

The Swiss say YES to a 5 Year Moratorium on GMOs

On November 25, 2005, Swiss voters approved by a decisive majority a referendum calling for a five year moratorium on the commercial planting of genetically modified crops. All 26 cantons voted for it, an historic victory, as only 15 referenda in Switzerland have ever been successful, and most won by very small margins.

The result is even more astounding because the opposition was strong: the entire government, the national parliament, all the conservative parties, industry and many scientists actively opposed the referendum. The government announced that a moratorium would be „poison for research” and advertisements claimed that the referendum was “dishonest, harmful and unnecessary.”

The victory was possible thanks to a uniquely broad coalition – a first. It included environmental groups and the conservative Swiss Farmers’ Association, the Swiss Rural Women and organic farmers, some companies, a group of researchers and many more. This diverse coalition was convincing, and triggered a dynamic movement at the local level, where hundreds of active groups fought for the moratorium with much effort and humour.

Hansjörg Walter, President of the Swiss Farmers’ Association, is happy about the prospects of this YES for the sovereignty of Swiss agriculture: “With the growing opening of the market , GMO-free zones will be more important than ever.” And Stephan Baer, director of one of the largest cheese producers – every Swiss child knows Baer cheese - says: “In my opinion, genetic engineering has no place in a natural product.”

Florianne Koechlin

Polish Pioneers

In Skórzyn, not far from the German border, Wojtek and Beata Halicki make new paths in agriculture

Just looking at the farm you can see that these aren’t dreamers puttering around, but visionaries who know their business. The wooden house with its earthen roof, reed insulation, electrical generation and integrated water circulation systems is as large as an old estate and the surrounding land shows that growth and sustainable farming are not contradictory. Welcome to Skórzyn, and the future of Polish agriculture.

The farm and related Institute for Applied Ecology (Instytut Ekologii Stosowanej) were built up by Wojtek and Beata Halicki near the small town of Krosno Odrzańskie on the River Oder, less than 50 kilometres from the German border. The 39 year old environmental engineer and the 33 year old German scholar are closely tied with Germany. Wojtek got his doctorate there, and both did scholarly work for years at Vechta College, where the first of their two children was born. After a stopover as lecturer at the University of Zielona Góra, the two founded the Institute in 2002. “The challenges in the countryside,” says Wojtek, “were more important to me than the professional security of the university.”

The Institute for Applied Ecology is a private research institution focused on water, forestry and agricultural ecology. The main idea is to bring the theory of sustainable regional development together with agricultural practice. “In Poland farmers are increasingly turning towards industrial agriculture and EU subsidies,” says Wojtek, but many small farms still survive by selling milk or grain to a cooperative. However the prices they get keep sinking.” Wojtek, Beata and their six co-workers want to follow a ‘third

way'. "We want to show by our own example that the cultivation of organic vegetables is worth it, and even planting fruit orchards. This way we can give an alternative to small farmers in our neighbourhood."

A walk through the fields, meadows and woods of the Institute, which has now grown to 270 hectares (675 acres), shows the current status of field trials. There are fruit trees that after a year's growth are grafted onto resistant trunks, vegetable plantations where different varieties are grown on soil of varying quality. "We experiment with planting old varieties in order to maintain genetic diversity," Wojtek explains. As for genetically manipulated seeds as protection against pests, like most Polish farmers he doesn't think much of the idea.

The search for new methods is paying off for Wojtek, Beata and their colleagues at the Institute. The eco-sewage system technology that Wojtek has tested at his farm in Skórzyn has already been sold to over 1,000 Polish farms and many municipalities. But the research of these Polish pioneers continues without a break. In a project with Eberswalde College they plan to investigate the implementation of the EU's water directive for smaller water catchment areas in the vicinity of the farm.

But sometimes nature will play its tricks on them: „For instance if we're sitting at the computer and our solar panels and wind generator aren't delivering enough current," says Beata. But they are sure of one thing. "There will be enough power for the World Cup soccer game between Poland and Germany!"

Uwe Rada / www.ies.zgora.pl

Italy: Against the violence of globalisation.

In Italy farmers, consumers and companies consider their identity.

Numbers speak louder than words when it comes to Italians' stand on transgenic agriculture. Thus far 15 of the country's 20 regions and 2,307 of 8,106 regional councils have moved to exclude genetically modified crops. The "GMO-free" proponents are regionally rooted and effective, with political credibility for their refusal of the transgenic model of agriculture and food production as scientifically unsafe, socially unacceptable, and uneconomical as well.

So what is behind such a "politically unsuitable" coalition, one that goes beyond the main environmental, consumer and organic-friendly organizations to include economic giants like COOP-Italy, the country's largest supermarket chain with more than 5 million members; the National Confederation of Artisans; Coldiretti, which with more than 1.2 million members is Europe's largest agricultural trade union; and the Italian Confederation of Farmers, with more than 450,000 associates? And what has convinced a parties and individual legislators, from center left to center right-wing, to support the coalition and its legislative objectives?

For one, the human factor, first expressed by a small group of environmentalists, with agricultural entrepreneurs and trade unions who tackled the new transgenic paradigm's unknown conditions, challenging the limits of science, the foundations of social relations, political hierarchies and economic theories. The socio-economic factor quickly convinced agricultural and food producers of the need for an "identity" to compete with far-flung globalisation. This was achieved through quality-based development with a social connection between producers and consumers.

Then there is the democracy factor. Sociologists define the GMO-free coalition as the most advanced experiment for a social fabric that reacts to the imbalance and economic violence of globalisation, presenting a new model of self-governance re-establishing relationships between social needs and politics.

The coalition has pushed the political agenda with a success surprising even its own members. It shows that when social needs move the agenda in the new paradigm of globalisation, many existing fences can fall. The results are in: of the 285 experimental transgenic fields planted in 1998, only 11 remain today. Monsanto, despite innumerable attempts to pollute the seed industry, has so far been stopped by the coalition's insistence on valuing public control authorities as partners in a dialogue between institutions and citizens on a sustainable and quality-based model of 'field to plate' production.

In unexpected and positive ways the "Italian case" counters both current conventional thought and traditional environmental battles. Here "third and fourth generation" rights – environmental, for sustainable consumption and genetic rights - are discussed and supported by a public majority, and technological innovations are not dogma, and are only accepted when supported by a social consensus. Sustainable production and consumption offer a model for shared innovation based on territorial identity and a distinctive population, far from monotone models of production like the transgenic one.

The Genetic Rights Council, an independent research and communication centre on biotechnologies, represents the strategies of the GMO-free coalition. The coalition is aware that innovative and appropriate instruments are needed in this complex struggle, and from the start it worked on the scientific level. It is necessary to renew a dialogue with the scientific world and discover, with patience and proficiency, possible roads to a unified understanding between science and society. The Genetic Rights Council sees this effort as its social mandate.

Ivan Verga

Protection for small farmers

14 of 16 Polish provinces are GMO-free.

The International Coalition to Protect the Polish Countryside, was founded in October 2000, with the goal of protecting and promoting Poland's 1.5 million small farmers and raising awareness, at both the national and international level, of the vital ecological balance that is maintained through the practice of traditional, environmentally friendly, agricultural methods and self sufficient life styles.

Over the past 18 months, ICPPC has led the GMO Free Zone campaign in Poland.

Accession to the EU, in May 2004, opened the door to GMO's on the Polish market and fields. Taking into account the urgency presented by this situation, ICPPC decided to directly target local authorities on the level of the Provinces and then to conduct a broader national awareness raising campaign. The objective, to make the whole of Poland a "GMO Free Zone," has been remarkably successful, with 14 out of 16 Provinces declaring their wish to become officially recognized as "GMO Free". ICPPC, which does not believe in "coexistence" between GM and non GM crops, has also linked up with many other European organizations and is now calling for a 10 YEAR MORATORIUM against all GMO's in Europe.

ICPPC strongly favours the maintenance of a large number of small scale enterprises on the land, with increasing use of renewable energy and on-farm processing, as the most sustainable way of protecting food quality and a way of life under increasing pressure from both the EU and the WTO.

Jadwiga Lopata / Julian Rose