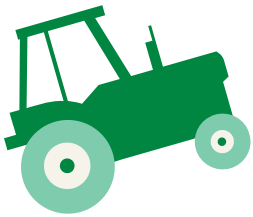
SECTION THREE

POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF THE NEW CROP TECHNOLOGIES



Converting beneficial science into publicly acceptable farming practices seems an uphill struggle.

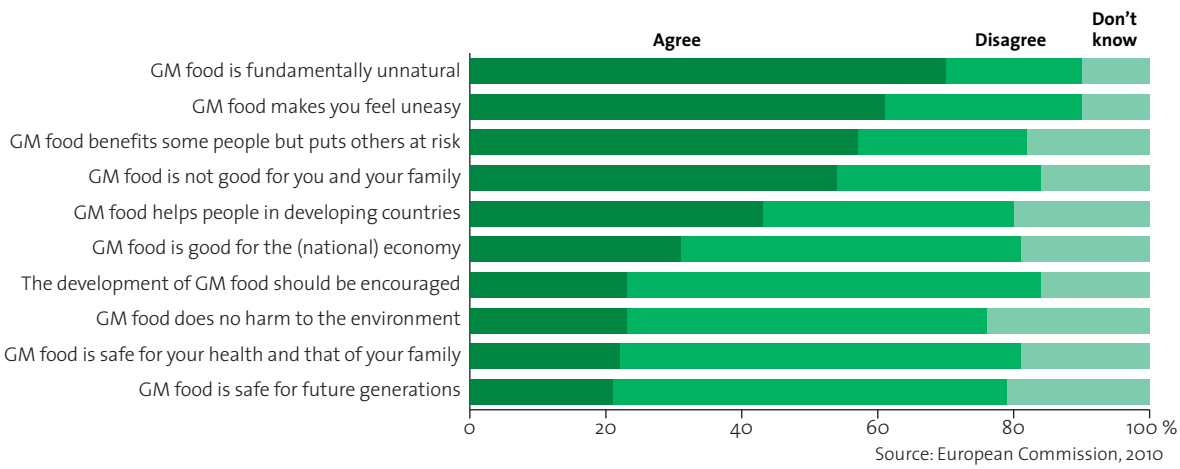
This section explores the relationship between advances in plant technology, especially genetically modified (GM) crops, and policy makers faced with converting beneficial science into publicly acceptable farming practices. On the face of it, this seems an uphill struggle. In Europe, politicians of all kinds have had to cope with the scepticism of the public, with GM attracting three times as many opponents as supporters. In 2010 fewer than 25 per cent of Europeans appeared comfortable with GM foods while more than 60 per cent expressed considerable concern.

Yet not all GM research provokes such hostility. The majority of Europeans approve of GM when it is used for medical purposes. Furthermore, so-called cisgenic crops – those that have genes imported only from the same species or from plants that can be crossed using conventional breeding methods – are deemed quite acceptable.

The need to achieve public acceptance of modern plant science is severe. It is estimated that around 700,000 lives may be lost each year through malnutrition and unhygienic food and water – a toll that could be reduced by implementing advanced agricultural methods such as GM. Yet countervailing arguments including

What Europeans think of genetically modified food

In answer to the question: *"Do you agree or disagree with the following?"*



Source: European Commission, 2010

the notion that the activities of agro-multinational companies amount to "genetic colonialism" continue to be aired. How can this policy stalemate be broken?

Policy makers need to learn three key lessons. Firstly, new knowledge does not get translated into benefits by default. It needs the drive, commitment and communication skills of good entrepreneurs to spread the word. Secondly, decision makers need to be clear about what they are addressing: they have to recognise when they are dealing with issues of science rather than policy-related priorities. And thirdly, there has to be universal clarity in distinguishing good regulations and practices from bad. This places the onus on decision makers to understand all the options available and to consider their consequences.

The role of governments is critical. They need to be alerted to any potential controversies at an early stage in order to harness the best scientific advice available to them. They have to ensure that any consultations they undertake reach the broadest possible range of interests and that any analyses they commission rest firmly on transparency and objectivity.

In short, if we are to avoid a dangerous drift away from the real needs of food security and production, there must be a genuine dialogue between advocates, decision makers and critics, in which any uncertainties relating to science or policy are freely and honestly debated.

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