

GM NATION? Engaging People in Real Debate?

A GeneWatch UK report on the conduct of the
UK's public debate on GM crops and food

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October 2003

Acknowledgements

GeneWatch is grateful to all the people who took the time to give us their views on the GM debate and to the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust for funding this work.

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1. Executive summary

In July 2002, the Government announced that it would have a broad public debate on the future of GM crops and food in the UK. This was a novel and welcome step that brought the possibility of a new form of public participation in decision making. Planning started in the late summer of 2002 and the debate itself ran for six weeks from June 3rd to July 18th 2003. In parallel, several discussion groups (called 'reconvened groups') of randomly selected people were established. Each of these met on two separate occasions to debate the GM issue but were not held in public so are not reviewed here. The findings of the whole exercise were published in September 2003. Inevitably, there will be useful lessons for any future process and this report is intended to aid that learning as well as to evaluate the importance of the debate for GM decision making. Therefore, this report gives initial reflections on the process of the public debate, drawing on the observations of people participating in it and stakeholders.

Whilst the public debate on the future of GM crops was widely welcomed in principle, there were considerable reservations about how it was conducted in practice. The areas where the public debate was controversial included:

- whether the Government would listen to the outcomes;
- the financial resources committed;
- its timing;
- the quality of the organisation and materials.

For participants in the debate, it was scepticism about the Government's intentions and their practical experiences of the organisation of the debate that dominated their comments. All stakeholders shared the uncertainty about how the Government would use the findings of the debate and most emphasised how constraints had led to the exclusion of many people (especially those who had not considered the issues before) and the omission of key pieces of information from the debate - in the shape of the Science and Economics Reviews and the results of the Farm-Scale Evaluations (FSEs). For everyone, the underlying responsibility for these shortcomings was thought to lie with the Government.

The Central Office of Information, appointed by the Government to run the debate for the Steering Board, were frequently criticised for not responding to requests, failing to advertise meetings widely, the poor quality of the information materials, and lack of support in how to host a meeting where discussion could take place productively.

Despite these criticisms, it was clear that many people were keen to try this new form of participation. Estimates of the number of public meetings held ranges from 130 to 500. Some 37,000 feedback forms were returned and 24,609 people visited the website, 61% of whom submitted forms. However, because of the restricted time scale and poor organisation, many of the people who participated were those who had already thought about GM foods and crops and formed opinions.

The fact that it was people with existing views who participated does not mean that they should be discounted as the 'usual suspects', but rather they should be seen as an interested and informed sector of society. Because the public meetings were only one part of the whole process, it will be possible to cross-reference findings with those of the 'narrow-but-deep' groups who met to discuss GM crops in a more formal way. The results of earlier research and the Food Standards Agency's Citizens' Jury will also help build a more in-depth picture of public attitudes. Extending the debate and increasing the depth and scope of public involvement would add to the quality of the input to government, especially if it drew on the outputs of the FSEs, Science and Economics Reviews.

The findings of this review suggest that the Government should take the following steps to ensure that the information gained from the public debate is capitalised upon and lessons are learned:

Political commitment: clear connection with policy and decision making

- make a statement which demonstrates the weight it will place on the findings of the public debate – unless the whole process is to be a waste of taxpayers' money, this has to be significant;
- ensure that in any future exercises in public participation, the way in which the findings will inform policy is made clear before the process starts – without this, there is little reason or incentive for people to become engaged.

Time: enough time, at the right time

- reopen the public debate for a period of at least three months in November when the findings of the FSEs have been published – only this will ensure the widest and best informed public is engaged;
- ensure that future exercises consider more carefully the length of time over which they are conducted and that they are not overshadowed or hampered by other parallel processes.

Money: sufficient funding, wisely spent

- ask the Audit Commission to review the spending on the public debate and determine what were the implications of the constraints in funding;
- ensure that any future public debates are properly funded.

Expertise and support: using people experienced in public engagement

- review the performance of the Central Office of Information (COI) in the public debate and investigate whether there is any evidence of mismanagement or incompetence – considerable public funds have been expended and it is important to determine whether the COI have acted properly;
- recognise that a public debate is not a public relations exercise but requires special skills and ensure that only properly qualified and experienced organisations are used in any future public participation exercises.

Information: quality materials, professionally produced

- make the findings of the Science and Economics Reviews and FSE results key resources in a reopened public debate - there must be investment in providing these in imaginative and engaging ways;
- undertake research to establish what are the key principles of good quality information provision in such a public engagement exercise.

2. Introduction and background

This report is an initial reflection on the GM public debate process and its likely usefulness to Government and society. It focuses on the grassroots engagement, including its intersection with the Science and Economics Reviews. In July 2002, when the Government announced that it would have a broad public debate on the future of GM crops and food in the UK this was a novel and welcome step that brought the possibility of a new form of public participation in decision making. At best, the process could be used to bring new insights to inform Government and industry policy and decision making. At worst, it could be ignored and fuel feelings of cynicism about intentions and the beneficiaries of GM foods.

This report only attempts to identify what lessons can be learned about the process at this stage. Therefore, it does not consider the outcomes – what the particular findings might mean for GM policy. It will be followed by another report in 2004 which will consider how the Government actually used the public debate and Science and Economics Reviews in its policy and decision making.

GM foods have caused intense public controversy in the UK ever since it was revealed, in 1997, that GM soya grown in the USA was being imported mixed with non-GM soya and could be included in up to 60% of all processed foods. Even before that time, research had shown that people had anxieties about GM foods; wanted choice in whether they ate them or not; had little confidence that they would bring much benefit except to industrial interests; and thought their views would be disregarded¹. Whilst public unease about GM foods had indeed been ignored by policy makers and the industry in the development of the technology, things changed in 1999 when all the UK's major food retailers and producers responded to pressure from their customers and removed GM ingredients from their products². In addition, the Government made an agreement with the biotechnology industry that GM crops would not be grown commercially in Britain until the outcome of the Farm-Scale Evaluations (FSEs) was known³ – a set of experiments to determine the effect of growing the first generation of GM herbicide tolerant crops on biodiversity⁴. This effectively delayed commercial growing until 2004 at the earliest. An *ad hoc* moratorium in Europe, whilst the regulatory system was revised, also meant that new approvals for importation of GM crops for food or animal feed use were put on hold.

Whilst the FSEs and regulatory delays might have been expected to reduce the GM controversy and allow Government time to consider what was needed to address public concerns, this was not the case. At many of the FSE sites there was intense opposition and indignation that local communities had not been consulted about the plans. Because of such problems and the approaching decision on commercial growing of GM crops in the UK, the Government's strategic advisory committee, the Agriculture and Environment Biotechnology Commission (AEBC), produced a report in September 2001⁵ which advised the Government, among other things, to hold a public debate. It argued that the findings of the FSEs alone were an insufficient basis upon which to make a decision.

The Government accepted the need for a broader consideration of the future of GM in the UK and thus the public debate, later called '*GM Nation?*', was born (see Box 1 for a chronology of events), its design and implementation beginning in July 2002. However, alongside the public debate, the Government also announced two parallel processes. One was a review of the

1 See e.g. Consumers' Association – *Which? Report: Food of the Future?* July 1996 pp22-25; Grove-White, R. *et al* (1997) *Uncertain World*. CSEC, Lancaster University.

2 See GeneWatch Briefing No 9. *GM Crops and Foods: A Review of Developments in 1999*. <http://www.genewatch.org/publications/Briefs/brief9.pdf>.

3 DETR News Release 507, *Voluntary Agreement on GM Crops Extended*, 5 November 1999.

4 DETR Background Paper, *The Farm-Scale Evaluations of herbicide tolerant GM crops*, 26 January 2001.

5 AEBC (2001) *Crops on Trial*. Available on www.aebc.gov.uk.

science of GM to be undertaken by Professor King, the Government's Chief Scientist. The other was a review of the economic costs and benefits to be undertaken by the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit.

GeneWatch UK welcomed the prospect of active public debate to inform the policy and decision making process so became an active participant in the debate in different ways:

- as an interested observer, collecting views of others participating;
- contributing to the process of preparing public information materials;
- actively trying to engage people in the process through a dedicated section of our web site and producing information materials;
- speaking at public meetings and making GeneWatch's case against commercialisation at present.

This report draws on GeneWatch's and others' observations to help learn lessons about the process of the public debate which we hope will inform any similar exercises in technology assessment in the future.

2.1 Shaping the debate

Having accepted the need for a public debate in principle, the Government asked the AEBC how it should be conducted. In its advice⁶, the AEBC gave some general principles including that:

1. The information collected in the debate should be qualitative rather than quantitative (i.e. there would be no simple yes or no answers) so that a broader understanding of the issues and opinions could be reached.
2. Government should be clear from the start how it would intend to use and respond to the outcomes of the debate.
3. The process should be carried out and results assessed independently of Government. It should include an independent evaluation.
4. There should be both grassroots debate - where individuals and groups could organise their own meetings - and also professionally run discussion groups. The public should frame the debate, not Government or the AEBC.
5. The debate should be conducted regionally so that the information collected would be able to show any regional differences of opinion.

The Government responded and generally accepted this advice by saying that⁷:

- it was their intention to create a dialogue between all strands of opinion on GM;
- there would be a public debate alongside a Science Review and an Economics Review;
- the Government would allocate a budget of £250,000 for the public debate (not including the Science and Economics Reviews);
- the Government wished to receive a report on the debate in June 2003.

They also specified the following terms of reference for the overall programme:

- *"to identify, using methods which focus on grassroots opinion, the questions which the public*

6 AEBC (2002) *A debate about the issue of possible commercialisation of GM crops in the UK*. Available on www.aebc.gov.uk.

7 Public dialogue on GM. Government response to AEBC advice submitted in April 2002.

Box 1: How the GM public debate unfolded

For references and links to documents, visit GeneWatch's public debate web pages or the official web site at www.gmpublicdebate.org.uk.

10th September 2001: The AEBC (Agriculture and Environment Biotechnology Commission) publishes its report '*Crops on Trial*'. This argues that the Farm Scale Evaluations cannot form the sole basis of the decision whether to grow GM crops commercially in the UK. Among other things, the AEBC recommends that a public debate be held to inform the decision on commercialisation.

17th January 2002: The Government responds to the AEBC's report '*Crops on Trial*' and requests a recommendation on how the public debate should be conducted.

26th April 2002: The AEBC makes a recommendation to DEFRA (Department of Food and Rural Affairs) about how a public debate should be conducted, including both in-depth deliberation and wide ranging, grassroots engagement.

26th July 2002: Margaret Beckett, Secretary of State for the Environment, announces the public debate and that there will be parallel additional strands considering the economics of GM crops, to be conducted by the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit, and a science study by Professor David King, the Government's Chief Scientist. Mrs Beckett asks for the Public Debate Steering Board to report by the end of June 2003. A budget of £250,000 is allocated, much less than the AEBC had anticipated would be needed.

13th September 2002: The first meeting of the Steering Board for the public debate. The Board, chaired by Malcolm Grant (also Chair of the AEBC), included 6 other members of the AEBC together a member of the Agricultural Biotechnology Council, an industry body; Clare Devereux of the Five Year Freeze; and Gary Kass of the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology. Lucien Hudson, Director of Communications at DEFRA, attended to ensure accountability of public funds. Meetings were held in public.

September 2002: Central Office of Information (COI) is appointed as prime contractor for the public debate. The Steering Board had no influence on, or input to, this decision.

14th November 2002: The initial stage of the national GM debate gets under way with the first of a series of discussion workshops designed to find out what questions the public want to ask.

20th November 2002: The Central Office of Information informs the Steering Board that much greater funding is required to meet the objectives of the debate than the £250,000 which has been provided by Government.

January 2003: An additional £250,000 in funding is provided.

14th February 2003: The Food Standards Agency announces its own programme to "*assess people's views of genetically modified food*". This includes a Citizens' Jury and schools debates.

18th February 2003: Margaret Beckett responds to the Steering Board's request for more time. The deadline for the report is put back to September.

3rd of June 2003: Launch of '*GM Nation?*' and first of a series of 6 regional meetings to introduce the concept and methods of '*GM Nation?*' to a wider range of people. In parallel, a series of reconvened discussion groups are set up to consider the issues using standard social science research methods.

11th July 2003: The Prime Minister's Strategy Unit publishes its report '*Field Work: Weighing up the Costs and Benefits of GM Crops*'. The report concludes that there is no immediate economic benefit to be gained from the growing of GM crops in Britain.

17th July 2003: The Food Standards Agency publishes a report summarising the outcome of the its GM debate activities.

18th July 2003: *GM Nation?* ends. About 400 public meetings have taken place and 37,000 response forms have been returned via post and the Internet.

21st July 2003: The GM Science Review Panel publishes its first review.

Next Stages

September 2003: Steering Board report to Government on '*GM Nation?*'

October 2003: Results of Farm-Scale Evaluations (FSEs) expected to be published.

October/November 2003: Science Review Panel reconvenes to consider comments and FSE results.

November 2003: AEBC report expected on Coexistence and Liability.

Government response to the public debate – date not known.

has about GM issues, avoiding as far as possible the polarisation that has characterised so much of the discussion to date, and getting to the heart of the issues;

- *to develop, from this framing of the issues and through a wholly open process, the provision of comprehensive evidence-based information to the public on scientific, economic and other aspects of GM;*
- *to provide people with the opportunity to debate the issues openly and to reach their own informed judgements on this subject;*
- *to provide information to government on how questions raised by the public have shaped the course of the debate, including on the scientific, economic and other aspects of GM”.*

An independent Steering Board chaired by Malcolm Grant, who is also the chair of the AEBC, was established and the Government appointed the Central Office of Information (COI) to organise the debate, subcontracting where they considered necessary. An independent academic team funded by the Leverhulme Trust is evaluating the GM debate process with the co-operation of the GM Public Debate Steering Board but this is not a formal part of the process.

To shape the content of the debate itself, the Steering Board commissioned a series of nine workshops (six in England and one each in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) comprised of members of the public⁸. At these workshops, the GM issue was debated and the findings were intended to be used throughout the planning of the debate to ensure it captured all the areas of public concern.

2.2 The role of the debate in decision making

Reviews of the Economics and Science were added to the AEBC's original proposals and were controversial because it was not clear how they fitted with the public debate and how all three would inform policy. Would the findings of the Science and Economics Reviews be more important than the public debate? How could the Science and Economics Reviews address issues of public concern and be part of a debate or dialogue if they were separate from it? However, it has remained unclear how the Government intends to use the information gathered from the public debate and how this would fit with other decisions to be taken in Europe on GM crops:

“Confusion over the national public debate on genetically modified crops increased yesterday when its organisers announced they had written to Margaret Beckett, environment secretary, asking for reassurance that they were not wasting their time.”⁹

Government statements never quite succeeded in clarifying matters. For example, Mrs Beckett, the Secretary of State for the Environment, said shortly after the start of the debate that: *“The Government has given a commitment that we will make a written response to the public debate report. We have already stated that this process will help to inform the Government's policy making on GM, including our policy on the cultivation of GM crops, which will be based on an objective assessment of all the available information”¹⁰*. Exactly how the debate will help to inform Government policy making and what weight will be attached to it remains uncertain.

Ultimately, the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit's review of the costs and benefits of GM crops was

8 The report of these workshops - known as the 'Corr Wilborn Study' after the consultancy conducting the work - is available on www.gmnation.org.uk/docs/corrwilborn.doc.

9 *Doubts over GM crops debate*. Financial Times March 21st 2003.

10 The Rt Hon Margaret Beckett MP - Keynote Speech at Green Alliance/Royal Society Event, Thursday, 5 June 2003. <http://www.defra.gov.uk/corporate/ministers/speeches/mb030605.htm>.

not published until a week before the end of the official public debate period¹¹. Although there was some attempt to consider the issues that came out of the first set of discussion groups, which were intended to frame the debate from the public perspective, it is impossible to claim that the study connected with the grassroots public debate or that it informed the Strategy Unit's thinking. The Strategy Unit did report back to the Public Debate Steering Board on progress but defined its own work and analysis, assisted by three specialist panels, and only engaged externally with established stakeholders.

The Science Review was conducted for Professor David King, the Government's Chief Scientist, by a panel of 24 members drawn from academia, the regulatory system, industry and 2 members nominated by groups critical of GM¹². It published its findings three days after the public debate ended¹³. The review process tried to engage with public concerns by addressing the questions identified by the initial discussion groups and it was possible to submit comments via the Internet. However, this was very much an elite debate for specialists and stakeholders. Many, including Sir Tom Blundell, Chair of the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution, raised concerns in a letter to Professor David King¹⁴ about whether, given the timing of the review and the debate, the public's questions about the science would be properly addressed.

Therefore, whilst both the Economics and Science Reviews made some attempt to engage with the questions identified in the first stage of the framing of the public debate, there was no real dialogue or debate in the sense that there was no meaningful exchange of views. It will be possible for the public to comment on the reports and the Science Review Panel will be reconvened to consider such comments and the outcome of the Farm-Scale Evaluations (FSEs). However, the format of the report and systems for commenting mean that they are unlikely to engage more widely than with existing stakeholders.

Consequently, through no fault of its own but because of the Government's imposed time limits, the debate has been unable to use these parallel processes to fulfil one of its terms of reference, namely: *"to develop, from this framing of the issues and through a wholly open process, the provision of comprehensive evidence-based information to the public on scientific, economic and other aspects of GM"*.

2.3 Reactions to the debate plans

"The concept of the debate is progressive but.." (large membership organisation).

The reactions to the public debate during its development are considered here because they proved to be influential in shaping its course. For example, in November 2002, ten senior social scientists criticised the emerging direction of the debate¹⁵ for a variety of reasons including the timing, Government's intentions and the inadequacy of resources. In response to this and others' criticisms, the budget was doubled in January 2003.

Overall, the debate plans drew mixed reactions. Most organisations and individuals welcomed a debate in principle but, like the social scientists, wanted it to be better resourced, to be conducted

11 *Field Work: Weighing up the Costs and Benefits of GM crops*. Strategy Unit, July 11th 2003.

See: <http://www.strategy.gov.uk>.

12 For details of membership, see: <http://www.gmsciencedebate.org.uk/panel/members/default.htm>.

13 The findings of the GM Science Review are published on: <http://www.gmsciencedebate.org.uk/>

14 Minutes of the Public Debate Steering Board, 15th April 2003, para 5. http://www.gmnation.org.uk/docs/minutes_15042003.doc.

15 Burgess, J. *et al. Some observations and proposals on the 2002-2003 Public Dialogue on possible commercialization of GM crops in the UK*. For the Public Debate Steering Board meeting, Nov 7th 2002. For the full text, see http://www.genewatch.org/Debate/PDSB_submission.rtf.

over a much longer time span, to be better integrated with the Science and Economics Reviews, and to include the results of the FSEs, which are not due to be published until September or October 2003. For example, Ross Finnie, Scotland's Minister For Rural Affairs and the Environment, considered that the whole timing of the debate was wrong because it did not include the results of the FSEs¹⁶.

Even the AEBC expressed reservations at an early stage about the Government's initial plans including that¹⁷:

"The AEBC recognises that the process of the debate will be exceptionally difficult. It has particular concerns about the time scale, and whether the proposed budget is sufficient to allow the independent steering board to do the job properly."

The role of the Central Office of Information (COI) was also intensely controversial. The Government insisted that the COI should be the prime contractors to facilitate sub-contracting without prolonged delays under European tendering rules and also because they considered they had the skills to manage the debate. The AEBC was concerned about the independence of COI from Government¹⁸ and their skills and ability to manage the debate came under question later.

Having tried to influence and assist the debate process during its conception, some non-Governmental organisations (NGOs) still had reservations about the debate when it started. A group of eight organisations including leading environmental and consumer groups¹⁹ criticised the Government on the eve of the debate for not giving enough time or the right quality of information for people to engage in the GM debate²⁰.

16 *Finnie on attack over premature debate on GM crops*. Glasgow Herald, 11th June 2003, page 2.

17 National debate on commercialisation of GM crops – AEBC's response, July 2002. Available on www.aebc.gov.uk.

18 Minutes of the AEBC Meeting, 11-12th September 2002, para 12. http://www.aebc.gov.uk/aebc/meetings/meetings_110902_minutes.shtml.

19 The Consumers' Association, Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace, National Trust, RSPB, Sustain, National Federation of Women's Institutes, and UNISON.

20 *GM debate 'risks being facade'*. BBC News Online, 2nd June 2003. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/2955150.stm.

3. How the debate was run

Following on from the series of discussion workshops intended to frame the issues for the wider debate, a format was developed which comprised the following basic elements:

- a 'toolkit' of resources to stimulate and enable groups and individuals to participate in the debate;
- three layers of meetings at regional, council and local levels;
- a feedback system which could be completed on the Internet or by using postage paid reply cards.

In parallel, but separate from the public debate itself, was research called 'narrow-but-deep' - reconvened groups which met on two separate occasions about a fortnight apart. These groups were formed from randomly selected people with no previous involvement in GM issues and were held across the country. Their meetings were facilitated and recorded and between each meeting the members were able to gather more information. The outcomes of these groups will form an important comparison with the outcomes of the debate. These are not discussed further here as they were not held in public and did not involve stakeholders.

Even more separate from the debate itself was the Food Standards Agency's study of public attitudes, which is considered here because stakeholders, including GeneWatch, were actively involved in their Citizens' Jury.

3.1 The toolkit

The toolkit consisted of a video and background information available either on paper or CD-ROM. The *GM Nation?* web site (www.gmnation.org.uk) also contained the same materials as the booklet plus links to the Science and Economics Reviews and organisations interested in GM crops and foods. According to the COI's report to the Steering Board²¹, "*the intention would be to stimulate thinking and deliberative debate, with people engaging in discussion with each other rather than passively staring at a computer or video screen or being given 'the answers'.*"

3.1.1 Video

The video (17 minutes long) was intended to trigger debate at the public meetings. It consisted of footage of three conversations between groups of three consumers, farmers and scientists who exchanged opinions rather than provided information. It was received rather negatively at meetings with comments such as '*confusing*', and '*boring*' being much more common than the occasional '*quite stimulating*' response. Being rather static and unimaginative in presentation, budgetary constraints seem to have dominated.

3.1.2 Background information

"None of the statements had supportive references – just a whole collection of opinions" (person seeing booklet at Swansea meeting).

Background information was presented in the form of a booklet and in CD-ROM format.

21 Minutes of the Public Debate Steering Board Meeting, 20th March 2003, para 15. http://www.gmnation.org.uk/docs/minutes_20032003.doc.

GeneWatch was one of the stakeholder groups which was asked to participate in the process of developing the background information. However, the COI and the Science Museum (who were contracted to work on the materials) managed to create a situation where no stakeholder, from any perspective, wished to be associated with the final product. The process was begun in the second week of January 2003 and took almost four months to produce and probably cost several thousand pounds. Presenting 'views for' and 'views against' to a series of questions emerging from the original discussion workshops, it lacked depth and substance. In addition, by presenting the issues in the format that it did, it may well have tended to polarise discussion by constructing two 'sides' from the outset. However, as a farmers' organisation acknowledged, presenting 'factual' information in such a controversial area is not easy: *"The information was not entirely what our members expected which was a list of factual points. But I understand the difficulties and it was quite a neat way of getting around the problem of lack of definitive facts."*

The criticisms of information materials came from all perspectives: *"At least some supporters of GM crops came away disappointed. 'I wish that there had been more scientific information available,' complained farmer Cecil Thomas"* (from a report on the Birmingham regional meeting)²².

The information booklet also had a bizarre selection of further reading with no discernible rationale. Overall, the production and final content of the information materials gave the impression of incompetence, which left the public debate impoverished and looking rather amateurish.

3.2 The public meetings

3.2.1 Regional meetings

"Due to a combination of lack of advance publicity and scarcity of places, the function of the meeting as a 'public' debate is highly questionable. If there was anyone present without an agenda, I didn't manage to meet them" (comment about the Glasgow regional meeting).

There were six regional meetings organised to kick-start the public debate. These took place in Birmingham, Taunton, Harrogate, Glasgow, Belfast and Swansea. Held in venues for around 100 to 200 people, all were fully booked. A second meeting was held in Taunton in an effort to meet local demand. There was criticism that large areas of the country were excluded from access to these meetings and that not everyone who wanted to attend could do so: *"Hundreds of people across the West Country have been denied access to the national debate on the commercialisation of GM crops in Taunton today"*²³.

However, as a report in *The Guardian* observed in relation to the opening meeting in Birmingham, the advertising for these key regional meetings, intended to trigger broader public interest, had not reached the person on the street: *"While those inside the room are eager to get the meeting under way - it is scheduled to start at the helpful time for local working people of 3pm - awareness of the debate outside the building is a little more fuzzy. Just outside the sprawl of the NEC, Nick Skeens, a writer, said he had never heard of the national debate. 'I have to confess to complete and utter ignorance of it,' he said"*²⁴.

At these meetings, the video was shown and then an introduction to the public debate was made, often by a member of the Public Debate Steering Board. People sat in groups of up to 10 to 12

²² *UK Probes Public Opposition to GM Crops*. Science, 13th June 2003.

²³ *Hundreds are denied access to GM meetings*. Western Morning News, 7th June 2003.

²⁴ *Government's 10-day public roadshow opens with a whimper*. The Guardian, 4th June 2003.

around a table and a single independent facilitator asked the tables to consider certain questions as identified in the resource booklets. Each table selected its own facilitator to ensure everyone had a chance to speak and, after about an hour, a general feedback session was held and often the quality of the main facilitator was praised - *"The person presenting it was very fair"* was a typical comment.

Although the minutes of the Steering Board²⁵ state that *"Members agreed that time should be allocated at the regional meetings to offer 'tutorials' to those people interested in running local meetings"*, this did not take place. *"There was nothing about advising people on how to go about arranging debates. I filled in the forms but heard nothing,"* said one member of a large membership organisation intending to run a meeting.

Expectations were that the regional meetings would be for the public. However, for a variety of reasons, they largely attracted people with an existing knowledge of, and interest in, the GM issue.

3.2.2 Council meetings

"60 people attended - this is an exceptionally large turnout for a Kingston Council meeting" (person attending meeting).

"Councillor Lynch said the Gloucestershire debate promoted discussion of an issue very important to the county" (from a report of the Gloucestershire County Council meeting²⁶).

The GM public debate web site listed nine meetings held by local authorities in both rural and urban areas. This is not a comprehensive list. For example, GeneWatch spoke at one council meeting which is not listed (organised by York City Council). The resources available to local authorities meant that these meetings were relatively well resourced in terms of facilitation, with many following the model of small group discussions and sometimes with the addition of speakers to put the cases for and against GM crop commercialisation. The council meetings tended to take place later in the debate period because of the time taken for organisation. The Steering Board had expressed its concern that, given the importance of these meetings, the COI had not engaged proactively enough with councils far enough in advance to encourage them to take the initiative and organise debates²⁷ and this seems to have been borne out in practice. Ultimately, it was often a result of local demand that led to the debates taking place, although it was sometimes not possible to organise a meeting at all - *"Your deadline of mid-July for comment means that as the information did not arrive when requested, it is actually now too late to arrange briefing sessions due to the Council's summer recess"*²⁸.

3.2.3 Grassroots meetings

"The meeting went very well with a very lively debate that could have gone on much longer" (local meeting participant).

Although no complete list of grassroots or 'third tier' meetings was kept, press reports claim that

25 Minutes of the Steering Board meeting, 23rd May 2003, paragraph 12. http://www.gmnation.org.uk/docs/minutes_27052003.doc.

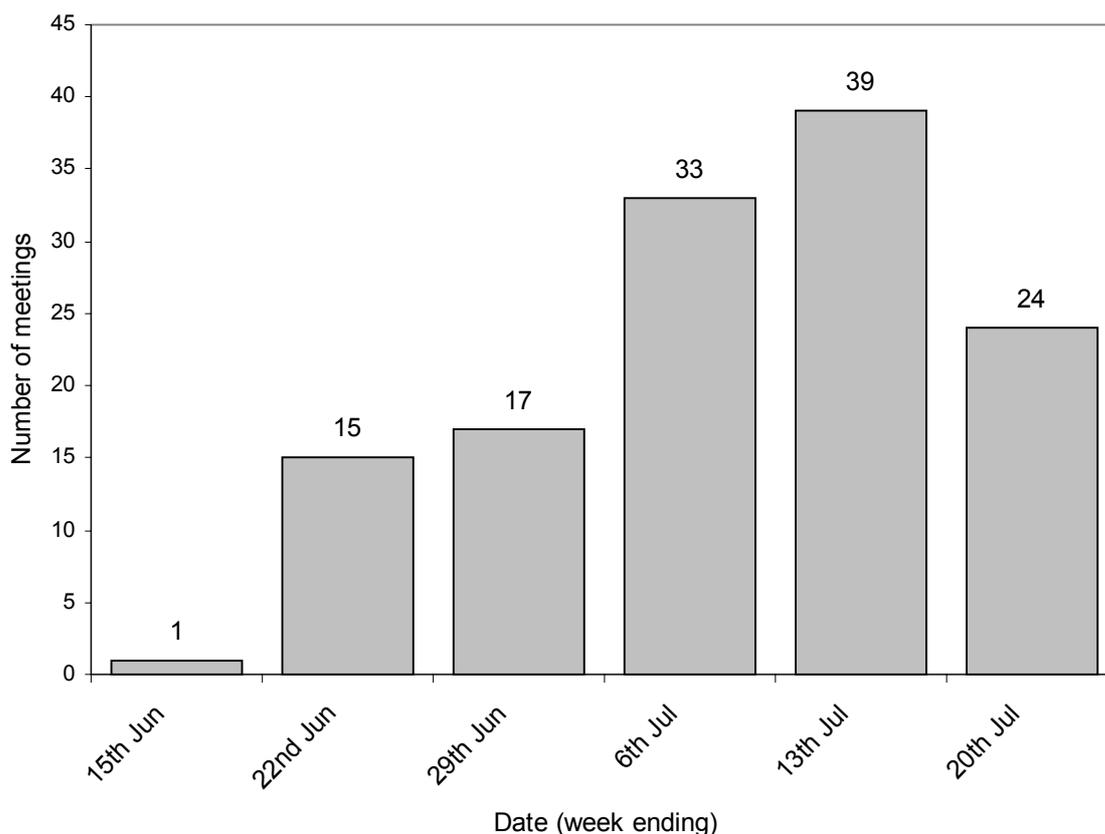
26 *Useful tool or step to armageddon?* The Citizen (Gloucestershire), 12th July 2003.

27 Minutes of the Steering Board meeting, 15th April 2003, paragraph 22. http://www.gmnation.org.uk/docs/minutes_15042003.doc.

28 Letter from Councillor Margaret Sinclair, Spokesperson on Environmental Sustainability, Glasgow City Council, dated 2nd July 2003.

up to 400 or even 500 local meetings were held across the country²⁹. However, the *GM Nation?* web site gave details of only 49 of these, so certainly did not facilitate people's attendance. On its own web site, GeneWatch listed 132 meetings and Figure 1 shows when these took place over the six week public debate period. Grassroots meetings were generally well attended, with attendances ranging from 25-300 people, but usually with more than 50. At the best attended, "300 plus - half the hall was standing room only and out the doors and some gave up [and] left". Without doubt, the majority of the people attending meetings tended to be critical of GM, which led some people to complain that they had an in-built bias. However, the only national organisation to organise grassroots meetings for its members and rural communities was the National Farmers Union.

Figure 1: Grassroots meetings during the 'GM Nation?' public debate



"Packing of meetings was going on, from the anti-side" (scientist speaking at local meetings).

The grassroots meetings tended to be of a conventional format, with speakers from different perspectives followed by debate and discussion. Sometimes, the video was shown before the meeting or at the start. Because all of the meetings had to take place within the six week period (in fact, the majority took place during the last three weeks as people needed time to organise them – see Figure 1), speakers were in short supply at times. At two meetings where GeneWatch supplied a speaker and no opposing speaker had been available, people tried to represent an alternative perspective using the booklet as a guide.

Some meetings (such as the Five Year Freeze meeting in London) where organisers had experience of small group facilitation, did split people up into small groups but this was the exception for most of the grassroots meetings. No advice or support was available from the *GM*

²⁹ *Diversity in food technology*. Editorial in *Nature*, 31st July 2003.

Nation? organisers to help people to run these meetings despite direction from the Steering Board that this should have been available (see Section 3.2.1).

3.2.4 The feedback forms

“Some of the questions on the feedback forms were simplistic. I wonder whether they will be used to promote a positive image” (large membership organisation).

“The questions were all very interesting and relevant but it is difficult capturing complex issues” (farmers’ organisation).

Feedback could be given via the Internet or via reply paid forms. A set of twelve statements were given and people were asked how strongly they agreed or disagreed with them. There was space for any general comments to be made, questions about the debate process, and an open question asking, *“Under what circumstances, if any, would you find it acceptable for GM crops to be grown in this country?”*.

The online and printed versions of the feedback forms were presented in slightly different ways (with the agree/disagree scale reversed), raising concerns about data analysis, but the COI reassured people that this would be addressed. However, the selected questions did prove frustrating for some people and it is clear that the restricted scope of the questions was due to budgetary constraints³⁰.

Gaining access to feedback forms also proved difficult for some people judging by the comments and calls received by GeneWatch. *“I was refused the full number of feedback forms requested and so have been left in the position of being unable to go ahead with a debate at short notice”* was typical of the comments we received. A limited number had been printed and the expense of prepaid postage meant that the COI only wanted to produce as few as possible.

Despite these problems, nearly 37,000 feedback forms were returned and 24,609 people visited the web site, 61% of whom submitted forms³¹.

3.3 The Food Standards Agency - a case apart

“The stupidity of the FSA going off on its own. More to do with their own political posturing than a genuine wish to participate in public debate” (consumer group).

The Food Standards Agency (FSA) decided to conduct a totally separate exercise from the public debate to investigate peoples’ attitudes to GM foods. This involved:

- holding a Citizens’ Jury to address the question: *“Should GM foods be on sale in the UK?”*;
- undertaking research with low-income consumers on their attitudes to GM foods;
- holding several schools debates.

By having their own separate process rather than working with the independent Public Debate Steering Board, the FSA came under criticism from many quarters. This included some members of the Steering Board who were concerned about the confusion created and the independence of

30 Minutes of the Steering Board meeting, 15th April 2003, paragraph 25. http://www.gmnation.org.uk/docs/minutes_15042003.doc.

31 Personal communication, 28th July 2003, from Clare Devereux, Steering Board Member.

the process³². Three leading consumer groups, the National Consumer Council, Consumers' Association and Sustain, also criticised the FSA's public debate information considering it pro-industry and anti-consumer³³. Even the FSA's own Consumers' Committee criticised the Agency's separation from the wider debate process.

GeneWatch acted as a witness at the Citizens' Jury held in Slough in April 2003. The process was broadcast via a live web link, allowing people to hear the witnesses but not the Jury's deliberations. In contrast with best practice in situations where a jury is considering a highly controversial subject, there was no independent steering board and the FSA did not consider that the Public Debate Steering Board was worth consulting in depth about the question posed or the conduct of the Jury. Instead, they left this to the private company, Opinion Leader Research, who were contracted to organise the citizens' jury.

The process became mired in further controversy because the verdict of a majority of the Jury that GM food should be available to buy in the UK was the headline of the FSA press release on the outcomes³⁴. The unanimous opinions that GM crops should not be grown in the UK at present and that comprehensive labelling was needed to ensure consumer confidence had less prominence. The FSA has recently sent the findings of all its research to the Government³⁵.

32 See letter from Professor Malcolm Grant, Chair of the Steering Board to Sir John Krebs, Chairman of the Foods Standards Agency, 5th March 2003. <http://www.gmpublicdebate.org.uk/latest/letters06.asp>.

33 National Consumer Council Press Release, 13th March 2003. *Leading consumer groups unite to condemn the Food Standards Agency (FSA) for shirking a genuine debate on GM.*

34 See GeneWatch UK Press Release, 9th May 2003: *Food Standards Agency hides unanimous findings of Citizens' Jury that GM crops should not be grown in the UK now: GeneWatch challenges the FSA to come clean.* Available on www.genewatch.org.

And: Minutes of the Public Debate Steering Board meeting, 23rd May 2003, paragraph 4. http://www.gmnation.org.uk/docs/minutes_27052003.doc.

35 Food Standards Agency, July 2003. *Consumer views of GM food.* Available at: www.food.gov.uk/news/newsarchive/report_gm_activities.

4. Experiences of the debate

This section includes comments and thoughts which were collected through personal contacts at public debates and other meetings, and as a result of e-mail requests sent to, and phone conversations with, people involved in arranging meetings and stakeholders. It also includes information from the press. It is not claimed as a comprehensive selection but, given the consistency of the views expressed, is likely to give a good representation of experiences of the debate.

What is most striking is the considerable efforts to which many people went to try and make the debate a success. From those organising council and grassroots meetings to stakeholders of all perspectives who advertised meetings and supplied speakers, there was clearly a strong compulsion to become involved despite any dissatisfaction with the process.

4.1 Participants' views

These views come from members of the public who either organised local events or attended them. They were collected when GeneWatch attended meetings or by e-mail contact afterwards. The most commonly voiced feelings were:

- **scepticism that their views would be taken seriously.** Many people felt that the Government had already made up its mind about GM crops. A typical comment was: *"Will the feedback have any impact to the decision as most people seemed fairly cynical about it?"*.
- **that the time for the debate was too short.** This had three effects, all of which tended to fuel cynicism about the intentions of the debate:
 - The information that would come from the FSEs and the Science and Economics Reviews was not available for public discussion.
 - Awareness about the debate among the wider public was limited.
 - It was difficult for people to organise meetings within the official time span of the debate.
- **that more information, resources and support were needed:**
 - The video and information booklet/CD-ROM largely did not meet people's needs. One comment was: *"We played the video but it did not really lay out the case for or against which would have been more helpful as a basis for our local debate"*. The video was also described as *"boring"* or *"confusing"* and, even in relation to the information materials, people were suspicious about underlying intentions: *"I thought the video, booklet and questionnaire were shallow and designed to confuse"*. But the shortcomings of the materials were not inevitably seen as an obstruction to debate: *"Although the booklet, questionnaire and video were provided and used they had little effect on the lively debate"*.
 - The timing of the debate in relation to forthcoming information was also questioned. For example, a common comment from meetings organised by a farmers' organisation was: *"How can we have an informed debate without knowing the results of the Farm-Scale Evaluations?"*.
 - The COI was not considered to be efficient in providing materials or answering requests for materials, particularly at the very beginning of the debate. This comment is typical: *"They seemed not well organised: we could not get them to send enough feedback forms for the expected numbers at our debate and were at least 100 short on the night in spite of numerous calls from different members of our team"*. However, a minority did experience them as helpful: *"[The COI] called me back within half an hour, was very helpful and enthusiastic about my offer to hold a debate in my village"*. It seems most

likely that the COI was inexperienced and too poorly resourced to be able to respond as quickly as people expected and so experiences could be very mixed: *“I found the COI fairly helpful, though from talking to other people across the South West they seemed pretty inconsistent”*.

4.2 Stakeholders' views

GeneWatch has spoken to, or reviewed published comments from, a range of stakeholders³⁶ about the process as it actually took place. None of these included groups or individuals on the Public Debate Steering Board or AEBC. Generally, people welcomed the principle of a broad public debate whatever their perspective on GM crops. They also shared some similar caveats, particularly around the way in which the results would be used. For example, a scientist usually characterised as pro-GM said: *“[It’s a] good idea that should evolve. First time, not wildly successful but I’m not saying it shouldn’t have been done. But I was not clear what the objective was. That should have been made clear.”*

An environmental group commented on: *“An unwillingness of Government to outline how they will use the outcomes in the decision to be taken. There’s a danger whole thing will be ignored or manipulated.”*

A consumer group said that: *“Even to this day it is not entirely clear [what is the link to decision making] despite the so-called clarification. I suppose there is big question over what is the point of doing it.”*

For public interest groups, there were also concerns about the length of time (six weeks) that was available for the public debate itself and the effect this had in terms of excluding people. As one consumer group commented: *“In terms of it being realistic for people at a local level to get involved if not already engaged, it was not possible. There was not enough time for people to get to know about it, get engaged. It’s a joke. A major shortcoming. Even consultations have guidelines of three months. A major, major mistake.”*

As well as the lack of time, the scheduling of the debate was also criticised, particularly as the results of the Science and Economics Reviews and the FSEs would not be available until after it had ended. A farmers' organisation also complained that the debate was being held at a very busy time of year for its members, who therefore found it difficult to attend meetings.

The level of funding for the debate was another issue. The delay caused by the initial limited funds of £250,000 was seen negatively by one consumer group: *“Not enough money – it wasted a lot of time at the start”*. Another conservation group felt suspicious that DEFRA was the source of problems for particular reasons: *“The key constraints were of DEFRA’s making - budget, choice of COI, time scale. We thought it was all coming directly from DEFRA and were suspicious that what they wanted was not a public debate but more of a PR exercise.”*

The actual organisation by the COI was another area that was highlighted. As one environmental group put it, *“Incredibly poorly organised despite best efforts of the Steering Board.”* A large membership organisation referred to their contact with one of the COI staff in the following way: *“He assumed that we would be able to switch and engage members in a way which was not remotely practicable and without any remuneration or help. He didn’t show any practical understanding.”*

36 Ten stakeholder groups were contacted spanning the environment, consumer, science, farming and industry communities. Eight of these were interviewed by telephone or provided written comments.

Whilst some saw the COI as uninspiring - *“COI wasn’t imaginative in approach. They laid out a bog standard option”* (conservation group) - there were occasional positive comments on the approach that was taken in the regional and local authority meetings: *“The way people sat around tables, I felt quite inspired but the people were those already in networks”* (consumer group).

5. Lessons to be learned

*“We are running a national discussion exercise like no other in this country before. GM Nation? is a unique experiment to find out what ordinary people think once they’ve heard all the arguments, and to pass their considered views on to the government who have to make key decisions”*³⁷
(Professor Malcolm Grant).

“My main hope is that government will deliver what it said it will and listen to outcomes that people have taken trouble to engage with and that it forms part of their decision making process and they will not have spent lots of money and put it to one side” (farmers’ organisation).

This review of the grassroots public debate provides lessons both for the way in which the GM debate findings are taken forward and any future public debates which may be held on this or any other subject. Here, we highlight what we believe are the five most important lessons and make recommendations for how they should be addressed.

5.1 Political commitment: clear connection with policy and decision making

It was quite obvious that considerable scepticism existed about the Government’s intentions and that statements made by Ministers did not clarify the role and weight of the findings of the public debate in terms of policy and decision making. Because of a lack of confidence in the process, people considered that organisational inadequacies were evidence of bad faith. At no time did a Minister say that the public’s views would be *important* or give any impression that they would be taken very seriously. The lack of such assurances fuelled suspicion that the process was nothing more than window dressing or a public relations exercise. That the Government will *respond* to the debate findings is not satisfactory.

To address this issue, the Government should:

- make a statement which demonstrates the weight it will place on the findings – unless the whole process is to be a waste of taxpayers’ money, this has to be significant;
- ensure that in any future exercises in public participation, the way in which the findings will inform policy is made clear before the process starts – without this, there is little reason or incentive for people to become engaged.

5.2 Time: enough time, at the right time

There is strong evidence that there was not sufficient time to plan and execute an effective public debate. People were unable to organise meetings within the time frame for a range of practical reasons, including being able to access the ‘toolkit’. The data (Figure 1) show how meetings were squeezed into the last three weeks of the debate period as a result. Those who were able to engage were more likely to be those who were already interested in the issue. Good practice for government consultations allows for a twelve week period for public comment and this applies to situations where the people to be involved are already informed. This should be seen as a bare minimum for an exercise which is attempting to reach out to those not previously engaged and difficult to reach.

³⁷ Professor Malcolm Grant, chairman of the Public Debate Steering Board, quoted in The Scottish Herald: *National debate on GM crops comes to Glasgow*. June 11th 2003.

However, more time alone would not meet the timing problems identified. The period of debate should have come when all the material relevant to the decision making was available. The outputs of the Science and Economics Reviews would have been valuable sources of additional information for the debate and may have avoided the production of shallow and polarised materials. The outcomes of the FSEs are also of great importance in deciding about the future of GM crops in the UK. Without all such important information, it is hardly surprising that people felt they were not as well informed as they would have liked and also suspicious that these reports would be used to marginalise the outputs from the public debate.

To address this issue, the Government should:

- reopen the public debate for a period of at least three months in November when the findings of the FSEs have been published – only this will ensure the widest and best informed public is engaged;
- ensure that future exercises consider more carefully the length of time over which they are conducted and that they are not overshadowed or hampered by other parallel processes.

5.3 Money: sufficient funding, wisely spent

According to the journal, *Nature*, the Netherlands and New Zealand spent four times as much as the UK did to evaluate public opinion about GM crops, even though they have much smaller populations³⁸. Arguments about funding dogged the initial planning of the debate and fuelled the perception that the Government was not serious about finding out what people thought. Because the budget was so limited, this put constraints on the quality of the toolkit, making it questionable whether certain elements - such as the CD-ROM, which merely replicated the booklet - were sensible investments.

To address this issue, the Government should:

- ask the Audit Commission to review the spending on the public debate and determine what were the implications of the constraints in funding;
- ensure that any future public debates are properly funded from the start.

5.4 Expertise and support: using people experienced in public engagement

There were criticisms of the COI from people trying to organise meetings, stakeholders and the Steering Board itself. There were serious questions raised about their capacity and ability to undertake the task, and these failings clearly contributed to the exclusion of many people who simply knew nothing about the debate. It was quite clear that the COI did not have expertise in working with local communities at a grassroots level or in participative techniques. The quality of meetings suffered because there was no assistance or support with facilitation. The public debate web site held details of only 49 grassroots meetings although it is said that there were some 400 such meetings. People did not receive materials sufficiently early and sometimes did not receive them at all. Since it was the Government that appointed the COI, it is they who must take responsibility for the decision.

To address this issue, the Government must:

- review the performance of the COI in the public debate and investigate whether there is any evidence of mismanagement or incompetence – considerable public funding has been expended and it is important to determine whether the COI have acted properly;

- recognise that a public debate is not a public relations exercise but requires special skills and ensure that only properly qualified and experienced organisations are used in any future public participation exercises.

5.5 Information: quality materials, professionally produced

The quality of the information materials is crucial in ensuring that a public engagement process is of the highest standard. From our own direct experience and the comments of others, GeneWatch knows that the attempts to produce the background, core information were seriously flawed, unprofessional and unimaginative. As well as the poor quality of the materials, there is also the question of the restricted scope of the information available given the other reviews taking place and the expected results of the FSEs. Again, this all fuelled suspicions among the participants and stakeholders about the Government's good faith.

To address this issue, the Government should:

- make the findings of the Science and Economics Reviews and the FSE results key resources in a reopened public debate - there must be investment in providing these in imaginative and engaging ways;
- undertake research to establish what are the key principles of good quality information provision in such a public engagement exercise.

6. Conclusions

“For two hours the well informed audience tossed around the big questions surrounding GM crops” (Financial Times, June 4th 2003).

Organising a public debate on GM crops in the UK was never going to be easy. Positions have been polarised and suspicion over everyone’s intentions, especially the Government’s, is intense. However, despite the shortcomings of the public debate that have been identified here, the public meetings and feedback forms are obviously going to be a vitally important source of data on public views that can and should be used to inform policy and decision making.

That so many people bothered to engage in the process - despite the difficulties involved and at a time when people are disinclined to believe it is worth engaging - is an indication of the importance the subject holds in the public mind. It seems that the meetings did not change many people’s minds: *“You went in with your own view and came out with the same view”* was a comment from one person attending a meeting. However, the fact that many of those involved had thought about the issue previously should not be used to discount their views but rather they should be seen as an interested and informed sector of society. The range of opinion and understanding its basis is what the Government needs to know. It will also be possible to cross-reference the findings of the public debate with the reconvened groups as well as those of other social science research and the work of the FSA (which would, of course, have been easier if it had been actually integrated into the public debate itself).

Extending the debate and increasing the depth and scope of public engagement would add to the quality of the input to the Government and would also build confidence in the Government’s intention and go some way to removing suspicions. If the Government seeks to downplay the outcomes of the public debate, this will increase suspicion that it was never intended to be more than a PR exercise and further undermine confidence that the Government and its institutions will act fairly in complex matters of risk.

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