

A tragic GM 'outing'

To what extent did the French government's failure to publicly disclose the exact location of field trials contribute to the suicide of a farmer hounded by anti-GM activists?

Picnics are not normally matters of life or death. But last month, one French farmer chose to take his own life rather than witness anti-GM campaigners 'picnicking' among his transgenic corn. At 8:30 a.m. on Sunday August 5, after telephoning the local police in Saint-Céré, Claude Lagorse placed at his feet a corn seedling and a leaflet announcing the anti-GM 'picnic/debate' planned for later that day and then hung himself under a tree.

Lagorse's social standing and his own attitude to GM crops probably contributed to the complex interplay of tensions that led to his suicide. A father of four and a respected member of the local community in Girac in the Dordogne, he and his brother were members of a local eco-friendly farming cooperative, raising pigs and cultivating ~3.5 hectares of corn as feed.

We don't know why Lagorse chose to plant GM *Bacillus thuringiensis* toxin (*Bt*) corn (MON 810) but it was clearly not just adventitious happenstance. He had notified all the relevant government authorities. However, only his brother knew about the *Bt* corn. He had not told his neighbors. He had not even told his wife.

Why not? In the context of prevailing, ill-informed perceptions of GM crops in Europe, perhaps he feared his decision might poison relations with neighbors or damage his eco-friendly credentials. Even if Lagorse recognized that the avoidance of chemical insecticides can make *Bt* corn more eco-friendly, would he have been able

to convince surrounding farmers, especially those with entrenched anti-GM views?

At least part of the blame for Lagorse's secrecy, and his anguish on being discovered, can be placed at the door of the French system. In direct contradiction to Article 9 of European Directive 2001/18-CE, the French government still releases only the number and aggregate hectares of GM crop plots rather than their precise locations. In contrast, other national authorities provide very specific, identifying information. The UK authorities, for instance, publish a map reference that narrows the location to an area approximately one square kilometer. Obfuscation by the Gallic authorities has not prevented crop destruction, however: in the past three years, anti-GM groups' vandalization has affected half of all French field trials.

There is a clear solution. Those who embrace GM crops must do it openly, as democratic society demands. Otherwise, activists will exploit secrecy to foment public mistrust, portraying themselves as heroes exposing covert GM planting operations. French regulators, industry and farmers must become explicit and precise about the location of GM trials, even if that makes abuse of the system easier for activists in the short term. Ultimately, transparency and openness will make the continued destruction of property and intimidation of farmers difficult to justify. And most importantly, it could prevent a repeat of the recent tragedy. 

Access all areas

A meeting earlier this year in Toronto offered a unique forum for showcasing biotech firms from emerging economies.

Improving access to lifesaving biotech products and encouraging homegrown innovation in poorer nations are long-standing problems. Key challenges are how to galvanize investment by firms in the industrialized world in startups and companies in emerging economies (North-South partnerships), but also how to encourage the private sector in developing nations to generate its own products that are relevant to needs locally and in neighboring countries (South-South partnerships).

The former North-South challenge has received considerable attention in recent years as companies seek to 'off-shore' or outsource certain R&D capabilities or clinical trials. Indeed, next spring, the Biotechnology Industry Organization (BIO) and BIO Ventures for Global Health (BVGH) will host the first "The Partnering for Global Health Forum," with the specific aim of "fostering new collaborations" between biotech firms in industrialized countries and those in developing countries.

But rather than focusing on what the developing world can do for you—and to a lesser extent what you can do for it—surprisingly little attention has been paid to what developing countries can do for themselves. This is what made a conference entitled "Mobilizing the Private Sector for Global Health Development" that took place at the MaRS Landing incubator in Toronto this May so interesting.

The conference, organized by the McLaughlin-Rotman Centre for Global Health, placed center stage >70 life science firms from over

a dozen countries across the developing world. The idea was to provide a forum that enabled these firms to find and form fruitful partnerships—not only with US and Canadian biotechs, but also with ventures in other developing countries that share some of the same problems and business constraints. Equally important, through the support of Genome Canada, BIOTEC Canada, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, The Rockefeller Foundation, BVGH, Wulff Capital and Burrill & Company, the registration costs were defrayed—an important consideration when thousand-dollar registration fees and the price of an airfare often represents several times an average monthly salary in many Southern Hemisphere countries.

Providing mechanisms to encourage South-South partnerships is going to be very important in accelerating and broadening access of the world's poorest to biotech's products. North-South partnerships certainly have a role to play, but progress has been slow; for example, it is sobering to realize—despite years of discussion of the concept of advanced market commitments—that the \$1.5 billion fund set aside for a pneumococcal vaccine by Italy, the UK, Canada, Russia, Norway and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation earlier this year is the first and only of its kind. In the meantime, local entrepreneurs in developing countries are finding solutions of their own. On the evidence of the Toronto conference, there is more than enough talent and ingenuity in developing countries to make that happen. 