CHAPTER 10

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BETWEEN POLICY AND POLITICS

Or: Whatever Do Weapons of Mass Destruction Have to Do With GM Crops? The UK's GM Nation Public Debate as an Example of Participatory Governance

INTRODUCTION

The recent transformation in democracy, characterised by the emergence of new transnational systems of political and economic governance, according to Robert Dahl poses a fundamental 'democratic dilemma' between increased system effectiveness and citizen participation (Dahl 1994). On the one hand, the capacity for effective decision-making at large scale can be significantly increased through transnational governance systems, such as the European Union, the World Trade Organisation and the United Nations. On the other, this comes at the cost of direct influence of citizens on the processes of decision-making.

However, large-scale systems of governance transcending the control of the nation state and its citizens are arguably only one dimension of the third[1] historical transformation in democracy and its accompanying 'democratic deficit.' Another dimension is the widely perceived increasing complexity of issues having to be dealt with in governance processes involving a multitude of policy-makers, experts and stakeholders, and the related context of uncertainty within which decisions have to be made in the public interest (see, for example, Fisher 1999; Taylor 2004). Recent examples of the latter dimension include the issue of global climate change and technological innovations in agriculture, such as GM foods, and biomedicine, such as human cloning.

Thus, the democratic and social *problematique* of contemporary multi-level governance is concurrently characterised by the vertical dimension of (spatial) scale – involving different, often overlapping levels of decision-making, from the local, national, regional to the global – and the horizontal dimension of (thematic) complexity – involving contested expert knowledge, different socio-cultural practices and competing normative preferences. Furthermore, multi-level governance is increasingly characterised by new relationships between public and private actors, such as public-private partnerships (PPP), that challenge traditional forms of political responsibility and public accountability in the provision of public services.

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The frequent references to the remoteness of contemporary decision-making, therefore, do not only relate to the physical distance between citizens and the political institutions representing them, but also to the communicative distance between the various expert discourses dominating technocratic policy- and decision-making and 'lay' discourses within the wider public sphere.

In response to this apparent democratic deficit and the related lack of legitimacy, there has been a growing body of scholarly literature to consider how contemporary public policy- and decision-making could be reconnected with citizens and the wider public through various forms of 'participatory governance' (see, for example, Kooiman 1993, Pierre and Peters 2000, and Grote and Gbikpi 2002). Dahl (1994) proposes the strengthening of democratic institutions and practices at national and subnational levels, so as to improve democratic control over, and the delegation to, transnational decision-making. Others postulate the direct and regular involvement of social actors representing different types of expertise and special interests, as well as actors representing the general public interest, to increase the opportunities for mutual accommodation of interests, as well as to generate trust and accountability among those who participate (Schmitter 2002). Such 'heterarchical' networking among state and non-state actors, it is proposed, could help to come to grips with the complexity, diversity and dynamics of recent socio-technological developments and related structural changes (Kooiman 1993).

This scholarly debate has been matched by programmatic commitments by policy-makers to work towards greater accountability and public involvement, as illustrated for example by the European Commission's 2001 White Paper on European Governance (European Communities 2001). At practical level, new modes of participatory governance have been explored in relation to various public policy issues, such as urban planning, environmental sustainability and health care.

One area where for some time now there has been considerable experimentation with new forms of public and stakeholder participation in policy-making is in science and technology (see, for example, Joss and Bellucci 2002; Banthien et al. 2003). The reason for this lies in the often problematic relationship that has existed between politicians, experts and members of the public in relation to significant public controversies on science, technology and the environment, such as nuclear energy, information technologies, genetic modification and human reproductive medicine. New methods of 'participatory' and 'interactive' technology assessment (TA) and 'public engagement' – including so-called 'scenario workshops,' 'consensus conferences' and 'citizens panels' – have been implemented in various institutional and national settings, so as to render policy procedures socially more robust and politically more legitimate through more sophisticated socio-technological assessment and greater openness.

However, mirroring the contested nature of the issues considered within such participatory TA – which have ranged from transgenic animals, urban sustainability, information technology, radioactive waste management to gene therapy – the procedures themselves have often been subject to critical debate about their relative merit as tools for policy analysis and decision-making. Their role is often seen as ambiguous, owing to their dualistic function as assessment tools – a *quasi* 'extended expert peer review' process (Fixdahl 1997) – and as public policy-making fora – a *quasi*

'court of public opinion' within institutional settings. Criticism is variably raised on empirical-analytical ground, for example questioning the representativeness of participants, the framing of issues and the validity of outcomes; as well as on normative-conceptual ground, for example challenging their underlying political aims and strategies as well as democratic rationale.

This article analyses one such recent initiative of participatory TA, the *GM Nation?* public debate that took place throughout summer 2003 on the initiative of the Agriculture and Environment Biotechnology Commission (AEBC), an advisory body, whose remit is to advise the UK government on GM crops and food policy. The *GM Nation?* initiative lends itself for analysis, as it represents an interesting methodological extension of participatory TA in that it combined 'top-down' elements of public participation within a formal setting of policy-making with wider 'bottom-up,' informal processes of citizen involvement and public debate. Furthermore, as it was set in the wider context of the ongoing public controversy on GMOs that had erupted in Britain in the late 1990s, it allows for the analysis of the interrelationship of structured participatory procedures and wider socio-political processes. Thus, the *GM Nation?* is an ideal case study to critically assess, and reflect on, the practical manifestation of 'participatory governance' as a response to the perceived 'democratic dilemma.' The analysis is based on a combination of semi-structured interviews, participant observation and documentary analysis.[2]

THE *UK GM NATION?* INITIATIVE

Background: The 'Great GM Debate'

The *GM Nation?* initiative was ultimately the result of the 'great GM debate' that had swept across Britain in the late 1990s. Following a relatively quiet period in the early to mid 1990s, in which the controversy about GMOs and GM food had by and large been confined to the scientific and regulatory spheres with only occasional media coverage and limited public debates, from 1998 onwards the controversy magnified, spilling into the wider public sphere and rapidly becoming a major issue of political and public debate (see, for example, Gaskell et al. 2001; Weldon and Wynne 2001). There were a series of 'trigger events' that fuelled the controversy, against the backdrop of similar controversies having emerged in other European countries, and an already sensitive British public haunted by the BSE (bovine spongiform encephalopathy - 'mad cow disease') epidemic in the 1990s that had shaken British agriculture to its core and seriously undermined public trust in government policy and regulation.

Two such trigger events in the early phase were: firstly, the announcement in spring 1998 by *Iceland*, a major retailer, to ban GM ingredients from its own products (publicly referring to GM products as 'Frankenstein foods'), and to challenge US distributors to separate GM soybean from non-GM soybean; and secondly, the disclosure in summer 1998 in the *Observer* Sunday newspaper of controversial research findings by Dr. Arpad Pusztai at the leading public Rowett Research Institute in Scotland, which apparently indicated that GM potatoes fed to rats had shown adverse side-effects on the rats' intestines and immune system.

There was widespread media coverage of these stories. The Rowett Institute's decision to terminate Dr Pusztai's contract and confiscate his research was portrayed by the media as an attempt to gag a reputable scientist and to prevent public scrutiny of the issue involved. The publication of statements both against and in favour of Dr Pusztai's research by different groups of scientists further fuelled the controversy. The GM debate entered the UK parliament in early 1999, where the leader of the opposition challenged the Prime Minister to introduce a moratorium on the commercialisation of GMOs. The Prime Minister retorted by complaining about the 'hysteria of public reaction,' the 'extraordinary campaign of distortion' by parts of the media, and 'the tyranny of pressure groups' (Moore 2001).

The controversy further intensified, with two tabloid newspapers (the *Daily Mail* and the *Express*) launching anti-GM campaigns. In summer, the Prince of Wales, a longstanding campaigner for organic agriculture, entered the fray with his opposition to GM food, publishing ten questions addressed to government and the wider public about the safety and usefulness of GMOs in the *Daily Mail* and setting up an Internet discussion group, which reportedly received tens of thousands of messages. By autumn 1999, various retailers withdrew GM products from their shelves. With the controversy showing little sign of abating, the government policy was diametrically pitched against public demands for a moratorium on GM crops by a broad coalition of media (from both left and right) and a growing network of civil society organisations, the latter forming the so-called Five-Year-Freeze' (FYF) network, which included diverse groups, such as the traditionally conservative, middle-class Women's Institute and Townswomen's Guild, and various environmental organisations as well as retailers. More radical direct action groups, such as Genetix Snowball went further by demanding an outright ban on GM crops. Successive opinion surveys showed significant public opposition to GMOs.

Finally, in early 2000, the government signalled a U-turn in its policy on GM crops (some commentators calling it the biggest U-turn since the Blair government had come to power in 1997). The Prime Minister for the first time publicly conceded, in the *Independent on Sunday* (27 February 2000), that there was 'cause for legitimate public concern' which the government understood well, and stated that 'consumers and environmental groups [had] an important role to play' in finding answers to the questions raised about GMOs. He explained that the government had 'radically overhauled the regulatory and advisory processes so that consumers have a real say on GM foods' and that confidence in the regulatory system would be restored by making it 'open, transparent and inclusive.'

Regulatory Streamlining and Opening-Up

In spring 1999, the UK Parliament through its House of Commons Select Committee on Environmental Audit recommended a new 'strategic' policy approach to GMOs, following a consultation that had shown the biotechnology regulatory framework to be too fragmented, lacking transparency, having too narrow a remit and not sufficiently representing civil society interests (ENDS 1999). This recommendation was followed through by the government with the announcement in summer 1999 to set up two new strategic commissions to advise on policy alongside the new independent

Food Standards Agency (FSA) – namely, the Human Genetics Commission (HGC) and the Agriculture and Environment Biotechnology Commission (AEBC). In addition, the government decided to set up a comprehensive system of field trials, so-called 'farm-scale evaluations' (FSEs), to compare herbicide-tolerant GM crops (corn, sugar beet and oilseed rape) with equivalent non-GM crops in terms of the effects of weed management on selected insect species (such as butterflies), the results of which were to be published in autumn 2003.

However, it should be noted that these three new commissions did not fully replace the various other already existing advisory bodies with more narrow remits and statutory powers, such as ACRE, the Advisory Committee on Releases into the Environment (Hails and Kinerlerer 2003). Rather, they were given an overarching position to provide strategic advice on all aspects of biotechnology relating to agriculture, the environment and human health. While the FSA is a statutory body with executive decision-making powers, both the AEBC and HGC are non-statutory bodies with non-binding advisory functions, a fact that was criticised in a report by the House of Commons Select Committee on Science and Technology (House of Commons, 12 March 2001).

The membership of AEBC – which became operative in summer 2000 with a budget of around GBP 100K – was opened to GM-critical civil society actors and experts[3]. AEBC's remit included: the consideration of wider social and ethical aspects of gene technology; the regular involvement and consultation of stakeholders and the public; and operation in accordance with criteria of openness, transparency, accessibility and exchange of information (URL: http://www.aebc.gov.uk). As a result, minutes of most meetings together with working documents and reports are published on the commissions' websites, meetings themselves are advertised and held in public in different parts of the country; and AEBC members are available for information to the public.

Public Involvement in GM Policy

Within just over a year of taking up its work, the AEBC recommended in its report *Crops on Trial* (AEBC 2001) public involvement in the decision-making process on the commercialisation of GM crops, stating that the government had approved the FSE field trials without providing the public with adequate information. In order to assess the (public) uncertainty surrounding GM crops and render the policy-making process more accountable, the report called for

> … the facilitation of a broader public debate … to foster informed public discussion. ... Whatever decisions are ultimately reached, they will be more palatable if they have not been taken behind closed doors. At present, there are no avenues for a genuine, open, influential debate with inclusive procedures, which does not marginalise the reasonable scepticism and wide body of intelligent opinion outside specialist circles. We need to harness new deliberative mechanisms … in the form of a series of workshops, public debates and consensus conferences around the country (AEBC 2001).

In response, the government confirmed its commitment "to take public opinion into account as far as possible through an open decision-making process" (DEFRA 2002a), and asked the AEBC to elaborate a concrete proposal. The AEBC thus sub-

mitted a proposal for public involvement in GM policy to government in April 2002, following consultation with various stakeholders and specialists in public participation. The proposal recommended that the government should clearly set out the national and international legal context in which it would make decisions on GM crops and how it would take account of public views in making these decisions (AEBC 2002). Furthermore, it recommended that the involved public should be able to frame the specific issues (rather than the government), that enough time should be allowed to carry out the participatory initiative, and that the results of the FSE field trials should be fed into the public debate process.

The government's positive response stated that "the Government wants a genuinely open and balanced discussion on GM. There is clearly a wide range of views on this issue and we want to ensure all voices are heard" (DEFRA 2002b). The House of Commons Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, in scrutinising the AEBC's proposal and the government's response, emphasised the importance of maintaining the initiative's independence from governmental influence, and therefore endorsed the AEBC's proposal for an independent Steering Board to oversee the impartial implementation of the initiative.

In summer 2002, the government gave the official go-ahead for the *GM Nation?* initiative, for which the Prime Minister approved a budget of GBP 250K (falling well short of the requested GBP 1 million), setting the following conditions (DEFRA 2002b): in addition to the *GM Nation?* public debate, a parallel economic study (to consider the costs and benefits of GM crops) and a scientific review (to review scientific issues) were to be carried out, the former by the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit, the latter by a committee chaired by the Government's Chief Scientific Adviser and including the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and the Food Standards Agency (FSA). Furthermore, the *GM Nation?* initiative had to be completed before the scheduled completion of the FSE field trials in autumn 2003. Finally, the government made it clear that the governmental Central Office for Information (COI) should be in charge of implementing the initiative, which raised concerns in some quarters due to COI's close relationship with government and its relative inexperience with participatory procedures of this kind.

The government appointed Professor Malcolm Grant, the AEBC's chair, as chairperson of the Steering Board, which included six AEBC members (Bradley, Carmichael, Dale, Grove-White, Hann, Maxwell –see endnote 3) as well as three non-AEBC members – namely: Clare Devereux, director of Five Year Freeze (FYF – see above); Gary Kass, Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST); and Stephen Smith, chair of the UK Biotechnology Council (an industry association).

In autumn 2003, the Steering Board convened a meeting of social scientists with expertise in science and society issues and experience of participatory governance to discuss the initiative. The invited group of social scientists subsequently criticised the narrow time schedule of the *GM Nation?* public debate, the lack of coordination between the three assessment strands, as well as the inadequate budget (Burgess et al. 2002). On behalf of the Steering Board, Professor Grant went public (both on radio and in the print media) with his criticism of the inadequate timeframe and financial resources (BBC 5 February 2003; Daily Mail 17 February 2003). This prompted the government to increase the budget by a further GBP 250K and to extend the time

schedule until July 2003 (which was still before the publication of the FSE field trial results).

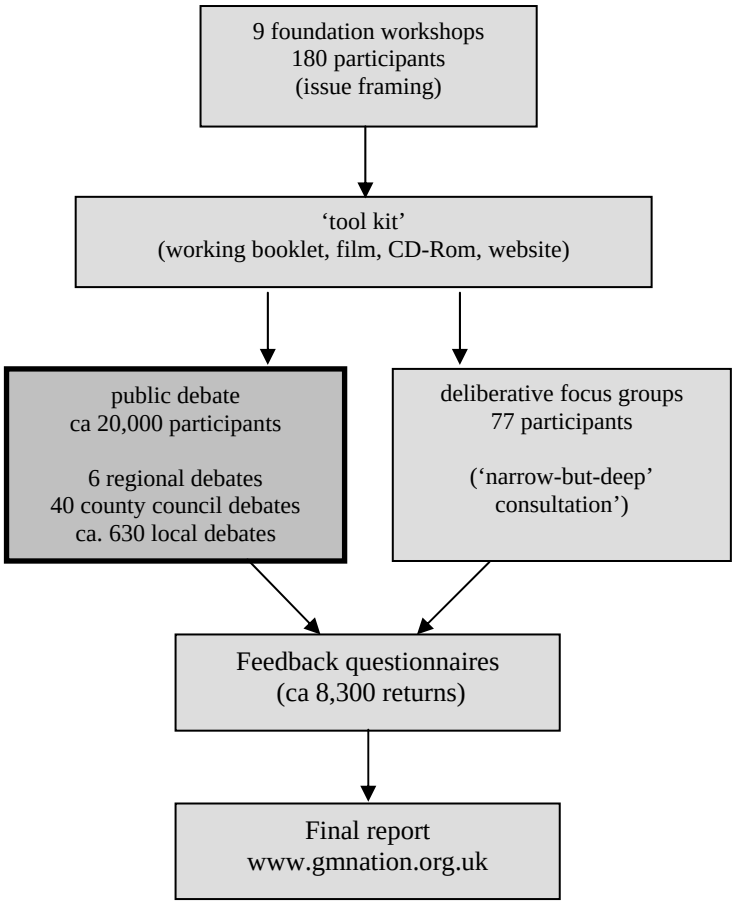

Figure 1: Methodological elements of the GM Nation? *initiative*

The *GM Nation?* initiative comprised several related methodological elements, as Figure 1 illustrates. The first methodological element was a series of nine so-called 'foundation discussion workshops,' each comprising 20 people, held in autumn 2002. For eight of these workshops, the aim was to allow members of the general public with no special or vested interest in GM crop technology to scope and frame the issues for the subsequent public debate. The participants were chosen from a random sample of members of the public, representing different age and socio-economic groups. The workshops, which took place locally across the UK, each lasted around three hours and resulted in the participants identifying the following six broad areas

of interest: food, choice, (lack of) information, (lack of) trust, regulation, and commercialisation of GM crops, and the ethics of genetic modification. The ninth workshop was different in that it consisted of pro- and anti-GM campaigners. Together, these workshops resulted in the formulation of 13 questions, which formed the basis of the standard questionnaire used subsequently for participant feedback.[4]

The second element was a 'tool kit' outlining the issues at stake, based on the findings of the foundation discussion workshops. This consisted of various 'stimulus materials,' including: a 40-page working booklet (20,000 copies) to be used in the public deliberation; a CD-Rom (6,000); a film (1,100) distributed on video to broadcasters and shown in the public debate; and the *GM Nation?* website (URL: http://gmnation.org.uk). However, these materials only became available to the public shortly before, or during, the public deliberation phase, thus hampering timely public access and information provision. Even basic information, such as the dates and venues of the various debates, were hard to obtain from the organisers. Thus, the media (including newspapers, radio, television, as well as websites of various interest organisations) ended up being the main disseminator of information.

The main focus of the *GM Nation?* initiative was a series of public deliberation events taking place between 3 June and 18 July 2003. The Steering Board had initially allocated more time for this phase, but later had to limit it to a period of six weeks due to a combination of internal and external delays (decision to run foundation discussion workshops, request for additional funding, elections for the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly). The shortage of time for the various public deliberation events was criticised by many participants, especially by those wishing to organise bottom-up events, as well as in view of the fact that the FSE field trial results were only going to be published later in autumn 2003.

The public debate comprised three tiers of deliberation: 'tier 1' consisted of six pre-structured, facilitated public meetings of 3-hours that took place at regional level in England (Birmingham, Taunton, Harrogate), Northern Ireland (Belfast), Scotland (Glasgow) and Wales (Swansea). Following the viewing of the commissioned film, participants in each meeting broke up into small-group sessions (comprising around 8-12 people), lasting around one hour, to discuss the issues and questions raised in the working booklet. In the second part of the meetings, each small group was asked to report their views and conclusions back to the plenum for further, facilitated discussion. Altogether, there were over 1,000 participants in these tier 1 meetings. Independent observers were invited to follow the proceedings and provide written feedback on the methodology, organisation and proceedings to the Steering Board.

'Tier 2' consisted of debates hosted by county councils (district authorities) in collaboration with the Steering Board. There were an estimated 40 meetings at this level. It was at times difficult to obtain timely information about where and when public meetings at this level were going to be hosted. (In several instances, the author received information from NGOs, because COI had no information to share.)

By far the largest number of events took place at 'tier 3' level, which comprised 'bottom-up,' locally organised meetings. According to COI's conservative estimate, some 630 events took place at this level (there may well have been more, as COI only counted those meetings where the local organisers had requested 30 or more feedback questionnaires and/or working booklets). These events were hosted by an

array of local councils, research organisations, churches, environmental groups, galleries, villagers, and many *ad hoc* groups.

All participants in tier 1-3 events were asked to complete the official questionnaire (see endnote 4) after the meetings, to provide feedback of participants' assessment and views. COI received over 8,300 questionnaires from these meetings. However, only just over 1 in 3 participants in tier 1 events returned their questionnaire. This, together with the fact that most 630 local events can be assumed to have involved at least 30 participants, leads to a conservative estimate of around 20,000 participants in total. Others have estimated the number of participants nearer 35,000. The *GM Nation?* website registered over 14,000 questionnaire returns online, although these may include repeat completions. Finally, COI also received over 1,200 letters and emails from participants.

The feedback questionnaires were analysed by COI for inclusion in the Steering Board's final report (2003). They showed that only two percent of respondents found GM crops acceptable in any circumstances, whereas the vast majority of people cautioned against any hasty commercialisation of GM crops before sufficient risk and ethical analysis was carried out, and demanded proper safeguards.

In order to further verify the results of the various public debates – it was assumed that participants in the public debate were mostly people with particular interests in GM crops, rather than representing 'average' members of the public – the Steering Board commissioned a parallel 'narrow-but-deep' consultation, in the form of a series of deliberative focus groups involving 77 members of the public. These were carried out by the same private consultants that had organised the foundation discussion workshops. The focus groups consisted of two meetings: the first served to introduce the issues at stake and discuss the working booklet; the second, held two weeks afterwards, served to discuss participants views and concerns. The feedback questionnaires were completed at the beginning and the end of this process, so as to provide a before and after snapshot of participants' views. The results showed that, with more information available, the participants had become more sceptical and expressed greater concern about the various risks assessed. On balance, they shifted towards an anti-GM view, favouring a more cautious approach. Overall all, however, they were less pronounced in their opposition to GM crops than the participants in the public debates, and saw some benefits of GM crops (cheaper food, medical benefits, advantage for developing countries).

The final methodological element was the Steering Board's detailed final report, including a description of the methodology, summaries of the various events, and an analysis of the findings (Steering Board 2003). It was published in autumn 2003 and submitted to the government for consideration. The government published its written response in March 2004, signalling that within the government's overall strategy (announced in February 2004) for recommending the commercialisation of GM crops on a regulated, case-by-case basis, it would push for proper labelling of GM products, introduce measures to prevent cross-contamination of non-GM crops ('coexistence'), consider setting up GM-free agricultural zones, and providing information openly and transparently (DEFRA, 9 March 2004).

BETWEEN POLICY AND POLITICS

When considering participatory governance as a means of addressing the perceived remoteness and legitimacy deficit of formal policy-making institutions and processes, several dimensions are relevant for analysis, including: the substantive dimension, concerning the effect of a given participatory governance procedure on policy contents and outcomes; the instrumental dimension, regarding the nature of utilisation of the participatory procedure; and the normative dimension, concerning the meaning and values attached to the procedure. Importantly, these dimensions should not just be considered in respect of the main, dominant actor behind the participatory procedure, but also in respect of various other political and social actors that relate to the procedure in some way (e.g., as participants, observers, opponents). The particular characteristics of these dimensions and their interrelationship within a given participatory governance procedure make up its political and social relevance in terms of policy-making, public discourse and social experience.

Such an analysis leads to a number of critical observations in the case of the *GM Nation?* initiative. While this initiative arguably represents a bold and groundbreaking innovation in GM policy-making in Britain, it at the same time points to several weaknesses as a practical manifestation and model of participatory governance.

These weaknesses became apparent, and indeed a point of ongoing discussion, in the course of the various public events (Tier 1-3), as well as the related wider media and public debate. The deliberation at the regional event in Glasgow (Tier 1), as well as at of the local (Tier 3) events in Forest Row, a rural village in East Sussex, on 27 June 2003, were a case in point: there was repeated criticism of the timing, organisation and funding of the initiative. Why had only so little time been allocated for the public debate, several participants asked, given the importance of the issue? The six weeks available made it difficult for members of the public and interest groups to get their own local events up and running in time, especially as the provision of information in the planning phase proved inadequate. For example, getting through to the COI often proved difficult in the absence of comprehensive and timely information on the dedicated website. Another criticism was that little assistance was provided for organisers of Tier 3 events. In particular, there was no financial support available, not even for basic expenses, such as reimbursing the travel costs of invited expert speakers. In other words, people wishing to get involved in the debate, either as participants or organisers of their own events, often found this practically difficult. The high number of Tier 3 events, therefore, can be seen as a particular achievement by their organisers and is an indication of the social mobilisation potential at the time concerning GM crops among significant sections of the public across Britain.

Concerning the contents of deliberation, there was criticism of the framing of the Tier 1 and 2 events, which were based on the video shown at the beginning of the deliberation, worksheets summarising possible risks and benefits of GM crops, and the working booklet. Participants criticised the contents of the latter for presenting some arguments (as opposite ‘pros’ and ‘cons’) in what was thought to be rather simplistic ways. Also, they queried the compilation process. The booklet did not attribute sources, and did not explain that the contents were based on the foundation

discussion workshops involving members of the public. Furthermore, as they were not available until the start of the debates, participants were not able to study them in depth. Thus, they did not fully serve as basis for the deliberation, as intended. There was further criticism of the fact that the results from the FSE (published in October 2003) as well as the economic and scientific assessments (published mid July 2003) were not availabe for consideration in the public debate.

What also became apparent during the discussions was that participants wanted to discuss the wider politics of GM crops in addition to the various more specific policy issues (such as risk assessment, regulation, labelling).[5] For example, why was there such an apparent rush to go ahead with the commercialisation of GM crops, given the many uncertainties involved, a participant at the Forest Row event asked? Others wondered what was driving the political process behind GM technology. Was it already a forgone conclusion? Was the UK government being pushed into promoting GM technology by the USA? Was Europe's precautionary approach with its *de facto* moratorium on commercialisation threatened by the overmighty, unaccountable World Trade Organisation and multinational companies?

Another revealing example was the comparison made at the Forest Row event between GM crops and the issue of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in connection with the war in Iraq, which was a highly sensitive issue in the public domain at the time. Participants complained that, like WMD, it was difficult to know whether the government made all information publicly available, and whether scientific information had been manipulated to suit political decisions. They also wondered aloud whether government was paying proper attention to public opinion. The chair of the debate at first tried to steer the debate back to the issue of GM crops, insisting that the discussion was not about the war in Iraq and WMD. However, in the course of debate, participants returned to the comparison made. For example, one farmer said, to loud applause:

> My main concern tonight is that – this point of Iraq, actually – that whatever we are discussing, it's going to be of no consequence as far as the decision that's going to be made about growing GM crops [is concerned]. And that to me creates great anger, just like it did over Iraq, that the population can have one view and regardless of that the government goes ahead and does something else. And I see this as exactly the same as GM as well (Forest Row GM debate, 27 June 2003).

The group of local citizens hosting the Forest Row debate subsequently organised two 'bare witness'[6] events, during which participants stripped naked in a field of GM crops in East Sussex, and later in Parliament Square in London, to draw (media) attention to the issue of GM crops. Both events were reported in news bulletins on radio and television, and pictures printed in newspapers.

The point about how the results of the *GM Nation?* debate were going to be used was also forcefully made toward the end of the Glasgow event, when a participant, again to loud applause, said that while the deliberation had been useful, it remained doubtful whether the government was going to take the findings seriously.

This points to an ambiguity of the *GM Nation?* initiative, as perceived by many participants and observers, in terms of how the initiative fit into the formal policy-making on GM crops, as well as what the government's real intention behind, and attitude toward, the *GM Nation?* initiative was. This can partly be explained by the

novelty of the initiative itself, and partly by its organisational setting: the AEBC is a relatively new agency charged with giving overall strategic advice (taking into account social and ethical aspect of GM technology) without, however, having any statutory function in policy-making, in contrast for example to the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment (ACRE – which formally is in charge of giving binding advice on GM crop releases) and the Food Standards Agency (FSA). ACRE reportedly showed little interest in the *GM Nation?* initiative and had little contact with AEBC. The ambiguity was further reinforced by the government's rather vague commitment "to take public opinion into account as far as possible" (DEFRA 2002a).

Hence, there was considerable suspicion and reservation on the part of many participants and commentators on the role and significance of the *GM Nation?* initiative. For many, these were confirmed in early 2004 when the government announced the go-ahead for the commercialisation of GM crops, although the government emphasised that this was to be done on a cautionary, case-by-case basis and in an open and transparent manner. Nevertheless, GM-critics complained that the government had ignored the findings of its own *GM Nation?* initiative and wider public opinion. The government's case was not exactly helped by the leaking of internal government documents in the *Guardian* in early 2004, in which the Secretary of State and her officials at DEFRA discussed how to 'wear public opposition down' by 'solid, authoritative scientific argument' (Paul Brown, *The Guardian* 19 February 2004: 1).

Thus, the *GM Nation?* initiative exhibits a certain paradox: on the one hand, the initiative was embedded in, and carefully controlled by, formal policy-making. Important parameters, such as timing (the time available for hosting the public deliberations), funding (the resources available to support the various elements), and framing (the setting of the agenda, the writing-up of the findings, the parallel scientific and economic assessments commissioned) were set and controlled by government and the Steering Board, with manifest impacts on the course of public deliberation. One source close to the organisation complained (in June 2003) that the government tried to exert control over the implementation, requesting regular meetings between DEFRA and members of the (supposedly independent) Steering Board almost on a weekly basis. On the other hand, the status of the initiative in relation to policy-making, and the government's commitment toward the initiative, were non-binding and remained relatively unclear and vague throughout the process.

Another difficulty facing the initiative was the issue of public representativeness. For example, some media commentators criticised the public debates for being dominated by people who had already made up their mind – namely, mostly GM-opponents, but also pro-GM scientists – and thus did not truly represent public opinion. One journalist asked: "why on earth did the government not commission a large-scale opinion survey instead?" (David Curry, *Financial Times* 17 October 2003: 21). This arguably misses the point, as the aim of the initiative was, as part of the policy-making process, to assess public perceptions on GM crops on the basis of in-depth deliberation, and to consult members of the public pro-actively and openly, rather than carrying out a closed, anonymous opinion survey with a statistically representative sample of average (and by – questionable - implication, relatively uninformed) members of the public. It should, therefore, not be surprising if interested people

wishing to engage on the issue of GM crop commercialisation – that is, farmers, scientists, environmentalists, consumerists etc – formed the majority of participants in the various events.

Also, it is arguably rather patronising to call onto civil society and the wider public to engage with controversial, complex socio-technological issues, such as GM crops, only then to react surprised when large numbers of people actually do show an interest, bringing to the debate informed viewpoints (of whatever shade). Furthermore, it would be misrepresenting the participants at the events (at least the ones attended by the author) to suggest they were all avid campaigners with set views and causes. A significant proportion of participants in both the Glasgow and Forest Row events showed an interest in the debate in their capacity as college students, farmers, mothers, villagers, pensioners and politically interested citizens. The Forest Row debate had been well advertised locally (with eye-catching placards placed along the roads leading into the village), it took place in the old hall in the centre of the village, it was attended by the local Member of Parliament, each a pro- and anti-GM expert, as well as representatives of the local media. There were well over 150 participants, with some people having to listen to the debate standing in the entrance because of the unexpectedly large turnout. The atmosphere was cordial and the debate good-natured. Thus, the event resembled much more closely the proverbial 'town hall meeting' than a one-sided campaigning event.

Nevertheless, the question of how to define, represent and canvass 'the public interest' in participatory governance procedures, such as the *GM Nation?* initiative, is an important one. The organisers did pay attention to this by clearly stating the nature of participation in the public debates, as well as by carrying out the additional 'narrow-but-deep' focus groups, so as to have comparative data for further validation the findings of the public debates. Furthermore, various newspapers carried out their own statistically representative surveys to compare the initiative's findings with general public opinion.

CONCLUSIONS

When, in 1994, Robert Dahl called for the strengthening of democratic institutions and practices at national level in order to tackle the 'democratic dilemma' arising from transnational decision-making, he did so without giving much detail about how this might be done conceptually and practically. Since then, a growing body of scholarly literature has begun to address the socio-political phenomenon of multi-level governance with its spatial dimension of local, national and global decision-making, and its thematic dimension of socially complex and contested (scientific-technological) policy-making under uncertainty. Participatory governance has been proposed as a possible way forward for tackling such multi-level issues, and for helping to ensure the legitimacy of decision-making institutions. The involvement of various stakeholders, and even the wider public, in policy deliberation and decision-making, is now widely – and sometimes rather uncritically – postulated. This has resulted in a plethora of practical innovations in stakeholder networking and public participation.

The *GM Nation?* initiative – with its roots in the public controversy about GM crops, its special position in formal policy-making, and its methodological characteristic of large-scale public participation – offers itself for analysis as a recent practical manifestation and model of such participatory governance.

Overall, the initiative represented a serious and bold attempt by its instigators (the AEBC) and organisers (the Steering Board) to respond to the growing public calls for a more open and participatory style of policy deliberation and decision-making on GM technology in the UK. This was done through a methodologically innovative and diverse approach to public engagement. However, the analysis of its substantive, normative as well as practical dimensions reveals several critical points. One was the limited time allocated to the public debate phase; another the inadequate provision of public information and lack of transparency, while yet another was the limited support available to the organisers of the local events. These largely arose because of the restrictive conditions imposed on the 'independent' Steering Board by the government in return for giving the go-ahead for the initiative. At the same time, the government only gave a weak and rather unspecific commitment regarding the use of the findings in the policy- and decision-making process. Thus, there was something of a paradox between the close governmental control exerted over the initiative, on the one hand, and the non-binding nature of the process and its outcomes in relation to government policy-making on the commercialisation of GM crops, on the other.

Furthermore, there was a certain disjuncture between policy and politics. As an initiative instigated from within the regulatory system, the official emphasis was largely on policy, with the participatory process aimed at informing policy-makers on public perceptions and opinion on the commercialisation of GM crops (with the government committed to 'listen' to the outcome). However, the emphasis of the deliberation within the various public events was not just on policy, but significantly also on the wider politics of GM technology and the government's stance on GM crops. This showed itself in the political nature of the discussion as well as the considerable social mobilisation, especially in connection with the large number of various local debates. People not only seemed to want to participate as providers of 'public opinion,' but also as politically and socially engaged actors in their own right, wishing to influence and co-determine the politics of GM crops.

In view of these points, some people must inevitably have felt disappointed by the *GM Nation?* initiative. There was considerable public criticism from several quarters. However, with the necessary distance, one can view these critical aspects as a reflection of the political and social reality of the initiative and its wider context. Different parties – from the government, the various participants, to the media – had different stakes in the initiative and the contested issue of GM crops, and thus brought their particular interest to bear on the initiative in their role as organisers, participants or commentators. Thus, the initiative was instrumentalised and politcised in different ways and for various purposes. In turn, this led to a critical meta-level discourse on the worthiness of the initiative during the deliberations.

This has more general implications for the conceptualisation and analysis of participatory governance. For one thing, one needs to pay close attention to the particular circumstances that give rise to participatory governance initiatives, and the contexts within which they are placed. For another, one needs to consider how various

actors relate to, and interact with, such processes. Finally, and importantly, one needs to sufficiently recognise the politics of participatory governance. Doing so should help to understand and consider its actual, and not just its normative, potential and limits, as a dynamic, diverse socio-political process, for addressing the 'democratic deficit' of multi-level governance.

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NOTES

1 The first transformation in the history of democracy, according to Dahl (1994), can be traced back to the emergence of democracies in Athens and Rome of Antiquity, the second to the emergence of modern nation states from medieval city-states.

2 This research was carried out as part of the European Commission-funded research project 'Public Accountability in European Contemporary Contexts'. The empirical data used is partly derived from the case study carried out by S. Joss, A. Mohr, and C. Parau (unpublished paper). However, the analysis is the author's own.

3 The AEBC membership in 2003 included: Prof M. Grant, Provost and President University College London (chair); J. Hill, former Director of Green Alliance (deputy chair); A. Bradley, Consumer Affairs Director for the Financial Services Authority; H. Browning, organic farmer; Dr. D. Carmichael, farmer; Prof. P. Dale, Research Director, John Innes Centre Norwich; Dr. E. Dart, Chairman of Plant Bioscience Ltd; Dr. M. Freeman, Senior Researcher, Medical Research Council Laboratory of Molecular Biology; J. Gilland, President of Ulster Farmers Union/farmer; Prof. R. Grove-White, Director of the Centre for the Study of Environmental Change, Lancaster University; Dr. R. Hails, Principal Scientific Officer, Centre for Ecology and Hydrology Oxford; J. Hann, freelance broadcaster and writer; C. Iweajunwa, member of executive evaluation group for NHS Direct, and member of Partners Council for NICE; Dr. D. Langslow, former Chief Executive of English Nature; Prof. J. Maxwell, Former Director, Macaulay Land Use Research Institute; Dr. S. Mayer, Director GeneWatch UK; J. Thornton, environmental law barrister at Allen and Overy Solicitors; Dr. R. Turner, Chief Executive, British Society of Plant Breeders. Source: http://www.aebc.gov.uk/.

4 The 13 closed questions (with answers ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree') are: (1) I believe GM crops could help provide cheaper food for consumers in the UK; (2) I am concerned about the potential negative impact of GM crops on the environment; (3) I believe that GM crops could improve the prospects of British farmers by helping them to compete with farmers around the world; (4) I am worried that this new technology is being driven more by profit, than by public interest; (5) I would be happy to eat GM food; (6) I think that some GM crops could benefit the environment by using less pesticides than traditional crops; (7) I think that some GM crops would mainly benefit the producers, and not ordinary people; (8) I don't think we know enough about the long-term effects of GM food on our health; (9) I believe that some GM non-food crops could have useful medical benefits; (10) I am confident that the development of GM crops is being carefully regulated; (11) I am worried that if GM crops are introduced it will be difficult to ensure that other crops are GM free; (12) I feel that GM interferes with nature in an unacceptable way; (13) I believe that GM crops could benefit people in developing countries (GM Nation? The Findings of the Public Debate reported by the Steering Board). NB. There was a further, open-ended question: (14) 'Under what circumstances, if any, would you find acceptable for GM crops to be grown in this country?' Additional space was given for further comments and views.

5 Around the same time, in the House of Commons (the lower chamber of parliament), Joan Ruddock MP in her motion speech (17 July 2003) complained of the lack of political debate about GM crops: "I want to speak on genetic modification. I believe that, with the exception of Iraq, GM is the most im-

portant issue the House faces. Tomorrow is the closing date for the Government's public debate on genetic modification. Six days ago, the strategy unit reported on the costs and benefits of GM crops...The science review is expected next week. However, we have not had a single debate on the Floor of the House about the momentous decision that could be taken in our name before the end of the year. The public remain hostile to GM, yet we, their elected representatives, are woefully unengaged in [the] debate..." (House of Commons, 11 November 2003).

6 The term 'bare witness' is a word-play, replacing the commonly used verb 'to bear witness' (to give testimony) with the adjective 'bare' (stripped off, naked).

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