

Democratising Agri-Biotechnology? European Public Participation in Agbiotech Assessment

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Agbiotech as a case study of participatory TA

- Agricultural biotechnology has attracted intense disagreements – about risk, benefits, uncertainties, precaution, sustainable agriculture, globalisation, etc.
- People have collectively created ways to participate, e.g. through public debates, protests, boycotts, etc.
- Agbiotech has also been the focus for state-sponsored exercises in public participation.
- Such exercises have continued to gain funding from state bodies in Europe.

What aims for participatory exercises?

- Participatory exercises draw many criticisms, e.g. that participants were not 'representative', that the government did not make a prior commitment to follow the outcome, or that the process neglected wider issues.
- Those criticisms presuppose particular aims, even simplistic models of 'participatory democracy', whereby true representatives of the public would determine policy.
- Sharper questions are needed to evaluate these exercises, their various forms & tensions.

Questions to analyse

- How and why did state bodies sponsor participatory TA of agbiotech?
- What aims arose in designing, managing and using those exercises?
- How did the process shape relations between expert and lay roles?
- How did participants raise questions about agbiotech and government policy?
- How did the overall process bear upon the accountability of representative democracy?

Govt commitment to techno-fix

- By the early 1990s EU technology policy was invoking objective imperatives for (non)choices.
- Global competitiveness required specific technologies as progress essential for European economic survival.
- ‘Risk-based regulation’, i.e. product safety as the only criterion for approval decisions.
- Expert bodies as adjudicator of safety claims.
- Technological determinism complemented neoliberal appeals to market forces.

Euro-legitimacy crisis

- BSE scandal highlighted the policy aims which drive safety claims, thus intensifying public controversy and raising the stakes for ‘science/expertise’.
- EU decision-making underwent a legitimacy crisis.
- Paradox of ‘Science and Governance’:
Governments depend more upon expert claims which are often contested.
Therefore scientific expertise must be combined with broader forms by democratising expertise.
- But legitimacy problems had deeper sources than narrow expertise.

Governance theories: neoliberal illegitimacy

- Neoliberal agendas undermine legitimacy: ‘economic globalisation and political change have created a crisis of the old hegemonic structures and forms of political consent, which are now coming apart...’ (Gill, 1993: 32-33).
- Global governance ‘can be seen as a product of two phenomena: the pursuit of neoliberal forms of globalisation, and the resistance to such centralisation of power’ (Paterson et al., 2003).
- Governments face deep conflicts over technological decisions. Governance is ‘aimed at establishing common values for the management of a collective, and ultimately reconciled, future’. Participation can displace societal futures from the formal procedures of representative democracy (Pestre, 2006).

Deliberating which common problems?

- Governance is widely understood as cooperation in addressing collective-action problems in order to resolve societal conflicts. Tensions arise between resolving a problem, on the one hand, and containing conflicts around the problem-definition, on the other. (Young, 1997). But when/how do problems become ‘common’ ones?
- Wider participation depends upon the premise ‘that a problem is “common”, in the sense that stakeholder advantage cannot be obtained – nor defined – independently from collective reasoning’. Yet often such advantages are foreseen, as some stakeholders pursue antagonistic agendas (Pellizoni, 2003).

Democratic roles of participation

- Wider participation can help to reveal underlying conflicts and stakes of a controversy:
‘the main purpose of a public debate is not to eliminate the conflict, but possibly to clarify what [the] conflict is really about’ (de Marchi, 2003).
- At issue is ‘how to make those in charge accountable’ and thus ‘how to organise effective accountability’ for government decisions (Hagendijk and Irwin, 2006).
- Any technological choice has framing assumptions. Tensions arise between efforts to open up or close down these assumptions. Power is exercised in either protecting or scrutinising them (Stirling, 2005).

Democratising technology?

- In practice, the relationship between representative democracy and participatory methods becomes most clear and complementary, when engagement is approached as a means to open up the range of possible decisions, rather than as a way to close this down. Choice among the options thereby identified then becomes a clearer matter of democratic accountability (Stirling, 2006).
- Danish consensus conference provides a 'counter-technocracy', a means to challenge or to deliberate expert claims, and thus to democratise technological choices (Klüver, 1995).

Upstream conflict-management

- Participatory exercises have become normal, alongside changes in their policy aims and role, towards methods of upstream conflict-management.
- ‘The first ideological vehicle for participation was democratisation. In a democracy people should be allowed to get influence on issues of importance to society and everyday life. It still works, but now it goes hand-in-hand with liberalism as a second ideological vehicle: Politics is seen as a market of opinions, and the citizens should be invited into the open market. Contrary to what many would have expected, the result has been more participation. Also, the result is a less alternative image – maybe we can even see the contour of a new image as a practical governance tool’ (Klüver, 2006).
- Thus citizen involvement becomes ‘an adjustment or a supplement to the existing discourses and governance systems’. Whose aims are served?

1980-90s TA exercises on agbiotech

In several European countries, state bodies sponsored TA exercises, some called consensus or citizens’ conferences.

- **Denmark 1987: which sustainable agriculture?**
Expert procedures opened up to civil society & wider criteria through Parliament.
- **Germany 1991-92: participation trap**
NGOs could play expert roles only within a technology-centred analysis.
- **UK 1994: risk-benefit framework**
Pro-biotech experts played ‘mobile experts’, while the lay panel could only Q them.
- **France 1998: benign role of the expert state**
Parliament spoke for the panel in ways which protected the lay/expert boundary of regulatory system.

UK 'GM Nation?': public roles

- Numerous public meetings open to those interested.
- Designed mainly to gauge public opinion, putting participants in the passive role of indicators:
Yet some acted as politically engaged actors in their own right.
- Critical voices were labelled as 'activists' – versus politically inactive 'grassroots' participants representing the public.
- For 'narrow but deep' focus groups, organisers did surveillance and policing to select 'grassroots' participants – listening to the *idiotis* (Lezaun & Soneyrd, 2006).
- Thus the more expert, informed citizens were excluded from representing the public. Constructed lay/expert boundary.

UK 'GM Nation?': risk info

- Steering Group prepared 'stimulus material' for the focus groups: arguments about whether to provide 'objective' information or opposed views about evidence of risk/safety (Wall et al., 2005).
- Stimulus material included divergent views, e.g. about evidence of non/allergenicity, but the info was detached from their sources – thus decontextualised from issues of expert credibility.
- Expert disagreements offer an important resource for citizen deliberation. Yet the issue was reduced to info on biophysical risk, accessible only to specialists. Reinforced lay/expert boundary.

UK Science Review

- In parallel with the ‘GM Nation?’, the ‘Science Review’ was limited to experts evaluating scientific information for risk asst.
- At Royal Society mtg, speakers advocated the need for agbiotech to solve global problems. Anyone who questioned these claims was cut off – for going beyond science.
- In policing the expert/lay boundary, socio-political framing assumptions of agbiotech were reinforced – in the name of science.
- Science Review report acknowledged uncertainties that warrant more information – and thus a potential role for wider publics in these judgements.

Questions posed earlier

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Contradictory aims

- Advocates of participatory TA had diverse, even contradictory aims – e.g., to democratise technology, to educate the public, to counter ‘extreme’ views, to gauge public attitudes, to guide institutional reforms, and/or to manage societal conflicts.
- Divergent aims were manifest in the design and process of each exercise.
- Participants performed various meanings of technology, the public, expertise, democracy and their relationship.

Which un/common problems?

- Conflict arose over which societal problems were ‘common’ ones for deliberation – and which problems were to be ignored or marginalised.
- Some participants questioned how to define the agriculture problems that need solutions – esp. whether agbiotech would provide a means for sustainable agriculture and a benign form of control. Some suggested the need for alternatives.
- But such questions were generally marginalised in the discussion and especially in the conclusion.

Contextual constraints

- Discussions remained within problem of regulatory controls – how to minimise risks of agbiotech, as if its safe use were the common societal problem.
- Regardless of views held by participants, they faced constraints which resulted from....
 - a search for consensus,
 - aims & design of each exercise, and
 - wider policy context.
- This overall setting limited what could be said with influence on the process, and thus what roles could be effectively performed by participants.

Democratising agbiotech?

- Participatory exercises internalised and reinforced assumptions about agbiotech as progress in the common interest.
- Wider controversy about agbiotech *as control* was channelled into regulatory arrangements and the appropriate scientific expertise to advise them.
- Exercises generally biotechnologised democracy.
- Tensions arose between discussing a ‘common’ problem – e.g., how to make agbiotech safe – versus broadening the problem, even containing conflicts around the problem-definition.

Lay/expert boundary conflicts

- Such tensions took the form of boundary conflicts. In the structure or management of the exercises, boundaries were imposed – between biotechnological imperatives versus alternatives, scientific versus policy issues, and expert versus lay roles.
- These boundaries were challenged in attempts to open up issues to a lay expertise.
- Through lay/expert boundary conflicts, participants performed different models and roles of the public.

Holding the state accountable?

- Participatory exercises helped publics to hold the state accountable for its regulatory frameworks – but not for its commitment to an agbiotech future.
- In the cases analysed here, participation symbolically reinforced boundaries on citizen roles, thus complementing the state's unaccountability for innovation (non)choices.
Thus, perversely, state-sponsored participatory TA complemented neoliberal representative democracy.
- By default, regulatory procedures bear the burden of societal conflicts over a contentious innovation.
- State accountability for innovation will depend upon autonomous forms of public participation.