

UK FOOD GROUP SEMINAR

Governing Agriculture: what now for food security and food sovereignty after Cancun?

World Food Day, Thursday 16th October 2003

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(Transcript of Speech)

Governance of food and agriculture: a challenge for the UN?

I don't know if it was brilliant planning or coincidence that today is not only World Food Day, which is hugely important and is the reason we are here and we will discuss how we can strengthen our future options. It is also the day that the results of the Farm Scale Evaluations of GM crops have been revealed to a waiting world, although actually they were revealed in the Guardian some weeks ago!

The background to our discussion is that there are more than 800 million people in our world today who are still chronically undernourished. That is something like one in seven of the whole world population. Two billion people lack food security. Almost 50% of South Asian children and one third of African children are malnourished.

The reason I mention this is that I think that one of the most regrettable things of this whole discussion is the way in which horrific facts like that, which are absolutely horrifying and a scandal at the heart of our global society, are used to try and shock well-fed people like us into accepting a novel technology like GM on the grounds that it is 'necessary to feed the world'.

That is an absolute canard. If you really want to deal with world poverty you have to deal with bad political governance; you have got to deal with the inferior economic and trading situation within Developing Countries and in the World Trading System. You have got to deal with the enormous maldistribution of land to peasants in these countries and the whole issue of population management, which I don't think we can avoid. If you deal with those, then I think GM, which is not irrelevant, is seen as miniscule in its contribution.

Now I thought the collapse of Cancun [Ministerial trade talks] and the emergence of the G21 (I am sad it is now the G17) was positive and that if China, India, Brazil and South Africa in particular hold together, then I think a new force has emerged on the world scene in terms of food and agriculture. I think that this development was inevitable if the

kind of things that we want to see were actually going to happen.

There is enormous antipathy to what the EU, to our shame, has been doing in those negotiations, concentrating on the so-called new issues – the four 'Singapore Issues': trade rules on investment, competition policy, transparency in government procurement and trade facilitation. That is all about greater access by our Multinational companies into their economies and sidelining the necessity for them to have greater access to our markets especially for agricultural products.

I would like to propose three tests by which we should examine any proposal in this area [i.e. global governance of food and agriculture]:

1. Does it allow democratic choice over food and farming systems?
2. Can it reduce threats to a safe and secure food supply?
3. Will it actually eradicate hunger and improve the livelihoods of the rural poor?

1. Democratic Choice

The United States has, as everyone here will know, under the WTO, challenged the European Union's moratorium on GM foods. I sometimes wonder if the US or the US authorities (I feel very sorry for the American people in many ways) are aware of the depth of concern felt by Europeans and the extent of our rejection of GM foods.

In a survey carried out last year by the European Commission regarding biotechnology and the European consumer, a representative survey sample of 16,500 respondents in the 15 Member States showed that a majority of Europeans do not support GM foods. These are judged not to be useful and to be risky for society. Respondents were asked if they would buy or consume GM foods if they contained less pesticide residues, were more environmentally friendly, tasted better, contained less fat, were cheaper or were offered in a restaurant. For all "reasons" offered, there are more Europeans saying

they would not buy or eat GM foods than those saying they would.

One of the things the British government did was to set up a proper assessment of GM crops. I am delighted to have had some hand in setting this up but I am not sure the results were quite what they wanted. But certainly it showed in the GM Nation debate that 37,000 people – not a miniscule sample – who returned the questionnaires that 54% of people said “No GM in this country under any circumstances” – a majority. A further 18% said “No GM if it causes crops contamination” (it clearly does) and a further 13% said [they would accept GM] “only if there was further extensive research both on environment and health” and clearly there should be. So, I think that, as in Europe, every aspect of this public debate in the UK is pointing in the same direction. There is no economic case for GM in this country – clearly there is no market. The scientific review headed by the government’s Chief Scientific Officer very honestly said that there has been no health testing of GM crops, that the environmental testing did not take account of many long-term aspects of biodiversity and environment and there is no framework at the moment anywhere about how you can prevent cross-contamination.

I have just come back from Canada, from Saskatchewan, which is far larger than the whole UK several times over. They can’t prevent organic canola (oil seed rape) from being contaminated even if you have got the prairies at your disposal

So it is not just the democracy, but it is now the science with the results of these trials today showing that in the case of oilseed rape and beet it is worse if you have genetic modification and the chemical weedkillers that are associated with it. Worse for the environment than the conventional crops. Actually, the one thing that they are saying is that with GM maize it is actually the other way round. But what they don’t tell you is that the chemical which they used for cleaning up the weeds in the ‘conventional’ maize growing is called Atrazine. I must say that ‘God moves in mysterious ways his wonders to perform’ but the EU, spot on cue a fortnight ago, banned Atrazine. So the whole test has collapsed because the basis of the comparison is no longer valid. Clearly other weedkillers will be used but until we have done tests on those we cannot know the comparative effects.

So, I would just like to say that I think that this canard that ‘GM crops are necessary to feed the world’ has been largely kept out of the three strands

of this dialogue and I think that is largely due to the good efforts of your UK Food Group and the way you have organised a coherent position against this amongst all the UK development agencies. I think that has helped and I would like to thank you for that.

I would like to make a point about the excellent work carried out by the Deccan Development Society, which we are about to hear, canvassing the views of marginal groups in Andhra Pradesh about their food and farming through the successful Prajateerpu Citizen’s Jury, which rejected GM crops in favour of more diverse farming using their local agricultural biodiversity. I think the government has got the message in this country, but if they haven’t that’s a superb model that we could also do with in this country.

2. Effective control of threats

What smallholder farmers, livestock keepers and fisherfolk want and need is to be able to use their skills and their knowledge to harness natural resources in their control, to produce the food that they and their neighbours require, in a way that sustains the local environment or the agroecosystem. That’s what we are aiming for – that’s the situation we all want to see.

Now I think we should consider the effectiveness of the recently enforced Biosafety Protocol to help, particularly African countries, to reject GM Food Aid and to resist the pressures to adopt genetic engineering technologies imposed on them by the US.

We did have, as Patrick [Mulvany of ITDG] knows because he organised it, a meeting in the House of Commons, actually on 9/11 – another of these quite astonishing and presumably accidental dates, it was actually 9/11 2003. It was the day on which the Cartagena Biosafety Protocol came into force. Tewolde [Egziabher], for whom I have enormous admiration, from Ethiopia was our guest speaker and I would like to quote some of the things he said:

“human health and environmental protection can be assured, as provided by the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, only through informed risk assessment and decisions based on the Precautionary Principle”

Making that bite is, I think one of the biggest challenges we face.

"Developing countries, and African countries in particular, don't want to grow GM crops

uncritically and without the due process of their regulatory systems approving them.”

He linked this – and I think this is another weakness under the TRIPs agreement - to the threat from privatisation through Intellectual Property Rights of the genetic resources that underpin agriculture. He said:

“We reject the patenting of living things,” (and I think we should underline this 6 times) “as has been made clear by our negotiations in the WTO.”

This is something that, for the world’s most important food security crops, is being addressed by the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture. That Treaty, negotiated under the auspices of the FAO, does defend Farmers’ Rights and does not allow IPRs on seeds.

But I do think two further controls are necessary.

One is to control the excesses of the food and agribusinesses – and I do think Duncan [Green of CAFOD] is absolutely right that we and the NGOs have fastened our attention far too much on the WTO, which, probably because of the Americans more than us, is potentially in a state of collapse. That, far more significantly, is why we have taken our eye off other areas which are very significant and undermining of the things we are aiming at.

When I first came into politics in the 1970s the great issue was control of the Multinational Corporations. It has now almost disappeared. It comes out under the posh title of Corporate Social Responsibility. But we ought to go back to the real issue of ensuring and finding effective mechanisms to ensure that the really big global companies act in a way which meets global interests and not the opposite in actually enhancing and not removing poverty.

And the other is that we do need an independent but democratically supervised facility to evaluate the possible impacts of new technologies. Perhaps that is a role for the UN.

3. Eradicate hunger and improve livelihoods

Devinder Sharma, a great man, and this is a tragic example from India, has said: *“A third of the world’s hungry and the marginalised live in India. And if India done were to launch a frontal attack on poverty eradication and feeding its 320 million hungry much of the world’s hunger problem would be resolved.”*

What has happened? The national response has not been to move the grain, which they hold in very large quantities, to the hungry, but, so perversely, to dissuade farmers from producing crops that can no longer be stored in government warehouses. What an extraordinary conclusion to draw. The international response has not been to force the redistribution of this grain, which incidentally is GM free and could be used as an acceptable alternative to US-sourced GM Food Aid, and redistribute it to the hungry.

No, the Indian government has been told to dismantle its price support mechanisms that are generating this surplus. If that isn’t making the world’s poor and hungry fit market requirements instead of the other way round, I don’t know what is.

So it is not a problem of technology – it is not the issue. It is a problem of politics. It is a problem of governance and it demonstrates that, and this is the political issue at the centre of all our discussions, India is not allowed, through international rules, to generate surpluses that could be used to feed its own population. The stark truth is that if the hunger cannot be solved in India, then it is not going to be solved globally.

If you take my three tests [by which we should assess the effectiveness of any arrangement for the international governance of food and agriculture:

1. Does it allow democratic choice over food and farming systems?
2. Can it reduce threats to a safe and secure food supply?
3. Will it actually eradicate hunger and improve the livelihoods of the rural poor?]

– if they were to be applied democratically – I think it would move us towards a world in which all peoples had a right to food, a right to control and determine the system that will deliver food of the quality that they require and a right to a healthy environment: in short it would be move us towards recognising the Right to Food Sovereignty. This is at the centre of our discussions today, as Via Campesina has so brilliantly articulated.

If the WTO can’t help, and I don’t think it can, is this something which the UN is able to deliver for the 2 billion who lack food security? And if not, I think the central question for us all is what other global governance alternatives are there which can deliver this in the time we have?

Thank you

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Question: Patrick Mulvany, ITDG

Clearly Food Sovereignty is part of what we are arguing for and, in the ways just described, it is very important to think about that concept not just as something valuable for poor people in other countries but actually valuable in Europe as well.

The whole concept of communities and countries being able to determine their own local food systems is very important. We are very pleased to be part of the FAO process of NGOs, Social Movements and Civil Society Organisations in the International Planning Committee which focuses on this.

My question is for Michael Meacher. You talked about the need for greater democracy lying at the heart of a rational food system and you quoted the results of the Strategy Unit study, the GM Nation debate, the Science Review and now of course the FSE trial results. Could you elaborate a bit more on how much impact all of that evidence will have on the British Government?

Michael Meacher

In answer to that question, Patrick, it is a \$64,000 question.... The way I approached it was that the Farm-scale evaluations were set up (and I had the major part in doing that) on the basis that if they demonstrated that there was harm, significant harm – always when I crossed out the word significant the officials put it back in – if the use of GM crops was worse for the environment than conventional crops then that would be the reason why we would not allow GM cultivation in this country. That was the bottom line in setting up the trials. And it is what has been shown to be the case, in the case of oil seed rape and beet. As I said, the only reason that is not the case with maize is because the chemical Atrazine was used and that if you used any other chemical you would get exactly the same results as with the other crops.

So I think it is Game, Set and Match. Now I think that settles the matter.

It is also true that the other legs of the debate – the democratic aspect is overwhelming 8:1 against GM. When the Strategy unit of number 10 says there is no economic case for GM in the UK at the present time, I think that is a pretty decisive statement. If we had said this it would not have meant a thing! And then you have got the Chief Scientific Officer – I was accused today of tarnishing and smearing those that disagree with me so I won't do that, I will honour him by saying he is normally regarded as pro-GM – when he Chairs the Scientific Panel and probably the majority of people are favourable to GM and yet they say that first of all there has been no health testing. Secondly environmental testing whilst limited does still not reveal all that we need to know about long-term impacts particularly on biodiversity. And they also said that there is no plan that is going to offer coexistence. Now, what else do you need?

The Prime Minister is always saying that he believes in the science. I get somewhat irritated by that as there is the implication that the rest of us don't. Of course, I believe passionately in science, more than he does. I want to see more testing, not less. I think the evidence is absolutely decisive. So I also say rather sadly after Iraq, after Kelly and the Hutton Enquiry, the issue of whether the government is listening.

