

Parallel Session 22: Public perceptions of GMOs

UK GM DIALOGUE: SEPARATING SOCIAL AND SCIENTIFIC ISSUES

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Background

In 1996, GM soya and maize were imported into Europe from North America. At this time, general public awareness of the new GM foods was low. During 1998 and 1999 there was extensive coverage in the UK of the controversy surrounding GMOs in the media, some of it involving HRH Prince Charles, Dr Pusztai (the scientist researching GM potatoes), the UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, the Minister of Science Lord Sainsbury and the supermarket chain Iceland. Over the next 5 years GM crops and produce were also destroyed by activists, numerous legal actions were taken by organic farmers and supermarkets removed GM foods from their shelves.

The UK was still getting over the BSE crisis and in 2001 another agriculture crisis erupted with the Foot and Mouth epidemic exposing some less than hygienic agricultural practices. Thus the arrival of GM food into the UK occurred at a time of decreasing confidence in agricultural procedures and in the safety of food.

The UK government responded slowly to the growing concerns surrounding GM foods, waiting at least four years after the controversy surrounding GM food was in the public domain, announcing the launch of the consultation in mid-2002. But not only was the timing late in terms of public controversy, the public consultation occurred a few months **before** the scientists conducting the GM field trials were to announce their findings.

GM consultation – the three strands

The government accepted the advice of its strategic advisory body on biotechnology issues affecting agriculture and the environment and announced that it would promote a broad national debate where all voices could be heard.

The national dialogue on GM had three strands: the science review (led by the Office of Science and Technology, OST), a costs and benefits study (led by the Prime Minister's Strategy Unity) and a public debate (conducted by an independent steering board). Each strand was to focus on its remit however it was stated by government that each strand would interact and feed into each other.

The BA's involvement – the science review strand

The BA was commissioned by the OST to organise the open meetings as part of the GM science review strand.

The aim of the science strand was to review the current scientific knowledge on GM. The review was led by the government’s Chief Scientific Adviser, who worked with a panel comprised of 25 prominent scientists in their field from a variety of backgrounds. The open meetings and the science strand website provided other scientists, and non-scientists, to raise scientific points of view.

From the outset of its involvement the BA indicated its preference to not separate the social and scientific issues, but this was not the remit of the science strand. As expected, social issues such as economics, politics, regulation, justice and consumer choice, were raised at the open meetings, however, these points were not discussed further by speakers or panel members.

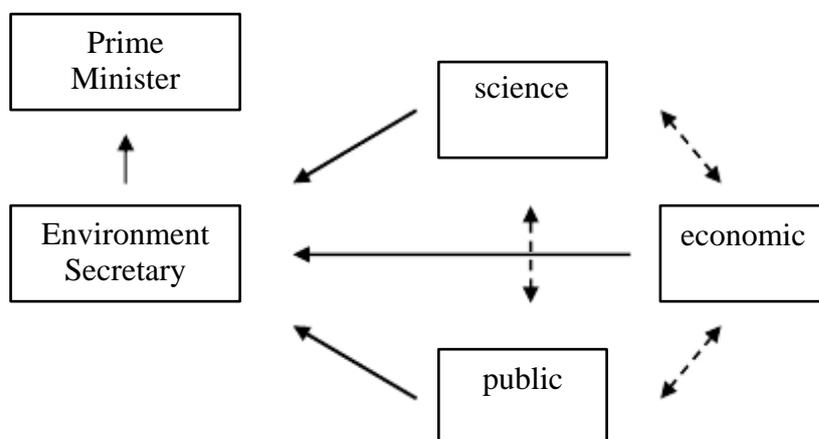
Each of the open meetings addressed a different area of science (food safety, biodiversity, horizontal gene flow, and future applications). The open meetings consisted of 3 or 4 speakers who were questioned by up to 4 of the science review panel members. Members of the audience were also invited to ask questions or make comments.

Observations

The GM dialogue was the largest public consultation on a science issue undertaken in the UK and has been promoted as an innovative procedure as well as criticised for its poor timing and implementation.

It was reported that “the activities of the [three] strands were different but closely related”ⁱ; and that the other two strands would feed into the science strand, including the open meetings that the BA organised. However the science open meetings were not held in parallel with the other two strands and as a result there was minimal interaction.

In a Statement of Relationships it was reported that “each strand will report separately”ⁱⁱ feeding directly to the Environment Secretary where ‘a decision would be reached’. The diagram below represents this model.



Although the Statement of Relationships outlines the interaction of the three strands, there was no clear indication of these relationships when the BA was organising the open meetings, nor how the information gathered during the consultation would be used to make a decision.

The independent evaluation of the GM public strand concluded that there was a “lack of cross-fertilisation with [it and] the science and economic reviews”.

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At the outset the government stated that the public consultation would be open and transparent. And in many ways it was, the meetings were held in public, minutes were available on the websites, public views and opinions were gathered. However, one of the most important elements to public consultation, how it will feed into the decision-making process, was not apparent from the beginning of the process.

Further, separating the scientific elements from social issues restricted the interaction of scientists, stakeholders and members of the general public. The BA has observed over the past 3 years that scientists, as well as members of the public, benefit from face-to-face communication. Sometimes this has to be approached in stages to reach a common language, but separating public and scientific dimensions does not progress public engagement with the future of scientific developments.

The decision to separate the dialogue into three strands was taken at a high level at the outset and the whole exercise was constructed on that basis.

One positive outcome of the separate science strand was that scientists were able to discuss the level of uncertainty of current technology in public, albeit among a fairly expert set of people. In our experience this rarely happens when scientists are placed in the position of having to defend their research once an issue becomes controversial.

ⁱ <http://www.gmsciencedebate.org.uk/default.htm>, accessed on 9 May 2004

ⁱⁱ <http://www.gmpublicdebate.org.uk/docs/StatementOfRelationships.pdf>, accessed on 9 May 2004

ⁱⁱⁱ A Deliberative Future? An independent Evaluation of the GM Nation? Public Debate, Understanding Risk programme (a major research initiative based at the University of East Anglia and involving researchers from Cardiff University, Brunel University and the Institute of Food Research at Norwich. February 2004.

