Stakeholder Dialogue in GM Debate: A Stepwise Approach Toward Consensus

10th International Conference of the Greening of Industry Network: Corporate Social Responsibility - governance for sustainability in Göteborg, Sweden
June 23-26 2002.

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes Thailand's concerted effort to overcome the deadlock of the GM debate in the country by initiating a process that invites all stakeholders in this field to come to the table and talk constructively. The process was designed to solve this complex issue in a stepwise manner by breaking down the focus areas into 4 sub-areas: environment, health, trade, and legislation. These were discussed one at a time in separate meetings over a 4-month period, each meeting was divided into 3 sessions on known facts, unknown concerns, and suggestions. After concluding the 4 stages, all participants were finally invited again to join the "consensus conference" which includes wider audiences from the general public. The conference was successful in connecting all stakeholders, putting their contributions into the big picture and finding the common ground. It provided a foundation for further works on tangible subjects such as joint demand for more openness, more transparent decision-making process and a harmonized large-scale public education program.

KEYWORDS: GMOs, GM debate, stakeholder, consensus, policy

INTRODUCTION

Toward the late 1990s the GM debate has sparked a fierce controversy across the Atlantic, mainly between USA and the EU. Growing public concern about the safety of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) to the environment and for consumption has spread from Europe to the rest of the world, including Thailand.

GMOs had been introduced into Thailand for the first time in 1994. According to the Thai Plant Quarantine Act, promulgated in 1964 and amended in 1994, introduction of GM plants into the country can only be for research purpose and has to be granted permission by the Department of Agriculture (DOA), Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives, after technical review and advice from the National Biosafety Committee (NBC), in accordance with Thailand's biosafety guidelines. The first crop plant permitted under this regime was Calgene Fresh Company's Flavr Savr tomato, a delayed ripening tomato earlier tested and permitted in the USA by USDA/APHIS.

Since then, many other crops including Monsanto's *Bt* cotton and Novartis' *Bt* corn has been permitted for similar field test in Thailand. In order to have an effective system to monitor the field-testing, NBC and DOA has jointly established a workgroup to monitor these field tests. Experts from both institutions considered the design of experiments, field visits, and recommended some post harvest practices. In the above case of Flavr Savr tomato experiment, four field visits were each made before and after the harvest.

Meanwhile, the current regulatory system does not specifically prohibit or control any research, development and production of GM crops developed domestically. The biosafety guidelines, a non-binding set of rules made in 1993 was the sole practice that researchers and developers (including plant breeders) in the country had to follow. Crops being researched in Thailand using transgenic technology include papaya, chili, rice and cotton. None of these has reached the market-scale production.

In the consumer's market, however, amidst the lacking of sufficient regulatory system, consumer's awareness, and overall policy framework, streams of GMOs started to flow into the country in the form of food and feed ingredients, and raw material for production of food-related products such as vegetable oils. These GMOs were mainly grain of soybean (Monsanto's Roundup-Ready) and corns (*Bt* corns and many others), commingled between GM and non-GM grains. The

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main source of these GM foods were exporting countries known to produce GM crops and exporting them to the world market and their domestic market, e.g. USA, Argentina and Canada. Under this situation, the Thai government has decided to take a realistic measure to allow these GM soybean and corn, approved overseas, into the country only for food, feed, and production.

Issues concerning pros and cons over GMOs were debated in newspapers and televisions among members of civil society: mainly non-governmental organizations, journalists, government officers and scientists. Often, the debate focused around international trade conflict and consumer's right and has overshadowed the sound discussion on scientific facts on the real threat and benefit of GM crops.

Perhaps due to the complexity of the issue, scientific facts were often mixed up with unfounded concerns and opinions, causing confusion among the public, though these aspects are equally important. As a result, the debate in Thailand has proceeded for several years without much contribution to public policy formulation. The stagnation could possibly be attributed to the issue being not only technically difficult in nature but also highly controversial in the political economy dimension. Lack of consensus in the public opinion has evidently dissuaded policy makers from making timely decisions, leaving the lay public confused, unfulfilled and unsatisfied. This indecisive attitude of the decision makers in turn worsened the controversy and harmed the confidence and trust of the public in their own government.

At the beginning of the year 2001, three quasi-governmental organizations: National Center for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology (BIOTEC), Thailand Biodiversity Center (TBC), and Natural Resources and Biodiversity Institute (NAREBI) has jointly launched a stakeholder initiative program to start up a productive dialogue among different group of Thai citizens involving in this issue. First convened in March 2001, this series of meetings included 4 thematic stakeholder dialogue meetings and one consensus conference, and was carried out over a period of 6 months.

Based on these activities, this paper will describe how effectively stakeholder dialogue has been used as an instrument to separate facts from concerns, and to gather suggestions to finally find common ground in public opinion in GMOs issue.

METHODS

Stakeholder approach has been chosen to promote openness and to mitigate misunderstanding among different groups with different interests in GMOs issue in the country. Definitions of stakeholders and their role are abundant in literatures. The acceptance and popularity of the stakeholder approach has grown overseas along with the broadening vision of companies' roles and responsibility beyond simple function of profit maximization. It is interesting, though, to note that *biotechnology companies* were among the early pioneers in responding to stakeholder pressure for improvement of environmental performance and technology acceptance. In advanced countries companies throughout the biotechnology sector have been engaged in stakeholder initiatives around the biotechnology and GMOs issue. In developing countries, on the contrary, this kind of stakeholder dialogue has not been evident and most information dissemination to the public was left in the hands of companies' PR activities, comments from independent scientists, NGOs propaganda and mass media reporting. Under this situation it was unlikely that a stakeholder initiative will come from any of these conflicting parties, nor from the reluctant bureaucratic governmental regulators.

The stakeholder dialogue process was designed to bring these parties to the same table at the same time, and to discuss the same topic. It aimed to separate facts, concerns and opinions from one another. To effectively handle the complexity of the problem, it also broke down the GMOs issue into 4 different sub-area or themes. The first two meetings were devoted to scientific themes of the safety of GMOs: the first one for *environmental safety* and the second for *health safety*. Theme of third meeting was *on trade conflict* and the fourth *on legal and human right* issues.

Invitations were sent to representatives of each of the following groups.

1. farmers
2. local food manufacturers and exporters

3. seed/biotech companies (local staff)
4. biotech research scientists (mostly from government-supported research institute)
5. experts in other fields (environmental scientists, nutritionists, law, etc.)
6. non-governmental organizations
7. governmental regulators
8. mass media
9. consumers

In order to maximize each participants chance to fully participate and give his/her view on the issue, number of participants were limited to about 25 persons per one meeting, but having as a minimum condition at least one representative from each group. Apart from this, virtually unlimited number of observers was allowed. The thematic dialogue meetings were held once each month in sequence, with prior information on the issue given to the participants in advance.

Each meeting began in the same manner, with a special 'informative' session in which an invited resource person in the topic would give an overview on the current status of the issue to participants. This is followed, after a short break, by three sessions of participatory discussions.

- facts
- concerns
- suggestions

In order to have as much and equal participation as possible, *card technique* was used. For example, in the ‘facts’ session, without any discussion or consultation, participants sitting in a U-shape table would write down his/her own ‘fact’ based on his/her knowledge about the issue, one ‘fact’ in one card. There was virtually no limit in number of cards that a participant can use. Facts needed to be short and self-explanatory. It could be ‘monarch butterflies were killed by *Bt* corn’ or ‘no evidence of invasiveness of the first generation GM crops were found after a ten-year field experiment’. Participants were asked to also write down on each card the group they belong to (e.g. farmers).

After every participant has finished, cards were collected and similar cards were grouped together by the staffs and then explained to participants one by one. At this point participants will at the first time have a chance to explain about their idea in more detail, other participants can also ask questions or request for clarification of each card.

From time to time there were cards that did not belong to the current session, e.g. some participants would write their own opinion or unfounded concerns in the ‘facts’ session. This situation was a thing that could be expected. To ensure the participants that every card that were written would be retained and given equal importance, the cards that appeared in the wrong session were discussed, kept and reused in the next session according to their suitable category.

By repeating this process in each session, *facts, concerns* and *suggestion* each began to move toward uniformity and separated from each other, giving a clearer picture on what is known, what is still unknown or unclear, and in which direction the stakeholder want the issue to move forward.

In the first two meetings where mainly scientific issues were discussed, a new method called ‘Buzz Group’ was introduced. Buzz Group was design to let the participants, especially the non-science laypeople, have close contact with the resource person, scientists or experts, and ask technical questions or discuss issues that would otherwise have been reserved or hesitated in the open. To set a stage for this kind of supporting discussions, besides the U-shape table where participants sit down and discuss during the sessions, four to five small-size roundtables were prepared during coffee break for participants (and observers) from each different group to sit down and discuss issues in a very informal atmosphere.

Finally after concluding all meetings over a period of 4 months, all participants were invited again together with a wider audience from the general public to participate in a ‘*consensus*

conference'. The conference was organized composing of a half-day seminar-style meeting, and another half-day 10-member panel discussion. It was intended to present the results from the prior 4 thematic meetings and to connect all the stakeholders and find some common ground on tackling the GM issue and discuss some possible joint activities.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The thematic stakeholder dialogue meetings were held according to the below schedule and with number of participants within the expected range (Table 1).

Table 1. Themes of stakeholder dialogue meetings, date held, and number of participants

Themes	Date	Number of participants*
1. Environmental safety	13 March 2001	34
2. Food safety	27 April 2001	51
3. Trade conflict	29 May 2001	68
4. Legal issue and human rights	19 June 2001	33
5. Consensus conference	25 August 2001	> 230

* including observers

Some individual participants attended all the meetings, but the majority appears to attend only one or two, according to their own interest. This is a good evidence showing that the GM debate spreads across many dimensions and stakeholders vary according to those dimensions. It is therefore impractical to have a fixed number or fixed member of the public discuss all the issues all together in such kind of complex issue. Policy makers, however, need to examine all dimensions of the issue and the stakeholder approached seemed to be an effective process to analyze and help them examine the issue in a more ordered and systematic way.

All the facts and opinion raised in all meetings were carefully recorded, analyzed and a complete minute book of the meetings was sent to all participants for proofreading to ensure correctness of the record.

It is worth noting that the Buzz Group method has played a significant role in bridging the gap not only between experts and laypeople but also between governmental officials and members of NGOs, who found it more comfortable to talk with each other under an informal atmosphere. It is probably suitable and important especially for people within Asian cultural background to have this kind of *alternative* way of communication other than an open forum, since most laypeople seem to be too shy to ask technical questions in front of others, thinking he/she may be the only one who is lagging behind in terms of knowledge. Thus, given this alternative opportunity, they feel more comfortable to ask the expert in person.

The meetings were reported in many Thai local newspapers and a journalist dubbed the meeting 'Four-step ladder project' in the newspaper's headline.

In the final consensus conference, unlike the prior 4 thematic meetings, a larger number of participants not only urban dwellers but also many from provincial region outside Bangkok attended. In the first half-day seminar-style meeting, the organizers explained to the participants the process in which the 4 thematic meeting was held, and the outcome of those meetings. Then member of the anti-GM NGO groups, BIOTHAI and GREENPEACE, who has been having critical view toward the process, were given equal opportunities to criticize the process and give further suggestions. In the afternoon panel discussion ten members from many stakeholder groups, including the organizer, joined together on stage to discuss further cooperation among stakeholder groups with different view, anti-GM and pro-GM. The panel finally agreed to work together toward the future in the following area:

1. To request to have more representative from the civil society in the government-led policy fora discussing and making decisions on national policy on GMOs.
2. To promote disclosure and transparency in those government-led policy fora.
3. To keep the connection among stakeholders and help coordinating between various

existing committees dealing separately with the GMOs issue. To jointly put tangible effort into some urgent issues such as public education and labeling issue.

After the consensus conference has been convened, there were some consequential small-group working meetings among the stakeholder workgroup formulated at the conference. One meeting discussed the Thailand's draft labeling regulation, which was attended by, among others, the secretary general of Thailand's Food and Drug Administration, whose organization was responsible for drafting and implementing the food labeling regulation, a members from a consumers activist group and a member of GREENPEACE Southeast Asia.

Another effort by the group, which is a direct outcome of the stakeholder dialogue, is to plan and implement a balanced information and education campaign among Thai public on the risks and benefits of GMOs, using the abundant information and network created during the 6-month process. The country's International Economic Policy Committee, under chairmanship of the deputy Prime Minister, has approved that the workgroup proceed with funding pooled from stakeholders themselves. Thailand Research Fund (TFR), one of the country's biggest public research funding agencies, and Monsanto Thailand (a local affiliate) has shown its interest to support the project.

CONCLUSION

The stakeholder approach to startup productive dialogue among different groups with different interests in the GM-debate was tried out in Thailand with some tangible success. The process is still at an on-going status; and whether it can produce some larger outcome or impact to the public policy in the long term is yet to be seen. In this latter phase, management becomes a more significant factor in this question.

Among the many results and lessons learned throughout the process, emphasis needs to be made that the process itself is a *social learning tool*. Stakeholders who gathered at the meeting bring their own knowledge and opinion with them; they shared them with other stakeholders, discuss, and refined their knowledge. At the end of the day they return home with more knowledge on the issue, and leave behind a larger pool of knowledge that everyone can share further. Since *sharing* is one of the main concepts of the dialogue meeting, not one opinion was denied, only regrouped at worst, and much less confrontation occurred. This might have been the key to the success of the dialogue.

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