Public participation in the GM debate: the case for sustainability reporting

Use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in agriculture remains controversial, particularly in the European Union. Researchers suggest that all members of society need to be engaged in the debate on GMOs to achieve agreement on policy decisions. They propose voluntary sustainability reporting as a suitable method for conducting public dialogue.

A number of public concerns continue to be raised about the impacts of genetically modified plants on the environment, including: unknown effects on human health, ethics of interfering with nature, freedom of consumer choice and patenting life forms. These concerns make it essential for the whole of society to participate in policy decisions about GMOs. The researchers argue that understanding the risks, management of these risks and the science behind genetic engineering need to be debated in society on an ongoing basis.

Debate about GMOs could be framed as a sustainability issue, using the method of voluntary sustainability reporting as practised by some businesses when setting out their corporate accountability and social responsibilities. The advantage of this approach is that it is necessary to include the participation of a wide range of multiple stakeholders, including the manufacturing and service sectors, investors, banks and insurance representatives, religious, environmental and labour organisations and governments.

A framework for voluntary sustainable reporting, the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) already exists. The benefits to society of using the GRI are that it enables all stakeholders to hold a dialogue with a company and make that company accountable for its actions. Reporting within the guidelines centres around three sustainability indicators: social, economic and environmental performance.

The study suggests that a specific set of GRI guidelines could be produced for GMOs used in agriculture. This could be used as a guide during the debate of relevant issues, leading to new perspectives on this controversial topic.

One expectation of using a GRI-type approach is that there will be greater transparency during the early research and development stages. It is thought that debate at this point could shape the development of the technology and behaviour of the company by wider society. This technique, known as Constructive Technology Assessment, should also benefit companies because it is less costly to make changes at these early stages.

Costs to companies developing new technologies are often substantial. These costs are usually recovered through patents and intellectual property rights, which give companies exclusive use of their products and processes. This is a major obstacle to using the sustainability reporting method and is an issue that needs to be resolved. It is one of the reasons why financial stakeholders are key to the GMO debate.


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