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After years of deadlock and political nightmares, are we finally ready to change the discussion on GMOs?

What care ethics can bring to the conversation

Today, the European Parliament backed four objections against the authorisation for import of new GM plants into the EU (two maize, one oil seed rape and a cotton), bringing the total number of such objections to 31 in just over three years. None of these 31 GMOs opposed by the European Parliament received a political backing from Member states. Nevertheless, the European Commission decided to override this opposition and to authorize 24 of them. These GM plants are mainly imported from North and South America and are used as animal feed.

In this article, we could discuss the characteristics of these four new GMOs and explain, for example, how some are tolerant to glufosinate, a dangerous herbicide, toxic for reproduction, and banned in the EU - but this would only be a repetition of so many articles that we have published over these last 3 years.

Why and how did we end up in this political stand-off? How did we come to such a deep misunderstanding between a majority of EU citizens, who are opposed to this technology in their food and fields, and the agro-chemical industry seemingly usually supported by the EU Commission?



A Green contradiction?

GMO supporters love to describe the opponents to this technology as Luddite, anti-progress and anti-science. Some people are even flabbergasted that the Greens seem to be simultaneously strong defenders of science when it comes to climate change, and apparently opposed to it when it comes to GMOs, or pesticides. This is due to a major confusion between science and technologies... as well, in many cases, to a will from GMO proponents to dismiss any criticism of biotechnologies.

A strong scientific consensus tells us that global warming exists, is linked to identified human activities, and is a threat. It would be folly to ignore the science, as we are beginning to see. But the choice of methods to fight against this threat is political. Do we need a techno-fix, like Bio-Energy with Carbon Capture and Storage (BECCS), which is supposed to mitigate climate change[\[1\]](#)? Do we need to change our sources of energy, opting for less impactful ones? Do we need to reduce energy consumption? And if so, how? By enhancing efficiency or by decreasing activities? All of these choices have different impacts on the environment, on the economy, and on our societies. They also reveal different - and sometimes competing - philosophical views of the world.

GMOs are no different. Even if there was an actual consensus on the risks bore by the use of biotechnologies in the food chain -which is not the case[\[2\]](#) - It is not possible to reduce the discussion on GMOs only to the (necessary) risk assessment, as it does not address the sources of the political standoff[\[3\]](#). Pointing to the erosion of food sovereignty as a result of the massive patenting of seeds by private global interests, or the confiscation of farmers' technical and economic independence by GMOs, in addition to legitimate concerns around gaps and weaknesses in the scientific risk assessment, cannot be labelled as "anti-science".

Diverging ways to take socio-economic concerns into account

Some stakeholders have an obvious interest in maintaining the narrative of the benevolent, science-driven agro-chemical industry trying to feed the world while fighting the Luddites. But why does the Commission continue to repeat this overly simplistic and damaging story? And, more importantly, how do we get out of this situation?


Indeed, while socio-economic considerations are officially taken into account in the GMO regulatory frameworks of many countries, including in EU regulation, the definitions given for these considerations and the weights they are given in the decision process diverge widely[4]. Directive 2015/412 (so called “opt-out directive”) for example, allows Member states to restrict the cultivation of GM crops on their territories based on “non-scientific” concerns. This has led 17 member states and 4 regions to ban the cultivation of maize Mon810 - the only GMO currently authorized for cultivation in the EU.





If socio-economic and ethical considerations are leading a wide majority of EU legislators to ban GMOs, it may be time to bring this debate to the EU level.


Another framework to discuss technologies: the example of Care ethics

A team of researchers may have opened a path with the publication of several studies on the Politics of Care and how it could be used to assess emerging technologies. Care ethics, a theme coming from ecofeminism, allows, according to the authors, to assess technologies “not simply as devices designed to create a certain end experience for a user, but as transformative systems that smuggle in numerous social and political interests”[5].

A politics of care would deal with the following notions: relationality, contextuality, dependence, power, affect, and narrative. Here is our summary and comments of the researchers’ proposal[6][7][8].

<p>Relations</p> 	<p>The assessment takes into account “<i>the relationships between individuals in a community, between different organisms and ecosystems, between society and the environment or between society and technology. Any shift or rupture in relationships brought about by new technologies</i>” needs to be assessed.</p> <p>For example, the shift in the relationship between farmers growing GMOs, and farmers not growing them (contamination and responsibility issues), or between plants and the soil biome.</p>
<p>Context</p>	<p>This is counter-intuitive to many scientists, but context actually matters. “<i>A technology could be good or useful in one context and bad in another one. Assessments may legitimately vary across different social, ecological and political contexts. It also requires taking account of the particular individuals, groups, and places that are likely to be affected by a technology and including different actors in assessment processes</i>”. Impoverished farmers in non-western countries do not have the funds and banking system allowing them to comfortably invest in seeds</p>

	<p>every year, for example (as cultivating GM varieties requires).</p>
<p>Dependence</p> 	<p><i>“Although relations of dependence are not necessarily negative, emphasis on relations of dependence encourages particular consideration to be given to what these dependencies are and how they may change or become amplified through the development and introduction of new technologies”.</i> For example, GMOs are notoriously increasing farmers’ dependence on a limited number of suppliers through patenting (especially if farmers were previously using farm-saved seeds), and to banks for investments.</p>
<p>Power</p> 	<p>The assessment should pay <i>“specific attention to the distribution of power, and particularly any abuses, inequalities or imbalances that may exist. This links to a concern for the most vulnerable actors (human or otherwise) within a particular network of relations”.</i></p> <p>GMOs are tools sold by huge globalised agri-chemical companies. Their target clients are farmers, who often not only have very small enterprises: in some parts of the world, they also constitute an extremely impoverished part of the population. The imbalance of power is evident and creates a legitimate doubt about the intents of the former towards the latter.</p>
<p>Affect</p> 	<p>Opponents to GMOs are often accused to be emotional, but emotion is actually a perfectly legitimate human reaction to new objects introduced in society. <i>“A politics of care recognises that emotion plays a significant role in people’s decision-making, including in science, and that action can be legitimately informed and motivated by affect in addition to reason”.</i> The “Eww” effect linked to some emerging technologies (such as synthetic biology food, for example) should not be dismissed from the debate. Not wanting to eat GMOs is a good enough reason for people not to eat GMOs.</p>

	<p>Narratives “A politics of care also embraces the useful role that narrative can play for communicating different understandings of the world, the connections that exist between people, events, beliefs and decisions, and the lived experiences of particular stakeholders”. “Narrative is recognised as valuable for the way in which it can draw attention to particularity and context, as well as encourage the consideration and assessment of alternatives”. For example, the “We feed the world” narrative, where western scientists would somehow be responsible for the world having access to food, is resented as neo-colonialist and disempowering by many non-western stakeholders.</p>
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Let us take a step back

GMOs, as any other emerging technologies, have impacts on our economy, our societies and our vision of the world. They do not happen in a vacuum: who is making them, whom they are profiting, the context in which they are being used are all important factors and should be part of the discussion. A discussion which should include diverse stakeholders, even those who don't fully understand the technical side of the question.

These 24 new authorisations in 3 years were only possible because they are invisible to the wider public, as GMO-fed animal products are not labelled. Hiding relevant information is certainly not a good way for the legislators to solve a societal conflict, an/or to remedy the growing mistrust in the EU's institutions. This is also the case for new GMOs, that many stakeholders and academics seem to want to deregulate, effectively removing any possibility of choice from farmers and consumers.

As Greens/EFA, we will continue to fight for the EU to take a step back and consider the wider picture on GMOs.

[1] Kevin Anderson and Glen Peters, “The trouble with negative emissions,” *Science*, Vol. 354, Issue 630, 2016 pp. 182-183

[2] Hilbeck et al. 2015. [No scientific consensus on GMO safety](#). Environmental Sciences Europe (2015) 27:4

[3] Pavone, Vincenzo, Joanna Goven, and Riccardo Guarino. 2011. [From risk assessment to in-context trajectory](#)

[evaluation-GMOs and their social implications](#). Environmental Sciences Europe 23 (3): 1–13.

[4] Binimelis, Rosa, and Anne Ingeborg Myhr. 2016. [Inclusion and implementation of socio-economic considerations in GMO regulations: Needs and recommendations](#). Sustainability 8 (1): 62.

[5] Preston, Christopher J., and Fern Wickson. 2016. [Broadening the lens for the governance of emerging technologies: Care ethics and agricultural biotechnology](#). Technology in Society 45: 48–57.

[6] Wickson et al. 2017. [Addressing Socio-Economic and Ethical Considerations in Biotechnology Governance: The Potential of a New Politics of Care](#). Food ethics 1:193–199

[7] Original designs by Imogen Shaw

[8] The part in italic are quoted directly from ⁶. The rest is our own comments.

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