

**COST Workshop on Value Communication of Novel Agro-technologies
Munich, November 3rd – 4th, 2011**

COST Actions involved:

Action FA0806 “*Plant virus control employing RNA-based vaccines: A novel non-transgenic strategy*”
Action FA0804 “*Molecular farming: plants as a production platform for high value proteins*”

Action FP0905 “*Biosafety of forest transgenic trees: improving the scientific basis for safe tree development and implementation of EU policy directives*”

Action FA1006: “*Plant metabolic engineering for high value Products*”

Learning from the GM debate, it is plausible to argue that other novel biotechnological strategies are likely to be regarded as problematic risk technologies as well. If scientists only offer facts, but do not address the value laden structures of citizens’ perception as well, communication will fail. Therefore the aim of the workshop was to develop strategies for successful communication in the food sector. In order to reach this goal, specialists on the value-laden risk and benefit communication were invited and space was provided for the participants from the different Cost Actions to utilize the information for the development of communication strategies.

The Workshop addressed the following topics in special thematic sessions:

- **Risk technologies and public perception**
- **Communicating values and trust**
- **Communication strategies and channels**

Between the thematic session the workshop participants tried to integrate the communicated information into an overall strategy.

The last afternoon was devoted to **identify “loose ends” and to an attempt to structure communication of biotech research:**

As a general outcome it can be recorded:

Mere explanations of research (-results) won’t be sufficient. Consumers don’t have the (mental) capacities to assess these results. But consumers are interested and perhaps even

curious to know. In this respect, it is essential to make consumers' approach easier. This implies a modification of wording and framing.

In general applicable: **narrations** (= systematic descriptions of reality by stories using metaphors; social reality is a constructed one and it won't become subject of discourse if it wouldn't be communicated in terms of pictures, allegories etc.). Narrations give **meaning / sense** to systems. This is far more than description and / or explanation.

In this respect, scientists should check if they could develop a narrative story about their project containing

- credible images of selected (involved) researchers, i.e. his/her motives and motivation
- challenge(s) to be managed by the project's results
- "history" of the project
- hurdles to overcome
- description of benefits to society and / or nature
- ethical assessment (reference to and compatibility with cultural values)
- involvement of society (open-mindedness of involved parties + transparency!)

Despite the fact that a lot of respective research had already been done during the last decade, **some important (societal) perceptions** need to be taken up again – and worked on with more emphasis.

In this respect, "internal" tasks – i.e. enhancement of sensitization of scientist – and "external" tasks – i.e. generating / intensifying influence on consumers – have to be distinguished:

a) "Internal" tasks:

Scientists have to analyze societal risk perceptions – which differ even within Europe. A lot of research has been done already. It only should be used!

Science needs products which might serve as "blockade-breakers". They don't need to be commercial blockbusters, but rather plausible products which attract consumers' approval.

And scientists need support for the commercialization of research results. Here, access to venture capital would be fruitful.

b) “External” tasks:

Consumers want to trust! This would make their life easier. Therefore, building *trustworthiness* is of utmost importance. Trustworthiness is easier granted individuals, not science as such. Education of scientists presenting and communicating projects and results to an interested public should be fostered:

This might be supported by scientific *success-stories* (proof of concept) and the outlining of *clear aims* of research – the latter with the intention to bridge the time gaps between the start of research and first applicable results.

Telling the truth is a precondition to appear trustworthy. In this respect, using worst-case-scenarios seems to be a fair manner to involve an interested public. This might also become a new kind of consumer approach and have a significant impact on consumer perceptions of associated risks.

In general, applicable tools for education (schools) would be helpful.

There are some **open issues** which might worry scientist – and cause frustration. Here, scientists are the addressees of communication:

- Scientists know that there is a regulatory framework, regulatory bodies and free choice in Europe. But how important –or even necessary – is a European consensus on agro-biotechnology?
- How far reaches politicians responsibility in this respect?
- Which role do NGOs play by blocking labeling of products in many cases?
- Is cooperation with consumer-organizations necessary or feasible?
- Which impact has a respective political system and culture on societal dynamics, rules and restrictions (on agro-biotechnology)?

A lot of information has been collected over the last decades. But scientists need more tailored information which goes beyond Eurobarometer surveys. They need support to cope with societal interpretations and the appropriate framing of information to present research interests in an attractive way.

Obviously, scientists lack of easy access to respective information and support.