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Mali's Farmers' Jury: an attempt to democratise policy-making on biotechnology

by PETER BRYANT

Introduction

Towards the end of January 2006, 45 Malian farmers gathered in Sikasso to deliberate the role of genetically modified (GM) crops in the future of the country's agriculture. This farmers' jury was known as l'ECID (*Espace Citoyen d'Interpellation Démocratique* – Citizen's Space for Democratic Deliberation). It set out to give farmers, who have been previously marginalised from policy-making processes, the opportunity to share knowledge and make a series of recommendations and influence future policy-making. This was an experiment in deliberative democracy, and a brave attempt to challenge the hegemony of pro-GM discourses. l'ECID represented an attempt to amplify alternative viewpoints, the voices of those rarely asked for opinions, and the perspectives of the people most profoundly affected by agricultural biotechnology. This article is the result of a visit to Mali carried out some five months after l'ECID took place, and focuses on examining the jury's impact on local decision makers.¹

¹ A longer version of this article is published in *Biotechnology Policy in Africa*, Clark, N.G., Mugabe, J. and Smith, J. with Bryant P., Harsh M. and Hirvonen, M., (2007). ACTS Press: Nairobi, ISBN 9966-41-148-8.

"The farmers agreed unanimously to reject GM crops and instead 'proposed a package of recommendations to strengthen traditional agricultural practice and support local farmers'."

The Farmers' Jury, Mali, January 2006

Between 25th–29th January 2006, 45 farmers from the Sikasso region in southern Mali took part in l'ECID, a Malian deliberative process strongly influenced by the citizens' jury model. Over the past 20 years there has been widespread use of this model in the UK and US. It has been used by some as an attempt to give those previously marginalised from policy-making a voice. Others have used it as a way of finding out opinions on an issue of public significance from (what they have claimed is) a representative sample of citizens. Most of them have a number of features in common:

- bringing together a diverse group of 20 to 30 citizens for an in-depth deliberation;
- involving a number of information providers who offer a further range of perspectives to the group;

The women's group at work during the deliberation sessions. The jury selection process emphasised the need for equal representation of different farmers, in particular women and small scale producers.



Photo: Michel Pimbert

- producing a set of recommendations; and finally
- the presence of an oversight panel of key stakeholders who check the rigour of the process.

In Mali l'ECID aimed to enable farmers:

- to have a better understanding of GM crops and the risks and advantages they carry;
- to confront viewpoints and cross-examine expert witnesses, both in favour and against GM crops and the industrialisation of agriculture; and
- to formulate recommendations for policies on GM and the future of farming in Mali.

L'ECID was organised by the Regional Assembly of Sikasso, with methodological support from the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) in London and the *Réseau Interdisciplinaire Biosécurité* (RIBios) of the *Institut Universitaire d'Etudes du Développement* in Geneva. Project funding was provided by the Swiss Development

Table 1: Executive Committee members of the ECID Steering Group

Lyegoli Mamadou TEMBELE, Assemblée Régionale
Mamadou TOGOLA, Institut d'Economie Rurale (IER)
Souleymane OUATTARA, Centre Djoliba
Issiaka DEMBELE, Jubilee 2000 CAD/Sikasso
Oumarou SANOGO, Associations des Organisations Professionnelles Paysannes (AOPP)
Youssouf SIDIBE, Compagnie Malienne de Développement des Textiles
Daouda MARIKO, Union Rurale des Radios et Télévisions (URTEL)/ Radio Kene
Boukary BARRY, Kene Conseils
Barbara Bordogna PETRICCIONE, Réseau Interdisciplinaire Biosecurite (RIBios), Switzerland
Michel PIMBERT, International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), UK

The question and answer session, during which the jurors cross-examined the expert witnesses.



Photo: Michel Pimbert

Cooperation (SDC) and the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs (DGIS).

A steering group was set up in June 2005 to develop and plan the citizens' jury. This steering group was made of approximately 15 members from various NGOs, unions and government bodies, in addition to the international NGOs providing methodological support (see Table 1).

In keeping with usual citizens' jury methodology, a seven-strong oversight panel was established. It consisted of a well-respected ex-Minister and representatives from four international NGOs. Firstly, in 2005, the steering committee visited each of the seven districts (*cercles*) in the region of Sikasso to explain the process to local actors and to discuss and agree with them their role. Secondly, it commissioned an information guide on GM for the participants, to provide information before the process of deliberation commenced. The guide was sent to both pro- and anti-GM experts for comments.

The Sikasso region has a population of more than 1.6 million inhabitants. The steering committee agreed a selection process to identify 45 farmers/producers from the seven regional districts. The selection criteria aimed to ensure that at least 30% of participants were women, and that all four categories of farmer/producer used by the cotton company CMDT were represented, as well as those affiliated to peasant organisations and unions (large, small and medium producers as well as a women's group).² Jury members also needed to have a capacity to listen, communicate and 'report back the information to the actors in the districts'. Meetings in each district produced a list of 45 participants, which was approved by the steering committee who checked all of the selection criteria had been satisfied.

² *Compagnie Malienne de Développement des Textiles.*

“The jury was not only a tool for activism: it acted as a transformative element for the jurors themselves. The farmers’ jury had an impact on farmers, on politicians, on people both for and against GM crops, and finally on the jurors themselves.”

The oversight panel agreed a list of 25 ‘experts’ who were invited to present to l’ECID. Ten refused or were unable to take part. Participants gathered for four days to hear presentations from the ‘experts’, including farmers from France, South Africa and India, government researchers from Burkina Faso and Mali, scientists and various NGOs. After each session, participants were able to pose questions and discuss together what they had heard. After the final deliberative session, participants were able to ask any of the experts to return and answer further questions. Eight experts were invited back. The participants worked in groups (based upon the CMDT farmer classification) to produce a set of final recommendations.

The farmers agreed unanimously to reject GM crops and instead ‘proposed a package of recommendations to strengthen traditional agricultural practice and support local farmers’. Such recommendations included:

- a proposed agenda for research;
- approaches to farmer learning;
- a vision of organic farming;
- measures to tackle biodiversity; and
- a suggested list of decision makers who should receive the recommendations.

The recommendations were passed on to the Sikasso Regional Assembly on January 29th 2006.³

l’ECID: the impact

It is too early to judge any long-term impact of the hosting of this process. However, some five months after the event, key decision makers, process facilitators and a number of farmer jurors identified some very real impacts. It appears that the approval of legislation which needs to be in place before GM crops can be introduced had been indefinitely delayed as a direct result of l’ECID. This suggestion came from both

anti-GM campaigners and most convincingly from key pro-GM decision makers. Commenting on his frustration over his continuous efforts to take legislation to the Council of Ministers, which would allow the introduction of GM crops first through field testing, one civil servant revealed:

...the delay has been because of the jury. It has been a great impact, this has caused a problem.

This opinion was verified by the coordinator of an International Biosafety project:

Everyone is pointing at this Citizens Jury in Sikasso... The impact (of l’ECID) has been very negative... Here (in Mali) things are stalling because of the misinformation made worse by the jury.

This is a significant achievement for l’ECID, for without such legislative approval it is very difficult for GM crops to be introduced.

There was one very clear indication of the role of l’ECID in raising awareness of the issue amongst politicians. It was interesting to learn of a request from the Sikasso Regional Assembly for a repeat of the Bamako l’ECID follow-up workshop (held in July 2006) for members of the Regional Assembly. At this workshop, five of the farmer jurors made presentations summing up their deliberations. This was followed by an explanation of the process and lengthy discussion. This development must be considered in the context of the economic importance of the region (as the main agricultural producer) and also in the context of the power of the Regional Assembly after decentralisation. In the words of a senior civil servant:

Because Sikasso is so important the government is scared to go forward.

The President of the Sikasso Regional Assembly, Kokozié Traoré, confirmed that the jury had improved his knowledge – and that if the jury’s opinion is no GM, then so shall his opinion be. He finished the interview with the following:

We are under great pressure to accept the OGM (Genetically Modified Organisms) – but if it is accepted, will the farmers be able to afford the seed? But who brings the seed and the fertiliser, who will own this? It will not be us.

The critics, drawing upon their own disciplines,

³ A more detailed explanation of the methodology followed and the recommendations produced is given in ARdS, 2006.

complained about the lack 'of scientific basis' and attempted to rubbish the methodology. One senior civil servant commented:

The anti-GM people gave information without giving the source. From a scientific view point this is not fair.

Another key pro-GM stakeholder stated:

It's easy to scare them rather than give them the science based information.

Those searching for evidence of an approach to participation that is capable of going beyond the rhetoric of the discourse, and leading instead to a transformative process which challenges power bases, may be heartened by the impacts listed above. However, less heartening is the feeling that in fact l'ECID's main impact will be only to delay the introduction of GM crops to Mali. One Mali-based anti-GM campaigner stated:

OGM (Genetically Modified Organisms) will come – all we can do is delay it.

Ibrahim Coulibaly, CNOP (Coordination Nationale des Organisations Paysannes du Mali – an umbrella organisation representing Malian Farmers' Organisations) also said:

The recommendations will not change the politician's mind or the researcher's, but, it is a kind of warning to these people. Please be careful.

Outlining what he described as the government's new strategy to get GM legislation passed, one senior civil servant said:

They are trying another way. Wait till they (the public) forget about the recommendations and then try again.

The notion that in Mali one of the key decision makers is the farmer is strengthened by the history of powerful political activism and willingness to flex collective muscle as witnessed through the strikes of 1991, 1996 and 2000. It is with this in mind that one of the other main impacts of l'ECID can be seen – that of an increased awareness of the issues around GM crops amongst farmers. One official from a major farmers' organisation commented:

“l'ECID has had a very real impact in Mali, both in terms of stimulating a national debate and ultimately in delaying the introduction of GM crops into the country.”

Our association helped choose the members and they then came back and gave us a report. Their report helped us to understand the problem; we then went out to speak to others.

This increased awareness also extended to NGO, union and government representatives. The President of the regional branch of one farmers' organisation commented:

We were not sure what OGM means but the jury helped us make up our mind.

This was reiterated by the President of Sikasso Regional Assembly:

We are happy it (l'ECID) has started to help us understand the issue.

The increased awareness and national impact of the process was undoubtedly assisted by the high level of media interest. Seven local radio stations broadcast the deliberations live every day. Three national newspapers covered the event as did the national TV channel. Many interviewees commented on the role of the media in allowing the debate to be extended from the l'ECID venue to the homes of thousands of Malians.

The jury clearly also built the capacity and confidence of the jurors themselves:

It has given me confidence so I'm now prepared to talk and give the recommendations to ten thousand people or one million people. I will be able to talk to them with my heart. I'm not afraid of this.

We came out with great strength. When you have the recommendations you are powerful, you yourself can become powerful.

I feel very strong because many people back home support us. I am ready to take these recommendations forward.

The process of citizen deliberation and inclusion enjoyed a good media coverage, with all hearings broadcasted live by seven local radio stations in the Sikasso region.



Photo: Michel Pimbert

The jury was not only a tool for activism: it acted as a transformative element for the jurors themselves. The farmers' jury had an impact on farmers, on politicians, on people both for and against GM crops, and finally on the jurors themselves. The jury raised the profile of debate and made people aware of issues to a greater or lesser extent. It provoked responses and it created momentum.

Science, knowledge and citizenship

L'ECID also presents an opportunity to examine the production of scientific knowledge in Mali. It clearly opened up the debate to a wider audience. An official from a farmers' organisation commented:

Usually the debate is at the intellectual level.

A member of l'ECID steering committee said:

The jury permits people to understand the intellectual

debate, but this was simplified to allow producers to make the decision.

This broadening of the debate has allowed alternative perspectives to be developed and articulated. Many important issues were grappled with, including:

- ethical and cultural issues around the production of transgenic crops;
- the role of existing organic modes of production;
- the role of women in agriculture; and
- questions of who should be involved in the setting of agricultural research agendas.

Technical fixes became embedded within economic contexts:

What's the point of encouraging us to increase yields with GMOs when we can't get a decent price for what we already produce?

Participants of the citizens' jury reading the newspaper coverage of the event after the first day of hearings.



Photo: Michel Pimbert

Others talked very convincingly of how l'ECID very clearly demonstrated the ability of citizens to contribute to policy-making processes. Ousmane Suy, Chair of the Oversight Panel, offers the following:

The success of the exercise proves that decentralised communities and producers are capable of contributing to public policy decisions.

Such an opinion was also offered by the head of a producers' organisation and a witness at the jury. When asked if he had learnt anything from his involvement in the process, he stated:

One thing I discovered was that before going I thought I knew everything in the rural world because I am an intellectual and a farmer; but I realised that the truth is with the people who deal with farming. It has been a humbling truth – I learnt a lot from this process and I realised I didn't

know anything. The people who know are the farmers and they've never been to school.

And from a farmer juror himself:

Maybe it's not written in a book but we understand what is a good seed.

These statements represent a closing of the gap between the expert and the lay, an acknowledgement that different forms and sources of knowledge can be brought together – without having a hierarchy of knowledge.

Inevitably for some, l'ECID represented a threat to a power base that uses knowledge as a means of legitimisation. Interviews with three key scientists (including two from a state agricultural research organisation) revealed an approach to knowledge which saw an ordering of scientific knowledge above other knowledge. One key role player who wished to remain anonymous summed up their feelings as follows:

The final verdict, with farmers' recommendations, is delivered.



Photo: Roger Gaillard

The decree has not been signed and the blockage is due to the lack of information. People are against it because they don't have enough information.

In a classic example of the use of the 'deficit model', (which sees citizens possessing a knowledge deficit which merely needs to be filled with expert knowledge), one scientist (who wished to remain anonymous) sums up the role of farmers in the knowledge production process:

If they have the right information they can make the right choice.

The same opinion also comes from a retired senior scientist who also wished to remain anonymous:

If the farmers were better educated they would ask them (the government) to sign the decree.

One scientist commented that the main learning point for scientists was to reinforce their communication strategy so that, using the deficit model, farmer knowledge could be improved. In none of the interviews with scientists did a single one of them admit to gaining new knowledge from the farmers.

Conclusion: from deficit to dialogue

L'ECID has had a very real impact in Mali, both in terms of stimulating a national debate and ultimately in delaying the introduction of GM crops into the country. It presents an example of decision-making in action and raises questions

regarding inclusion and exclusion and the privileging of knowledge:

- how do we build dialogue when not everyone seeks dialogue?
- how do we avoid continuing to privilege elite or expert forms of expertise over citizen or lay knowledge?

However, in this case study, many of these questions are rendered moot when one considers the refusal of Syngenta, Monsanto and USAID to present their own knowledge for 15 minutes – let alone enter a potentially more threatening deliberation over a few days on a more equal footing. The refusal of one key scientist to attend the Bamako l'ECID follow-up workshop on the basis that it would purely give legitimacy to the process does not bode well.

One cannot help but feel that legitimacy is built through dialogue. Withholding dialogue is a way to de-legitimise a process. Active, engaged dialogue provides a two-way generation of legitimacy – without it, the opposite happens. Internalising this requires an acceptance of other perspectives, other objectives and other forms of knowledge. Citizens' juries are not the only way of introducing participatory democracy into decision-making regarding agricultural biotechnologies in Africa. What the case of Mali does do, however, is allow us to ask questions about who should be involved in decision-making of this sort, how real dialogue between scientists and citizens can be promoted, and how dialogue can help us build better agricultural technologies for Africa's producers and consumers.

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NOTES

The full report of l'ECID in addition to regular updates is available on the IIED website: www.iied.org/NR/agbioliv/ag_liv_projects/verdict.html

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