

Environmental release of engineered pests:
Building an international governance framework.

Abstract

“Public trust in governance: Pacification or participation?”

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Public discussions about GM crops are often polarized debates in which the burden of proof is assigned to opposing perspectives. As Sheila Jasanoff and others have demonstrated, different jurisdictions often consider similar evidence but draw different policy implications because of variation in what counts as important knowledge and how responsibility for risk is assigned.

Deliberative public engagement provides another approach to informing policy when there are diverse stakeholder views. Stakeholders, including experts, present information and social perspectives, but a small group of diverse citizens develop an understanding of the different claims and perspectives, then work toward policy advice that the participants in the deliberation think is reasonable as a way to live with diversity. Participants often emphasize the conditions under which decisions and governance in controversial areas can be trustworthy.

Cass Sunstein and others have raised serious concerns about polarization in deliberative engagement, and more recent critiques have supported Chantal Mouffe’s concern that deliberation undermines the agonism that is essential to democracy. Prolonged public acrimony between proponents and opponents of GM crops or engineered pests might enhance the risk that deliberation participants may merely draw affinities to those who are politically, culturally or socially similar. I will describe deliberative public engagement that attempts to meet these criticism. Participants are selected to enhance diversity of perspectives while avoiding prior strong commitments. Policy choices that emphasizing trade-offs between the social benefits and the risks of new technologies holds the promise to incorporate stakeholders’ input, moderated by the deliberation of open-minded citizens to produce policy advice. Further, the process of representation of diverse perspectives and deliberation suggests components of ongoing participatory governance that can enhance the trustworthiness of policies and decisions even in the presence of strong opposing views.

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