

The Illusion of Coexistence

Genetic engineering and conventional agriculture can exist side by side in theory only. In practice this EU wish is impossible. It comes down to one conflict: that between agri-business and the GMO-free European regions.

When in 1996 the first genetically engineered „Roundup- Ready“ soybean entered Europe from the US, it was generally seen as the starting signal for the unstoppable introduction of a new technology into agriculture and food production. Greenpeace's actions against freighters in Hamburg and Rotterdam were smiled at sympathetically as a Luddite 'storming of the machines'. That now, ten years later, with marginal exceptions in Spain and Romania, there is still no planting of genetically modified crops in Europe, would at the time have been considered impossible. And also that worldwide there are still only two genetically engineered entities, already developed in the 1980s, in the four crop plants on the market: maize, soy, rapeseed and cotton.

It would have been a daring forecast to say that in 2006 these would grow on 80 million hectares and that over 90 percent of their patents would come from one single company, Monsanto. The fronts have hardened in the struggle over genetic engineering, which has flared up in the past ten years, first in Europe and then worldwide. If things were as democratic in the EU as in Switzerland, it would be quickly decided. The clear majority in Switzerland, which in November 2005 rejected cultivation of GMOs for the time being, would probably be repeated in almost all European countries. A solid majority of citizens reject GMOs, in their food and in nature. This is now much more than just about possible health effects, also not about the unforeseeable ecological risks of the technology.

For GMOs have come to symbolize a soulless, industrial agriculture that threatens to destroy natural and cultivated variety, regional tastes and farmers' independence to produce. They force us to question the ethical boundaries in controlling nature and whether living beings and their characteristics should be allowed to be patented, like machines or software. Additionally, there is the unprecedented global concentration of agribusiness and biotech corporations – and with that the question, as to who the economic as well as cultural winners and losers will be.

We face a merger of chemicals, biotechnology and agriculture into one worldwide integrated and controlled market. The question of the independence of science, between its public role and private dependence is also a new crystallization point in the debate over genetic engineering. It's a telling example of European democracy.

All basic decisions concerning the licensing, use and control of GMOs in Europe are now being made in Brussels. National decision-making, as in the case of liability in the law on genetic engineering, is limited to only a few areas. Since Europe's societies and governments do not have a consensus on basic principles, the policies and legislation of the EU are noted for their inconsistency. On the one hand, official statements from the European Commission generally consider the obvious risks as 'exaggerated', public opinion as 'one-sided' or 'badly informed'. Millions of Euros were spent on information and public acceptance campaigns. But this had an undesired effect: opinion researchers discovered that increased awareness of biotechnology only increased popular rejection of biotechnology in agriculture.

Billions are spent on genetic research and development, so as not to lose out in the technological race. Traditional agricultural and genetic research are marginalized. On the other hand, there is only one genetic product currently approved for commercial use in the EU, the maize variety ‚Mon 810‘ from Monsanto, which produces a poison against insects. Some 20 modified products allowed for import and use in food and animal feed are either resistant to a particular herbicide or else produce an insecticide themselves.

Between 1998 and 2004 the EU states declared a general moratorium on GMO approvals, ignoring their own laws. Since then, just four new products have been approved for import, but not a single one for planting. And these four approvals were only possible due to a typical EU loophole: if the Council of Ministers does not reject it with a qualified majority, then the European Commission can issue approvals even against a majority of Member States. The Council of Ministers stopped the EU Commission only once, when the Commission applied in September 2005 to cancel national bans in Austria, Luxemburg, Greece, Germany and Italy on approvals already made by the European Commission. The Ministers rejected this with a qualified majority.

The only minimum political consensus that proponents and opponents of biotechnology have agreed upon thus far was for citizens' 'freedom of choice'. On the store shelves this is to be secured through labelling regulations. Through sophisticated control programmes, producers and supermarkets guarantee that none of their products contain more than 0.9 percent of genetically modified substances. Products labelled with GMO contents are hard to find anywhere. Even genetically modified animal feed has to be labelled, but not the milk, eggs or meat that are produced with it. Unnoticed by the consumer, 15 million tons of genetically modified soy from the US and Argentina are used in animal feed each year. Nobody ordered this, but the monopolists of raw materials in Southern and Northern America - Cargill, ADM and Bunge - supply GMO-free goods only reluctantly, and then at a higher price. Members of the European animal feed industry, which is in any case no leader in transparency and consumer protection, present themselves as innocent victims. All the same, the market for certified GMO-free feed is growing.

However, freedom of choice quickly meets its natural limits in the field: Pollen is carried for kilometres by wind and animals. Seed is carried along by machines and people even further and can hibernate for years in the soil. Once a wild plant is subject to genetic changes, these cannot be reversed. Even with maize, which has no natural relatives in Europe and cannot hibernate, the effort necessary to separate GMO and non-GMO cultivations is enormous. The coexistence that the European Commission and industry promote, which is supposed to guarantee problem-free side-by-side growth of conventional, organic and GMO cultivations and guarantee the free choice of the farmers has proven to be a trick. It is a politically comfortable solution as long as reality, i.e. the cultivation of transgenic plants, does not interfere.

Because they do not want to rely on the situation staying as it is in the future, those political organisations in Europe that would be immediately affected are now mobilising. Whether agriculture should be with or without genetic engineering should not be decided by a single farm. But farmers and consumers also do not want Brussels to prescribe this for them. Neither European nor national legislation enables a decision at the local level. The emerging conflict is likely to be interesting.

Benedikt Haerlin

GMO-FREE REGIONS

Thirty-six regional governments from eight EU countries have formed a network of GMO-free regional governments. Their aim is to secure GMO-free agriculture in their territories and to speak with a common voice in Brussels. In joint declarations they have presented a detailed list of demands to the European Commission as well as to their own national governments. They want to decide themselves if and which GMOs are planted in their regions, and insist on participating in the approval process for GMOs and independent scientific risk assessment to guarantee the preservation of GMO-free seeds and the protection of regional varieties. So far, initial meetings with the EU Commission have led to no concrete results. Most voices from the regions in this publication are from the last GMO-free network meeting of this network in Rennes, Brittany.

The Assembly of European Regions

European regions demand that those who cause genetic contamination be liable.

European regions are increasingly concerned about the way the European Union and its Member States have handled the GMO issue since May 2004, when the European Commission authorised importation of GM-seeds following a 5 year moratorium. For this reason the Assembly of European Regions (AER) - a 20 year-old association promoting the interests of more than 250 regional governments – has launched an awareness and information campaign on the impact of GMOs on regional agriculture.

The two main concerns are the very limited democratic control over decisions on introducing new GMOs into the EU, and the issue of coexistence, which is meant to ensure that GM crops are isolated from other types of farming and that contamination from a GM-crop to a conventional one is avoided. The European Regions demand a binding EU legislative framework on coexistence which would set up a clear liability plan in case of contamination.

Estelle Delangle / AER

The Assembly of European Regions/AER (www.a-e-r.org) is the political organisation of Regions in Europe and their spokespersons at European and international levels. Its goal is to defend the Regions' interests in the political process and develop interregional cooperation. AER brings together 250 Regions from 30 European Countries, members and non-members of the EU, and 13 interregional organisations.

www.a-e-r.org

Congress in Vienna on Co-Existence

A European authorisation allows the open cultivation and sale of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in principle. However according to Article 26a of the EU-Directive on Deliberate Releases 2001/18, Member States can 'use appropriate measures to prevent the unplanned presence of GMOs in other products.' What measures these may be is left up to their national law and regional legislation. In Austria, state laws enacted on the basis of this article go a long way towards halting cultivation of GMOs, because they don't allow any contamination of neighboring fields at all. The EU Commission, on the other hand, maintains that contamination up to a maximum declaration limit of 0.9% for "accidental and technically unavoidable presence" of GMOs must be tolerated. An unrealistic assumption. Because a crop that is already contaminated to the upper limit with GMOs would in practice not be saleable. A decision on this basic aspect of so-called co-existence has not been made thus far. This and other areas of conflict will be discussed in Vienna from April 2-4, 2006, at a "genetic engineering summit" of member states. A lively debate is expected.