

A citizens' space for democratic deliberation on GMOs and the future of farming in Mali

African countries are under increasing pressure from agribusiness to open their markets to genetically modified (GM) crops and industrialise their farming sector, but the continent remains divided in its response. South Africa and Burkina Faso have allowed the introduction of GMOs, but Benin has adopted a five year moratorium against introducing GMOs. In January 2006, the local government of Sikasso in Mali hosted a *Citizens' Space for Democratic Deliberation on GMOs and the future of farming in Mali*.

Organised in the second most economically important region of Mali, this ECID (*Espace Citoyen d'Interpellation Democratique*), or citizens' jury, was an unprecedented event in West Africa. The ECID was designed to allow ordinary farmers, both men and women, to make policy recommendations after considering expert evidence from different sources. Its main objective was to create a safe space for communication and action in which small, medium and large scale farmers could:

- better understand GMOs, their risks and advantages
- confront different view points and cross-examine expert witnesses, both in favour and against GMOs and the industrialisation of agriculture
- formulate recommendations for policies on GMOs and the future of farming in Mali.

The Citizens' Jury on GMOs was organised by the government (the Regional Assembly) of Sikasso, with conceptual and methodological support by the Réseau Interdisciplinaire Biosécurité (RIBios) in Geneva and the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) in London. A steering committee made of representatives of 15 local, national and international institutions (government, civil society, research, farmer organisations, IIED...) was responsible for the design, organisation and facilitation of this deliberative process. The Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC) and the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs (DGIS) provided financial support for the overall process.

The Citizens' Jury focused on farmers/producers of the Sikasso region, which is home to about 1.6 million people. A region-wide selection process in seven districts of Sikasso identified 45 farmers as jurors. This selection was done with the support local organisations and structures, on the basis of a pre-selection of 290 farmers from all districts. Clear and transparent criteria helped ensure a fair representation on the Citizens' Jury of the diverse types of farmers of the region (e.g. small versus medium-sized farms, women versus men). The citizens' jury allowed the jurors to cross-examine 14 international witnesses representing a broad range of views on this controversial issue. These included biotech scientists, agencies such as the Food and Agriculture Organization and farmers from South Africa and India with first-hand experience of growing GM crops. In January 2006, the 45 farmers voted against introducing genetically-modified crops in Mali. The verdict included the following statements:

- As the number of small-scale producers in Mali represents 98% of the farming population and as crop genetic modification is only viable for large-scale producers—who represent only 2% of the farming population—this new technology should not be introduced.
- Research programmes must focus on improving and adding value to traditional crop varieties instead of working on transgenic crops.
- Considering that the technology of organic cotton cultivation is already used in Mali, and given that it is highly viable in terms of women's participation, availability of a market and minimum guaranteed price, the cultivation of Bt cotton should not be encouraged, it should be stopped.
- Women farmers should instead be given the technical training needed to produce organic sesame and cotton.

- Farmers should be directly involved in agricultural research and scientists should never carry out research on GMOs in the name of Malian farmers.
- Strategies are needed to promote organic farming, which is based on local resources and local produce.

This unique event for West Africa demonstrated that citizens' juries can provide a safe space for farmers to reach an informed, evidence-based view on complicated and often controversial issues, which can then be amplified to policy-makers. In this instance, seven local radio stations ensured that the entire deliberative process—cross-examination of expert evidence, deliberations, the jurors' verdict and recommendations—were broadcast live throughout the seven districts that make up the Sikasso region. L'ECID very clearly demonstrated the ability of citizens to contribute to policy-making processes and, with the help of radio and media, it also helped deepen the debate on technological choices, risks and the future of food and farming throughout Malian society.

This citizens' jury on GMOs and the future of farming in Mali has had several immediate and longer term impacts:

- Delaying the approval of national legislation needed for the introduction of GM crops in Mali. This is a direct result of this citizens' jury's recommendations. Similarly, a key political debate in June 2006 on GMOs and the future of Malian agriculture was held in the National Assembly and is widely seen as a direct outcome of the citizens' jury process.
- Opening up a safe space for communication and action, which allowed a cross-fertilisation of ideas to take place, and for hitherto marginalised knowledge systems to be recognised, respected and used. It succeeded in firstly increasing the awareness of the issue amongst the public; secondly, in strengthening social movements engaged in the struggle against the march of the biotech industry; and thirdly in improving the political capabilities of the farmers involved in the process.
- Cultural impact and enhanced social awareness of GMO-related issues *and* on the value of democratic deliberation in safe spaces for policy-making. These cultural gains and shifts have been greatly facilitated through a film on the process and outcomes of this citizens' jury shown on some national television channels in African countries (Burkina Faso, Mali...) and in international civil society networks. The film *Paroles de Paysans* is now available in several languages: Bambara, French, Spanish and English. And, at the time of writing, Arabic and German translations of this film are being prepared.

Though the jurors' decision is not binding, it is expected to influence the future direction of agricultural policy in Mali and across the region where most people rely on subsistence farming. Such initiatives are about making the agriculture agenda more directly responsive to people's priorities and choices. The fact that Mali has a strong farmers' movement operating in a partly decentralised system of governance, a relatively free media, and a recent history of political mobilisation, suggests that the opportunities for an open debate on the use of GM crops was more likely in Mali than in many other countries in West Africa. In this regard the decentralisation process is important in nurturing a culture of localised decision-making and in strengthening the belief that decisions of significant importance to regional economic stability are not solely the preserve of the National Assembly.

Overall, l'ECID has succeeded in politicising an issue of global importance and has allowed marginalised voices to question the dominant discourse in favour of GM crops and the industrialisation of agriculture in Mali. However, the powerful nature of some of the global actors involved (e.g. USAID, the World Bank, Monsanto and Syngenta) means that such actors are increasingly looking for new ways to avoid the constraints of national legislation, for example by supporting high level meetings and encouraging country governments to harmonise bio-safety policies and intellectual property right laws for the entire West African region.

Source: http://www.iied.org/NR/agbioliv/ag_liv_projects/verdict.html; *La Revue Durable*, 2006 ; <http://www.biosafetyafrica.net>; Pimbert *et al.*, 2007.