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Consumer Attitudes to Genetically Modified Crops

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Consumer Attitudes to Genetically Modified Foods

LOUISE SYLVAN

In this paper I will discuss consumer attitudes to genetically modified foods, as both President of Consumers International and head of the Australian Consumers Association.

Attitudes in developed countries

One thing I can say with ease is that consumers in developed countries, in every reliable survey done – by consumer organisations, media groups or others – say they want GM food to be labelled. When John F. Kennedy articulated the first four of the basic consumer rights on 15 March 1962, ‘the right to choose’ was in his list. For consumers in developed countries, genetic engineering, or under its more moderate nomenclature genetic modification, has been partly about their right to labelling, and partly about concerns regarding the behaviour of regulators and governments.

When we talk to consumers about why they want labelling, they give a range of reasons – some have concerns about the possible long-term health effects, a lot are concerned about the environmental effects of introducing these crops with so little in the way of controls, and so little understanding of possible risks and outcomes;

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even those who are neutral on the technology or supportive of it, still think they have a right to choose in the market.

The other issue frequently raised is that consumers don't believe this technology has anything much to do with benefiting them – if one looks at the possible price reductions that might derive from use of GMOs, the case is not very compelling at the moment: in fact the evidence is becoming less clear in terms of farmer benefits as well. Consumers perceive that the big benefits of this technology devolve to the holders of the intellectual property, and in lesser ways to others tied to work in this technology such as the research scientists whose careers are in the area.

One of the very general responses of scientists, companies, governments and regulators is that consumers just need to be educated, and once they understand, they'll be very supportive – this is in general characterised as the ‘public are ignorant’ argument. I'll leave aside the inherent paternalism in that, but generally the assumption is based on a wrong premise – people understand far more than they are being given credit for – as we saw in the *Consensus Conference on GM Foods in Australia* - and there appears to be a correlation between the amounts of information people have about GM foods and an increase in their caution. So spin is not going to work in this debate, as I think Monsanto has found out at least. I draw to your attention recent work done in five countries by the research team headed by Prof. Brian Wynne from Lancaster University (www.pabe.net). This was an in-depth study on public attitudes and perceptions, and some of the results are quite surprising. The public was very sophisticated in its views and the usual distinctions between ‘real risk’ and ‘perceived risk’, and between ‘scientific’ and ‘non-scientific’ concerns are much more blurred than one might have been predicted. I was especially surprised at the similarity across

countries like Italy and the UK – I had expected significant differences there.

One of the key findings is that the public's view about GMOs and their use derives predominantly from knowledge about the past behaviour of institutions responsible for the development and regulation of technological innovations and risks; the public believes that the government and its public service, as well as the scientists, will mismanage GM crops and foods. That perception is reinforced, of course, by such things as patently inadequate crop separation rules as just one example – people say things like 'oh, these scientists don't know about the existence of wind and bees, is that the problem?' The view seems to be that you can't trust these people, and that the clear indicator is their denial or downplaying of the risks. In the research on agricultural biotechnologies that I mentioned earlier, people weren't actually asking for zero risk, but they felt strongly that inherent uncertainties were being downplayed which means, by definition, that the institutions and people doing this become untrustworthy.

Given the topic of today's seminar, I would also comment that in that study, communication strategies that emphasised that GMOs could 'feed the world' got some of the most negative results – I think people are very aware that the key problem in food security is actually access, not supply, in most instances.

Views from developing countries

Let me move now from the developed countries to the developing world. The attitude of consumers to GMOs in developing countries is much less clear to us. What we do know is that there is large variation in awareness of GM issues generally between countries – and that's hardly surprising – and that amongst consumers who do know about GMOs, the distrust of it is reasonably high and appears to be growing.

Consumers in developing countries haven't been much asked what they think about GM foods, but at the recent *Asian Workshop* held by Consumers International in Chiang Mai, some survey results were presented by a variety of organisations that were present – consumer organisations, governments, farmer groups and so on. I'll share a couple of those with you:

- The Guangzhou City Statistics Bureau survey of 7000 consumers found that 50% of people didn't know about GE, 12% knew quite a bit, and about 25% were worried – there was high caution brought on in part from being given too little information and in part by worries about it among those who are more familiar with GE food issues.
- In the Philippines, a national survey of 1200 people conducted by Pulse Asia (a polling group) found that only 11% of people were aware of the issue – and of those 94% believe that the use of GE should be revealed.

There were 12 country reports and they reported not dissimilar findings. One of things that will occur, I believe, is that in countries where GM foods were introduced with no respect for people's rights to be made aware of that fact, there will probably be some level of backlash against the technology – people do tend to react quite negatively about being treated in this way.

I guess an additional reason that there is so much cynicism about the 'GM will feed the world's poor' thrust is the sort of thing we are seeing at the moment in Zimbabwe and Zambia – a report in, I think, the *Zimbabwe Times*; described the refusal of the Zimbabwean government to accept to accept genetically modified corn a couple of weeks ago. The governments are particularly concerned that farmers will save some of the GM seed for planting - before the country has had a chance to examine the issues adequately – and without any controls, they don't know how it will affect their indigenous strains; on the other hand, if the seed is 'terminator' treated, other questions arise. That seems to be a quite reasonable set of concerns to me, but I guess the US Government's assumption is that countries with starving people can take what they're given, no questions asked – but it certainly won't do its reputation much good in the developing world.

Consumer acceptance has stalled

One of the things that I believe we're starting to see – and I'm trying to take into account here the US intransigence on labelling, the European Parliament's positioning vs. the European Commission on things like adventitious contamination and the moratorium issues, the recent research from the Food Standards Authority in the UK on finding genes from GM soya in the

intestines of people fed GM soya (a tiny study), the recent Agriculture Canada research on contamination of seed stock which was finally made public but only after litigation, the recent EC research on the costs of growing GM crops (where the cost/benefit analysis is quite uncertain and possibly negative in terms of farmer income) – is that despite all the effort put into trying to persuade people about the terrific benefits of this technology when applied to food, consumer acceptance is not really growing.

I think we're going to see more effort at promoting acceptability, under the two headings of 'save the poor' and 'consumer-friendly crops' in particular; there's just too much money in it now for the companies and the scientists to stop, and governments are now in it full tilt as well. I'm also going to put a quite disquieting notion to you – there seems to be a growing view, I think because of the way in which the whole process of introducing GM crops is taking place (commercialisation without sufficient care), that there is an increased likelihood that something is going to go quite wrong. That's not unusual for a novel technology, and often the direction of the problem is somewhat unforeseen, judging from our past experiences.

The ACA hasn't surveyed consumers recently on GM foods, and probably won't do that until the labelling is in place in the Australian market – though the *Daily Telegraph* certainly went for it a couple of months ago.

If I'm correctly interpreting what we're hearing more generally, however, I think the message is that, by and large, consumers in developed countries don't think that further industrialisation of food production is necessarily either desirable or of much benefit to them – that's especially true in countries where food is not really relatively costly and where food choices are good. In countries like Europe and the US, consumers would have far far more to gain financially from an end to the production subsidies to agriculture than could ever be delivered from GM improvements.

The key issue is how best to help developing countries

If one relies on top minds, like Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen, there are far better strategies for alleviating poverty in most of the third world than

GM crops. According to the World Food Programme, there's enough food around in the world to provide everyone with at least the minimum nutritional requirements; now, of course, no one is going to start trucking around millions of tonnes of food, so I find that particular truth of somewhat less use than one would like. I use another figure that I think is much more relevant - eight out of ten malnourished children live in places where there are food surpluses. That statistic, it seems to me, truly conveys the key of the problem. The main problem is poverty – whether that means people being unable to afford to buy food or people not having the enabling resources to produce it for themselves in a sustainable way.

Consumers International has, as the great majority of its members, organisations from developing countries. These members are very active on poverty issues, food issues, and many of them have close links to farmer organisations. The key question that you are asking is one that we have addressed. The question is being posed this way: *'This issue is not whether we can afford the risks of GM foods, but more importantly can we afford not to take the risks given the world's food situation?'*. The members of CI have answered this question. Their consensus answer is that this trade-off question should not be being asked at the moment. It is too soon to make the choice, and there are two reasons for that.

That first reason is that, as you may know, probably the most significant contributor to the current poverty among rural people and farmers in developing countries – including in countries where the population is still predominantly rural – derives from being unable to compete with food imports: foodstuffs often imported from countries heavily subsidising agriculture. Throughout the developing world, farmers are leaving their land because they cannot sell their produce for an adequate return. While local markets collapse under the onslaught of cheap imports, urban consumers can benefit from somewhat cheaper food prices, but at the high cost of urban overcrowding and the attendant increases in crime and pollution, and high unemployment as rural people flee to the cities hoping to find ways to earn a decent living.

The developed world's huge subsidisation of agricultural production, coupled with export subsidies, non-tariff barriers, as well as high tariff

barriers and quotas – many of which are clearly directed against developing countries – is effectively the export of poverty. The total supports to agriculture in developed countries, at this moment, are 6-7 times all of the development assistance they provide to poorer nations. The big culprits in agricultural subsidisation are the EU, the US and Japan, and there are five or six others that follow.

From the consumer movement's point of view, tackling this issue – where real and widespread benefits are realisable in the very short term – is where we as a consumer movement want to put our work.

The second reason is that if developed countries had stopped this behaviour – or even moderated it – and diverted a bit of those subsidies to Africa for example, or parts of Asia, not in food aid, but towards agricultural sustainability, water management, rural roads, storage facilities and other rural infrastructure, as well as investment in people such as education, we would not be here talking about these huge numbers of people living in poverty and in want. Frankly, we don't want to be back in a room like this in 10 years, having exactly the same conversation, just with bigger numbers of poor to put up on the slides – and that's all the so-called GM solution offers. So, basically, our answer to the question is that GM is just not a key item. GM foods are a sideshow in

the effort to sustainably alleviate poverty and feed the world's population.

A ray of hope?

One of the most interesting coalitions put together to tackle this issue of developed country subsidisation of agricultural production occurred at the World Economic Forum in February 2002. The WEF is the annual meeting of the world's big multinationals. But I did attend, as did members of about 100 other invited non-business organisations. One result is a statement - with Consumers International, Oxfam, Save the Children and a few other NGOs and including signatories like Unilever, Monsanto, Cargill, Nestle and now the WTO, World Bank and so on – about the need to end agricultural production subsidies in developed countries. The statement is on the WEF website for all to see. Despite the enormous distrust between many of these global corporations and the consumer movement in particular, we're about to try and tackle this particular issue together. The EU recently moved, very slightly, on these production subsidies, and I hope you all wish us luck in getting at least some success in the area. If we succeed, even if we succeed by only 40–50%, it would mean the biggest contribution to alleviation of world poverty that we've yet seen.