they start cultivating GM crops," he said.

But, he agreed that Europe has an important role to play in encouraging the development of biosafety regulations, which are often very weak in developing countries.

Simon Barber, Director of External Relations, EuropaBio, the European Association for Bioindustries, said that the public had "very limited knowledge" about GMOs and about agriculture in general. He accused green groups of spreading unfounded rumours, saying: "After ten years of GM plants, what negative effects have ever been seen?"

He added: "Many other plant-breeding technologies are just as scary and do not only produce benefits...To categorically say that the technology should not be used is not ethical."

Furthermore, he said that imposing a ban on GMOs was not feasible anyway as "the international trading system simply cannot segregate crops on a 100% basis".

Fouad Hamdan, director of Friends of the Earth Europe (FoEE), believes that it is an exaggeration to say that GMOs can save developing countries, because there are only four types of GM crops: soy, maize, oilseed rape and cotton.

The majority of these crops are destined for feeding animals, not people, in rich countries.

Furthermore, he said, GM crops only benefit large farmers, not small ones who cannot afford expensive patented seeds. And, as for the environment, he said that the use of pesticides has actually increased in Europe following the introduction of GMOs.

He refuted the argument that NGOs were stirring up fear on false pretences, saying: "I still believe that the benefits of GM food are almost nil...NGOs are working with independent scientific facts, not with biotech-industry funded research."

Therefore, he concluded: "The EU can with a lot of confidence tell developing countries to be cautious too. The organic market is the future."

But, a **South African representative** said: "Most Africans don't have the luxury of choice of what to eat and what not to eat. If genetic engineering can bring some relief to this food insecurity, then let it be. And if it is too risky, then come up with another solution."

Latest & next steps:

EurActiv would like to hear your views on this debate. Contributions can be sent to letters@euractiv.com.

Links

Industry Federations

- European Association for Bioindustries (EuropaBio): [What are the benefits of GM crops and what can they do?](#)

NGOs

- Friends of the Earth Europe (FoEE): [European GMO Campaign](#)

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'Eux (les Américains) c'est eux et nous (les Européens) c'est nous'
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Europe impedes improvement of crops in the developing world

Publication: Innovations Report

Date: Monday, February 26, 2007

On Tuesday the 20 February 2007, Connie Hedegaard, Danish Minister for the Environment announced at a public discussion organised by Friends of Europe, that she was concerned if Europe has a negative effect on countries in the developing world by imposing its standards on the rest of the world with regard to regulation on Genetically Modified Organisms (GMO).

As a follow-up to this event, plant researchers from the developing world met in Brussels at a meeting organised by European Action on Global Life Sciences (EAGLES). The purpose of the meeting was to discuss how European regulation on GM foods influence legislators in the developing world to call for unnecessary tough testing.

Thousands of people die every day in the developing world due to hunger or the use of harmful pesticides in agriculture. No death or any illness throughout the world has ever been connected to the use of GMO. The zero tolerance of GM foods unauthorised in Europe and the labelling of GM foods imported to Europe have a huge influence on legislators and research funding organisations in the developing countries. Even countries which have no export of foods to Europe are afraid of approving or supporting the development of GM foods because of European policy.

Former head of unit at the European Commission, DG Research and head of the unit of biotechnology at the OECD Mark F. Cantley said: "The global influence of the European policy on GMO has a massive economic and political impact on our trading partners. The economic and political disincentives Europe imposes to the use of more modern and precise technologies and more environmentally friendly agricultural production makes it impossible for the developing world to develop new improved crops. We have painted ourselves into a corner in Europe, from which we shall not easily escape, and from which we have a malign influence on poor countries all over the world".

Professor Jennifer Thomson from University of Cape Town says: "Genetically modified maize resistant to the devastating African endemic maize streak virus is in the pipeline for field trials. The problems of regulation are therefore of immediate importance. We are concerned about what we consider the over-regulation prevalent in Europe and question whether this may prevent, or severely delay, the approval of these plants that are desperately needed by poor Africans, many of whom eat maize three times a day."

Professor Zen Zhangliang President of Beijings Agricultural University said: "In China we have a long tradition for plant development. Genetic engineering is a better and more precise technology. We have already many Chinese GM products on the market and we will invest massively in agricultural biotechnology in the coming years. It does not seem rational to me that the Europeans want to slow down their agricultural development with superfluous and heavy regulations."

Professor Marc van Montagu, Department of Molecular Genetics, Ghent University and president of European Federation of Biotechnology (EFB) concluded at the meeting with following comment: "A sustainable agriculture and a less-polluting industry badly need the GM-technology and the transgenic plants developed, worldwide, over the last ten years. Exactly in the same period, well-intentioned regulators in the EU set up an unnecessary and very costly application of the regulatory system. No small or medium enterprise, public research centre, charity or foundation can afford to open a file for approval through the established system. It is a crying injustice towards the developing world, towards nearly 85% of the world population.

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