

## **THE BRITISH-GERMAN ENVIRONMENT FORUM (BGEF)**

**Second conference, London School of Economics, 20-21 March 2000**

### **RISKY BUSINESS: MANAGING RISK AND BUILDING TRUST IN POLICY ON GMOS AND CHEMICALS**

**BGEF is a network which brings together policy makers, business leaders, environmentalists and practitioners in business, government and the voluntary sector to discuss how Britain and Germany can meet the challenges of environmentally sustainable development, and to learn from leading practice in each country. BGEF's first conference, in Wuppertal in 1998, focused on climate change and the challenges it poses to policy makers, business and civil society. Future BGEF annual conferences will alternate between the UK and Germany, bringing people together from all sectors and levels of activity to debate vital issues in environmental policy and propose practical solutions.**

#### **1. Introduction**

BGEF 2000 focused on the issues of public trust and risk management facing decision makers dealing with policy on genetically modified foods and chemicals. The conference, generously supported by the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Anglo German Foundation, and kindly hosted by the LSE, brought together experts from Government, business, research and NGOs from Britain and Germany, and ranged across issues which have emerged as key challenges for policy makers in both countries:

- The crisis of public trust in GM technology following the uproar over GM crop testing
- The problems of assessing and communicating complex risks and benefits from innovation
- The challenge of devising better processes for public engagement in debates concerning technological innovation and risk management

The BGEF 2000 event covered two days of plenary debate and small workshop discussions, dealing first with GM technology issues and then with chemicals policy. The conference was opened by the **Rt. Hon. Michael Meacher MP**, the UK Minister for the Environment.

## **2. Michael Meacher on risk and trust**

In his keynote address Mr Meacher identified three key issues facing our two governments:

- How to share information on risks
- Building and maintaining confidence in advisory and regulatory systems
- Developing a truly precautionary approach to risk management

### **Sharing information**

The UK and Germany were both highly involved in the OECD chemicals hazard assessment programme. The UK attached particular importance to its success, and welcomed Germany's strong support for the pilot phase of the programme. As part of their programmes researching endocrine disrupters, the UK and Germany had collaborated in developing guidelines for assessing impact of the anti-fouling agent tributyltin (TBT) on marine molluscs.

On the GMO side, Germany could be singled out as one of the most active contributors to OECD's series of consensus documents on the state-of-the-art science that could be used by all countries. All EU partners had worked together in negotiating the Biosafety Protocol to the Convention on Biological Diversity in January. This was a major step forward in helping all countries to take informed decisions about imports of GMOs.

### **Building confidence**

Openness and involvement of the public in decision-making was needed to build public confidence and trust. The UK Government had recognised public concerns with GMOs, and was undertaking crop trials to see the effects of GM crops on farm wildlife. These were being done openly, advertising in advance and giving full details of trial locations. A new Human Genetics Commission and Agriculture and Environment Commission would work alongside existing bodies in overseeing biotechnology developments and ensure consideration of broader issues.

The open approach was reflected in the proposed revision to European Directive 90/220 on the release and marketing of GMOs, which would require public consultation at each stage of GM food production. Openness was also key to the UK's Chemicals Strategy, being taken forward through a Stakeholder Forum to advise on chemicals risk management. This would conduct its business in the most open fashion, making its documents, minutes and advice to Government public.

### **Precautionary Approach**

The precautionary approach was essential in properly addressing risks from chemicals and GMOs. There would be no decision on commercialising GM crops in the UK until the outcome of the farm scale trials was known - this exemplified the precautionary principle in practice. The precautionary principle underpinned the OSPAR convention, which aimed to cease discharges of hazardous chemicals to the sea by the year 2020. The UK and Germany were both playing a leading role in the developing OSPAR strategy.

In conclusion, openness in policy making and easier access to information were vital in building public trust. In answer to questions, Mr Meacher elaborated that the new Stakeholder Forum for chemicals and Commissions for biotechnology would force people of contrary views to talk to each other, and narrow down areas of difference – that was the way forward to encourage a less polarised public debate.

### **3. Sessions on GM issues**

Following Mr Meacher's speech, the discussions on GM issues were opened with a plenary address by **Dr Christine von Weizsäcker**. In a provocative and wide-ranging talk, she posed key questions about GM technologies:

- Whose interests are being served by GM innovations?
- Who defines the terms of the debate?
- What kind of future do we really want? Who controls and sets the framework for stakeholder discussions?
- Why do we want more trust? How should it be earned, and are we not better off with a less trusting approach to policy makers?
- Is risk management simply the management of risk *perceptions*?
- How do developing countries gain a proper voice in international risk debates?

She compared the present framing of the debate with the approach of the medieval Church to ruling certain questions and perspectives as admissible or heretical. Science, she argued, could now be in the tragic position of abetting a dogmatic use of its capacities and findings to control debate and rule out certain alternatives to GM developments. Science cannot be a tool for commercial development and a disinterested public service at the same time. The great risk, she argued, is that 'innovation' is being set up as an unchallengeable good, and that this undermines the prospects for richer debates and effective learning about the choices confronting us. The speed of innovation was 'disempowering' for citizens and worked against adequate learning about risks and benefits.

The key issue in her view was the development of effective mechanisms for public participation in which people would engage with the questions as citizens, not simply as consumers.

The presentation stimulated a lively debate, which focused largely on the need for innovations in debates and learning about risks so that arguments about new technology benefits and risks could be better informed. This was necessary for parliamentarians just as much as for the general public, and there was also a need to counter the extreme distortion often to be found in the media's presentation of risk issues – which nonetheless sometimes was necessary to ensure that the issues had a hearing at all.

Workshop discussions on GM issues focused on:

- Assessing risks
- Communicating risks
- Ethical issues beyond risk

The debates within the groups and in the subsequent plenary session raised fundamental issues:

- How do we overcome the 'culture of suspicion' which now exists in risk debates, in which participants' views are invariably identified with the interests of the sectors they are representing?
- How do we establish new processes for deliberation which can genuinely involve the public, and which focus not only on risks but also on benefits, and offer tools with which to weigh them up?
- How can citizens be given incentives to participate?
- Does more participatory democracy undermine representative roles of politicians, or will it enhance the role of parliamentarians and ministers in weighing up conflicting perspectives and broking new settlements between them?
- How can ethical issues be integrated, given that policy makers find it hard to handle anything other than the technical information and expert guidance on it?
- How can we safeguard the public's right to say No in the face of innovations which could produce irreversible effects on the environment once used?
- How can we establish more independent sources of disinterested and widely trusted authority and judgement, and what might they be? Candidates included scientific institutions and parliamentarians acting as brokers for stakeholder dialogues.

The debates revealed considerable tension between the views of business and those of NGOs on the risks and benefits of GM innovations, and a clear consensus that there is urgent need for radical measures to improve the quality and quantity of wide public discussion and deliberative processes on risks and benefits. The delegates agreed on the urgency of measures to experiment with new forms of stakeholder forum and ways of providing space and time for debate on a *richer range of alternatives* than current methods of risk assessment and communication can handle.

These themes were taken up and expanded in an entertaining and challenging after-dinner speech from the sustainable development campaigner **Sara Parkin** of the UK NGO Forum for the Future, who set out an agenda for updating and revitalising the role of the Green movement in bringing issues of risk and alternative innovations for quality of life and sustainability into mainstream politics and public debate.

#### 4. Chemicals issues

The keynote speech on the second day of BGEF 2000 was given by the doyen of British public opinion researchers, **Bob Worcester**, who presented findings from his organisation MORI on public attitudes towards the chemicals sector. His findings included:

- 78% of people polled in 1999 expressed confidence in the views on environmental issues of scientists from environmental NGOs, but only 48% and 47% expressed confidence in scientists from industry and Government respectively.
- There is a strong tendency among the public to judge the merits of R&D on the basis of its end purposes, not its impact on the economy or scientific knowledge; much of the public is unclear about what scientists are trying to achieve, and there is strong support for more openness from Government as to the aims of scientific research and development.
- There has been a strong trend through the last decade towards the view that when environmental issues are at stake even scientists do not really know what they are talking about.
- There is strong public support for better regulation of scientific research and innovation, but immense ignorance of how science is actually regulated.

Bob's proposals for policy in the light of his research over the 1990s included:

- Improved scientific education at school and beyond;
- Ensuring that truly independent scientific institutions are supported;
- Ensuring that scientific establishments are as transparently accountable as other public bodies are now being urged to become;
- Promoting more effective communications and public debate on the part of the chemicals sector, which has been poor at publicising the efforts it has made to improve its environmental performance.

Debate in the plenary and the three workshops on chemicals issues, which covered many of the same topics as those on GM technology, focused on the need for much more open disclosure of possible risks as well as promotion of the benefits of innovations, and on the forms of deliberative 'stakeholder' forum that could generate more consensus and less

polarised and misleading debates on risk. A credible agency was needed to oversee open assessment of chemical risks; there was a need for far better public understanding of science as a process full of uncertainties and blind alleys, rather than simply as a means of delivering 'discoveries'; and we need forums capable of debating the levels of risk exposure in *particular circumstances*, rather than simply setting out lists of risks and benefits.

Key issues for future assessment and public debate were identified, including:

- The unintended effects of existing and new chemicals;
- Indoor air quality and pollutants;
- Inappropriate forms of recycling which generate new chemical risks;
- The effects of cadmium in fertilisers;
- The risks from organophosphates and organosilicone compounds.

The consensus across the sectors represented was clear-cut, as with GM technology issues:

- There is an urgent need for new mechanisms for wide public deliberative debate on risks and benefits from innovations, initiated early by the instigators of innovation in partnership with independent sources of expertise and information;
- These must be underpinned by efforts to improve public understanding of science and risk issues;
- Companies need to learn rapidly from the experience of losing trust and need to improve their systems for communicating internally and externally about innovations, risks and benefits. And they need to ensure that participation in stakeholder dialogues is a strategic issue calling for engagement from the most senior people.

The co-chairman of BGEF **Tom Burke**, formerly advisor to the UK Secretary of State for the Environment, closed the conference with a summing up that called for a 'richer approach to public choice' than was offered by conventional economic policy and risk assessment procedures. We have, he argued, an 'impoverished theory of choice', focusing on too narrow a range of motivations and levers in considering the policy approaches to the dilemmas raised by the BGEF conference. Business and Governments need to learn to initiate much more wide-ranging debates about innovation and alternative options.

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**We welcome ideas from BGEF participants for future BGEF events -  
both in terms of subject and format.**

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