Democracy, participation, and local governance: The Network of GMO-free European Regions and biotechnology regulation

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Introduction

Genetically modified organisms (GMOs) have engendered vociferous debate on their potential benefits and risks. Two parallel discourses, one utopian, the other dystopian, lead to diametrically opposed conclusions on how to address GMOs, with activists arguing for precaution and expressing concern over corporate control of agriculture while supporters call for limited regulation to stimulate research and development of new, beneficial applications of biotechnology. Dissatisfaction with government responses to GMO policy at the international and even national levels has led to a search for ways to escape the impasse. These have included action at the subnational level.

At the same time, the issue falls into a larger debate over democracy and public participation. At the EU level, concerns have arisen over a "democratic deficit," with the case of GMOs cited as an example of a decision-making process marked by a lack of transparency, participation, and representation. Among other recommended remedies to democracy's ills, devolution, decentralization, subsidiarity, and local control are suggested as governance solutions.

In this context, nearly 50 regions in eight countries in the European Union have formed the Network of GMO-free European Regions ("Network"). They are linked by mutual concern over GMO issues, and are seeking means of expressing these concerns not only by using policy tools available to them individually, but also by joining together to encourage democratic decision making and improve public participation in environmental policy and management of socio-economic risks.

Networks and governance

The study of governance has led to a heightened appreciation of the role of networks in various aspects of policymaking. Authors point to new policy networks of state and private actors (Blatter 2004, Ward & Williams 1997), the role of public-private partnerships in decentralized governance (Bovaird 2005), and the importance of transnational NGO and local government networks in a globalized economy (Morgan et al. 2006, Le Galès 2004).

In local action on GMOs, networks clearly matter. Not least, the idea of networks arises regularly in the names of groups involved in GMO policy: the *Network* of European GMO-free Regions, GE*NET*, and *Réseau* Cohérence, among others. Skogstad (2003) discusses the potential of "network governance" and co-decision, with multiple points of access for 'diffuse interests', as a means to reduce democratic deficit and increase legitimacy of the EU on GMO policy. I explore this question further, looking at the case of the Network.

Anti-GM activism[1]

Anti-GMO activity, new food policy movements, and anti/alterglobalization efforts worldwide have pulled together actors from different sectors and with diverse interests. These groups have sought to act on a number of fronts, such as local grassroots activism, subnational government regulation, consumer-driven change, national legislation, information campaigns, and international lobbying.

Scholarship on social movements has addressed two important aspects of social movement strategy that are particularly relevant to this case study: (1) questions of how, when, and where social movements act, and (2) how social movements form networks to act on certain issues. From Schattschneider (1966) on venue-shopping to more recent work on political opportunity structures (Schurman 2004), it has become a given that political and institutional context affects social movement strategies. Kriesi et al. (2007) also point out recent shifts in strategies in Western Europe, including the rise of "audience democracy," in which the public is consulted not just during elections, but in day-to-day political life, with activity targeted to the media.

Also, social movements are coordinating actions on certain issue areas. Keck and Sikkink (1999) note the emergence of transnational advocacy networks, and Hajer (1995) discusses the emergence of "discourse coalitions" forming around particular environmental controversies. The coalition members form loose partnerships around an issue, even if their definitions of the issue itself and their goals for policy change differ. Seifert (2006) in particular has noted the emergence of new types of social movement strategy around issues of GMOs, where NGOs are not only approaching local governments to take action on their behalf, but are actively forming networks with the government actors themselves.

Background and history of subnational actions

In the European Union, actions on GMOs have occurred within individual Member States, but also across state boundaries, in networks of activists and local governments. While the European Union has its own "Committee of the Regions," where regional governments have a direct voice to the EU, subnational governments, particularly at the regional level, have taken their own steps to be heard within Member States and at Brussels. However, regions also want to be able to lobby from outside of the EU government, and subnational governments have formed other lobbying arms and have also opened their own offices in Brussels to track EU activity and lobby the Commission and the Parliament.

Scholars have discussed this trend, in particular, in light of the idea of "multi-level governance" (MLG), suggesting that regional governments can use their new direct contacts with EU government to try to do an end-around on their national governments (Fairbrass and Jordan 2001). Even in countries where national and regional governments often have close working

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[1] Schurman (2004) offers an excellent caveat about the term "anti-GMO," noting that while some are adamantly opposed, "…others are not opposed in principal [sic], but want to see the technology better studied and regulated, and subjected to greater democratic debate" (244, n. 2).

relationships, however, having additional support for national policies in the form of lobbying offices in Brussels can help get policies heard and adopted at the EU level (personal communication 2006, Upper Austria representative, Brussels).

Both of these motivations have been key to regional activity on GMOs. In countries like Austria, with strong partnerships between the national government and the regions to propose GMO policies at the EU level that allow flexibility for countries and individual regions to make their own GMO policy, the regions have joined a range of partnerships and coalitions to lobby the EU. In countries with strong central states, like France, the opportunity to act independently and to join coalitions at the Brussels level has given regions a platform to recommend policy and air concerns.

The Network

The Network formed initially in response to the European Court's overturning Upper Austria's legislation banning GMOs. This dispute led to a recognition of mutual interest among a group of regions in regard to GMOs and agricultural policy. Physical proximity – not of the regions themselves, but of the regions' offices in Brussels – along with communications technologies (in particular, the internet) allowed regions to contact, inform, and work with each other. The Network grew from ten to 49 regions in eight countries in the course of five years. Its influence grew as well, as it has become a recognized player in European biotechnology policy. It has formed alliances and coalitions with consumer, farmer, and environmental NGOs, as well as with organizations representing local governments. Its members have also been able to share information, policy proposals, research, and projects with each other.

Key dates and actions of the Network are presented in the table below. These include seminal moments like the formation of the network, the signing of the "Charter of Florence," Network conferences, and formal interactions with the European Union. 2006 was exemplary of the growing involvement of the Network in several international activities and partnerships, like an agreement between the Network and the International Commission on the Future of Food and Agriculture, a meeting with COPA-COGECA (a network of European farmers and farmer cooperatives), participation at a GENET (network of GMO activists) conference in Berlin, a working meeting with the EU DG Agriculture, and participation in COEXNET, an EU initiative to study coexistence.

Two trends are notable: continual growth of the Network (with one withdrawal), and expansion of Network's areas of interest. The Network added activities, from an initial concern about the restrictions EU membership created for regions' ability to tailor their own agricultural policy to meet local needs and desires, with lobbying at the EU level, to an expanded frame of action that included exploration of alternative sources of GM-free animal feed, support for GM-free agriculture, potential labeling of GM-free regional products, and cooperation with NGOs, like Slow Food, that support quality and traditional agriculture.

Table of key dates in the Network's history

Date	Action	Comments
November 2003	Tuscany contacts Upper Austria about forming Network, organizes 1st meeting of	"Here in Brussels, all the regions are present, and so quickly there was a tom-tom, like that of the

	GMO-free regions in Brussels at the Tuscan delegation's office	American Indians, a smoke signal, and the regions were called and gathered here, in this building…. So that happened first, then this [declaration] was communicated 'urbi ed orbi'. You know the Pope? Ratzinger? Just like when he does the benediction, … it was communicated to everyone. To the Council, here at the building with the beautiful exterior, and to the great gentlemen of the European ministries, to the grand European Commission, urbi ed orbi. This is the position of the European regions. Of one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten… to infinity!" -- Personal communication (translated from Italian by author) Founding regions: Aquitaine (FR), Euskadi/Baskenland (ES), Drama-Kavala-Xanthi (GR), Limousin (FR), Marche (IT), Oberösterreich (AT), Salzburg (AT), Schleswig-Holstein (BRD), Toscana (IT), Wales (UK)
May 2004	2nd conference of Network at Linz, Austria	2 new members
February 2005	3rd conference at Florence, Italy, with signing of Charter of Florence	9 new members
April 2005	Meeting of the Network with EU Agriculture Minister Marian Fischer-Boel	7 new members
July-September 2005	Membership changes	3 new members; Schleswig-Holstein withdraws. 30 members total
October 2005	Study trip to Brazil organized by Bretagne	Members assess feasibility of setting up GM-free soy supply for animal feed
November 2005	4th Conference of the Network, Rennes, France and accession of new regions	Specific goals and policy recommendations for European rules on coexistence, with contributions from several regional agriculture departments from Italy, and, as at the September 2005 meeting with DG AGRI, there was again a decidedly "technical" tone to a number of the conference reports. The Network discussed future directions for a research program on sustainable agriculture and on GMOs. The Rennes conference also opened a discussion of international relationships, laws, and partnerships, with contributions in particular from Brittany, which combined its focus and work on sustainable development with its goal of having a voice in GMO policy. 10 new members: total 40
April 2006	Two day conference on GMOs and coexistence under the Austrian Council´s presidency in Vienna	Formal Network participation
May 2007	5th Conference of the Network, Turin, Italy	Included an explicit call to "elaborate coexistence guidelines and encourage the creation of GMO-free areas at a national, regional or local level."
December 2007	Conference on Non-GM feedstuff, quality Productions and european regional agricultures'	Organized by Network, AREPO, and EU Committee of the Regions, with participation by feed suppliers and animal producers

	Strategy	
April 2008	6th Conference of the Network, Bilbao, Spain	Bilbao introduced what has since become one of the Network's four main themes, "Non-GM labeling." The meeting covered several topics, from coexistence (framed as "Freedom of choice", with two sessions: (1) "Approaches for a consistent and full protection of conventional and organic agriculture, and (2) "Towards a common label for GMO-free food products" (Network Program 2008, 6th Conference).
November 2008	Network participates in Terra Madre Conference and signs joint agreement with Slow Food International	The theme of a link between "the culture of food and the sustainability of agricultural practices" with an anti-GMO position is again made explicit in this agreement
June 2009	7th Conference of the Network	

(Network conference documents available at http://www.gmofree-euregions.net:8080/servlet/ae5Ogm?&cms=null&id_cms_doc=11)

Conclusions

Members cite a broad variety of reasons for acting, both separately and together, on GMO policy. These include, principally, representing their citizens, consumers, and farmers in a way that has not been possible on the EU or, in many cases, national levels. This desire to give a voice to constituents itself breaks down into a range of factors: citizen concerns about human and environmental health risks, consumer "freedom of choice" for purchasing non-GMO products (which itself allows expression of opposition to GMOs on a number of levels, including health, environment, socio-economic, and ethical issues, without judgment as to the "validity" of these concerns or risk perceptions), and farmer concerns about ability to plant traditional, conventional, and organic varieties without fear of GMO contamination (again, for reasons ranging from moral convictions to market concerns).

Regions also mention issues beyond agricultural and GM policy for acting, especially questions of democracy and representation for which GMO policy serves as an example as much as an issue in its own right. Questions of devolution, decentralization, and scale of decision-making come into play, especially in respect to the EU's authority to determine policy directions and guidelines as well as in cases where regions have little power in respect to their national governments. In France, then, for instance, regions have sought to take advantage of the Network in order to lobby their own government as well as the EU, and also to gain support for projects that are of mutual interest to them and other Network members (for example, the search for a supply of non-GMO animal feed). In Great Britain, Wales has expressed policy differences with Whitehall on GMO policy in part through its membership in the Network, which has been a means for it to demonstrate a level of independence and a desire for decentralized decision-making.

The Network has created a means for subnational governments to express their policy goals and to reflect what they see as their constituents' desires and preferences. While a number of regions were already acting individually on GMO issues (especially in Austria and Italy, for example, as well as on a more symbolic level in France), the Network offers a means to pool resources, accomplish joint projects, and gain attention from media, citizens, and higher government levels.

It is an example of the concept of "governance," decision making and representation conducted in new fora, with the participation of private and civil society actors, translated and mediated through the existing institutions of local governments.

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