Moving Beyond Dialogue

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For nearly two decades, the subject of this workshop, as well as the general theme of this meeting, has been a central and recurring issue in the protracted agricultural biotechnology "dialogue." Enormous efforts have been made to investigate, discuss and propose ways to ensure that the applications of biotechnology address and promote the public good. Equally impressive are the many conferences, papers, books, official pronouncements, organizational initiatives and various other public and private "dialogues," aimed at discovering, analyzing and suggesting agenda-setting mechanisms designed to enhance the sustainable agriculture community's understanding and acceptance of the products of agricultural biotechnology. Many of the best minds in agriculture have repeatedly grappled with these issues with intelligence, sincerity and often enormous insight.

It has been an important and necessary debate. It has identified and clarified issues; exposed constituency interests; fostered improved communications among those constituencies; revealed important areas of common ground; and created the framework, climate and process for a continuing dialogue.

Despite these considerable accomplishments, we gather at NABC 6 in the backdrop of enormous controversy and divisiveness created by the application of agricultural biotechnology's bovine somatotropin (bST). And we do so to explore the two most enduring and global issues surrounding agricultural biotechnology: its relation to the public good and how best to set its agenda. After all these years, why have these issues not been more satisfactorily resolved? Why does the sustainable agriculture community remain suspicious of the goals and motives of the proponents of biotechnology? How can the costly and counterproductive miscalculations of situations such as happened with bST be avoided in the future? What new strategies, processes and mechanisms are needed now to move beyond "dialogue" to the rational and workable development and application of agricultural biotechnology acceptable to both the biotechnology industry and the sustainable agricultural community? The answer, in my judgment, is to create new and effective mechanisms for direct public participation in the process of informing and setting the biotechnology agenda.

Before exploring this idea, I turn first to a brief review of the agricultural biotechnology dialogue to date. In proposing new strategies, it is important to understand 1. why past ones have fallen short of the needs and 2. why the "dialogue" must evolve to a new level of citizen involvement if it is to succeed in truly setting an acceptable agricultural biotechnology agenda.

THE AGRICULTURAL BIOTECHNOLOGY DIALOGUE IN PERSPECTIVE

In reading the agenda-setting literature of the agricultural biotechnology debate, several observations come easily to mind. First, those persons interested in the development of a more effective agenda-setting process have focused almost exclusively upon ways to improve the biotechnology dialogue. Second, analysts and proponents of such a process stress the need for the dialogue to be inclusive. For example, they note that the dialogue must "consider all viewpoints," "include a broad range of interests and issues," "review the ethical dimensions of biotechnology" and "analyze biotechnology's socioeconomic, health, and environmental impacts." Third, the need for open and candid conversation is emphasized. Fourth, it is said, participants in the debate should reflect diversity in background, education and experience. Fifth, the dialogue should serve to "educate" all parties in the debate about the potential benefits and dangers of new applications. Sixth, the dialogue should be conducted at multiple levels and under the auspices of both public and private institutions. Seventh, the dialogue should seek to foster consensus, whenever possible. And finally, the process should create improved understanding and mutual respect among dialogue participants.

But even those analysts who believe in the importance of dialogue and recognize its limitations have noted, for example, that "Important questions remain regarding education and communication, as well as policy formulation for the development and introduction of genetically engineered products" (Lacyetal. 1991:156). These authors point out that an effective dialogue must address a number of critical questions: "1. What should be the content, scope, and audience for an information and education agenda? 2. Who are the credible spokespersons to both raise and discuss the range of issues surrounding biotechnology? 3. Who should outline and articulate the broad responsibilities that come with powerful technologies like biotechnology? 4. Who should make decisions regarding the products, processes, and regulation of biotechnology? and 5. How can we stimulate a productive and meaningful dialogue among the relevant constituencies?" (Lacy et al. 1991).

Thus, despite widespread agreement on the goals and process-type questions surrounding an effective dialogue on agricultural biotechnology, not to mention the enormous resources and energy devoted to the process to date, important gaps and questions remain in our efforts to develop an acceptable agenda-setting framework. In my view, the most basic reason for this puzzling situation is that public involvement has not progressed sufficiently in either our minds or to the level necessary to recognize and deal with such questions.

It is time to move beyond our preoccupation with the dialogue process and begin to explore new and innovative ways to involve the sustainable agriculture community in the biotechnology decision-making process itself. There is, after all, a critical difference between broad participation in the dialogue about biotechnology, actual involvement in the planning and decision-making phases of agricultural biotechnology research and development, and the introduction of these technologies into the market place.

MERGING THE BIOTECHNOLOGY AND SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE AGENDAS: A RADICAL PROPOSAL?

As mentioned earlier, the agricultural biotechnology dialogue has made important contributions to our understanding of many of the underlying issues surrounding this powerful technology. It has helped create the climate and lay the factual groundwork, not only for continuing discussions but also for the consideration of new and more effective agenda-setting strategies and mechanisms. Before outlining some possible new approaches, however, I will briefly review the nature of policy agendas.

According to Cobb and Elder (1972), there are two analytically distinct policy agendas. First, there is the systemic agenda which "consists of all issues that are commonly perceived by members of the political community as meriting public attention and as involving matters within the legitimate jurisdiction of existing governmental authority" (Cobb and Elder 1972:85). The systemic agenda is thus merely a discussion agenda. The second phase of the agenda-setting process involves the so-called action or governmental agenda. According to Anderson (1979:56), this agenda is "more specific and concrete than a systemic agenda..." and "is composed of those problems to which public officials give serious and active attention." Placing an issue or problem on the systemic agenda is much easier than achieving a similar status on the governmental or action agenda.

Although these authors are describing policy agendas in the public domain, their distinctions between discussion and action agendas offer important insights into the limitations of the current agricultural biotechnology dialogue. While the dialogue has been remarkably effective in placing biotechnology issues and perspectives on the agricultural systemic or discussion agenda, it has failed to devise ways to ensure that decisionmakers give "serious and active attention" to the claims and priorities of the sustainable agricultural community, broadly conceived.

PARTICIPATORY DECISION-MAKING: PLANNING THE AGRICULTURAL BIOTECHNOLOGY AGENDA

The idea of direct citizen involvement in the formulation of specific policies and broad policy agendas in both public and private arenas is not new (Kariel 1966). The value of such participation has formed one of the most enduring and embracing themes in American political philosophy since the founding

of the republic (Grimes 1955). Indeed, much of our fascination with direct citizen involvement in policymaking stems from the writings of Thomas Jefferson and has come to be embodied in the notion of Jeffersonian democracy. For our purposes, it seems relevant to note that Jefferson's agrarian leanings "inclined him to the view that the farmer was the best subject for self-government" (Grimes 1955).

In the brief space remaining, I wish to suggest that the time has come for the biotechnology industry to begin exploring the principles and processes of participatory decision-making, and to initiate a serious assessment of ways to implement concrete decision-making opportunities involving all elements of the agricultural biotechnology constituency including farmers, public interest group representatives and other citizens. These individuals should be involved in the strategic phases of basic and applied agricultural biotechnology research, development and marketing. Given the conceptual nature of the scientific strategic planning process, I know of no reason why ordinary citizens could not contribute to this critical activity.

Unlike the dialogue, which offers only sporadic, short-term opportunities for interaction (and no opportunities to literally participate in setting the agricultural biotechnology agenda), the ongoing, relatively intimate interactions characteristic of participatory decision-making would create authentic opportunities to directly influence the biotechnology agenda. Furthermore, I believe such a process would have multiple additional benefits for all parties involved: it would create trust; it would result in more comprehensive and enlightened planning; it would very likely save time, money and resources; and it would make possible public endorsement, not mere acceptance, of new agricultural biotechnology products. It would, in effect, move agricultural biotechnology from the realm of dialogue to acceptable action.

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