

Public Participation of NGOs in decision-making regarding GMOs

- GENET - European NGO Network on Genetic Engineering: 44 members in 24 countries
- Mission:
 - to provide information on gene technologies and related topics to member NGOs and the interested public
 - facilitate the involvement of members and interested public in decision-making processes which must guide the development of these technologies
- Views on Public Participation
 - Questionnaires and interviews to member NGOs
 - Informal discussions

Participatory tools available to NGOs

- Invited consultations
 - frequently asked to contribute to consultations
 - rarely to stakeholder forums and dialogues
- Uninvited participation
 - lobbying government at local, national and international level
 - press/media campaigns
 - consumers' campaigns
 - legal challenges and court battles

Feedback on participatory experiences

→ National practices and experiences vary, but institutionalised participatory processes are perceived by many as a bad investment of their time and resources

- Often invited only as observer or to agree or disagree with researchers and policy makers but not to debate the root of the issues or be involved in the scientific process
- Not enough time provided for a proper reply (e.g. e-consultations) or not a good enough notice of the event
- No consideration for the situation of the invited NGOs that don't allow participation on meetings or quick responses to consultations
- No consideration for the inputs provided or justification why on final reports
- No effect on trajectory of decisions and policy developments

Feedback on participatory experiences

- Also the most important decision-making takes place on the EU level and only a few NGOs based in Brussels have opportunity to participate
 - e.g.: dissatisfaction with how EFSA formulates its opinions - lack of civil society participation vs. known ties of some members to the industry
- While there have been some improvements, most of the consultations happen in a written form and there is little chance for direct participation
- Public participation is often hindered by the lack of access to information - NGOs and individuals need to invest a lot of energy getting hold of that information that should be available in the first place

NGOs prefer other ways of public participation

→ Widespread feeling that they've been invited to be educated into a pre-determined outcome or just as pro forma

→ Uninvited participation is the preferred option for most NGOs

press work / mobilizing a larger public / changing the market / producing materials on times in which they'll be meaningful for policy workers / support and produce independent research

→ Many NGOS withdraw from institutionalized participation either to make a point or as a prioritization of time and resource investment on more effective methods

Roots of the problems

- Participatory exercises about risks and benefits but never to question the need for the technology in itself
- Separation of science from its social context
- Framing science as objective and social, ethical and political concerns as subjective and therefore not fit for the base of decision-making
- “Deficit model” which considers the public as inherently ignorant on scientific issues excluding it from debate
- Lack of political will: science and technology seen as competitiveness tools and public concerns as obstacles instead of a base to guide science and technology developments
- Lack of capacity of institutions who promote consultations to take up the inputs received
- Timely access to information, effective public participation and affordable access to justice not yet widely recognized as "rights"

What NGOs hope for a better public participation

- Participation for all
 - Everyone should be able to participate at some level
- Participation from the very beginning
 - at the level of deciding if society wants/requires a certain technology
- Research responsive to society's needs
 - public funds for science in accordance with public interests
- Creation of spaces/places for participation
- Real dialogue
 - two way exchange and genuine interest in listening the other side
 - no point in consultations that are designed to get a particular answer
- Provision of resources for NGOs to participate at consultations, public hearings
 - equality issue: NGOs don't have the resources other interest groups have to invest on participatory processes
- Access to information free of obstacles so efforts can go into participation

THANK YOU

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