Technopolis: Can you present your organisation?

ECVC: The European Coordination Via Campesina (ECVC) is a European organisation that brings together 31 peasant organisations from 21 European countries. ECVC represents small farmers and stands for peasant agriculture, and against an industrial agriculture model. We are recognised as an official stakeholder by the European institutions, and also in several international institutional spaces, such as the United Nations, the Convention on Biological Diversity and the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Agriculture and Food.

Technopolis: What is ECVC’s historical position on GMOs? Is ECVC opposed to new genetic modification techniques, but also to traditional GMOs?

ECVC: Historically, ECVC has opposed all techniques of genetic modification in agriculture, for socio-economic, environmental and ethical reasons:

• From the end of the 1990s onwards, what led us to oppose GMOs was first and foremost the issue of patents, which cover all genetic modification techniques, and prohibit any re-use by farmers of patented seeds, or against the payment of a fee in the case of plants of some species also covered by plant breeders' rights.

• There is also the problem of contamination of non-GM crops by GM crops containing patented genes: in this case, farmers no longer have the right to re-use the seeds, or in some countries, their harvest may even be seized. Moreover, such contamination condemns farmers and non-GM industries to bankruptcy. Today it has been proven that coexistence between non-GMOs and GMOs is impossible.

• European consumers are overwhelmingly opposed to GMOs, and we are not interested in producing for a market that does not exist, or in misleading the consumer by not indicating that our products are GMOs.

• ECVC does not produce an expertise on this subject, but we share the analysis of many scientists who point out the health and environmental risks of intentional and unintentional genetic and epigenetic modifications resulting from genetic engineering processes.

• Both old and new GMOs are linked to environmentally damaging industrial agricultural systems, which require pesticides, fertilisers, monocultures, etc. and destroy peasant farming. Most of the patents on new GMOs concern herbicide-tolerant plants, so they are clearly not a solution for sustainable food systems. New GMOs will not reduce our dependence on pesticides or be adapted to droughts, no more than GM crops did 20 years ago. Today, even if the European Commission says so, there is no evidence that these techniques can help reduce pesticides.

• Finally, GMOs and patents contribute to an extreme concentration of the global seed market. Contrary to what the industry claims, the concentration is not related to the costs of evaluations, but primarily to the patent model. Today, for example, all operators who want to produce
CRISPR/cas9 genetically modified plants have to negotiate patent rights with the company Corteva, which has a monopoly on CRISPR/Cas9 patents for agricultural plants. This concentration has serious consequences for farmers: an increase in the price of seeds, which can be seen in countries that have authorised GMOs, and a loss of diversity in the seed supply (FAO estimates that 75% of agricultural diversity was lost over the last century and that this phenomenon has accelerated since the beginning of the current century).

**Technopolis:** For ECVC, there is no difference between GMOs and the new genomic techniques?

ECVC: There are differences in one respect: with the new genomic techniques (NGTs), the distinction becomes more complicated than with transgenic GMOs. With NGTs, the breeder of a modified trait claims that it is identical to a trait that can be obtained by conventional breeding techniques. However, only its description by genetic parameters can sometimes be identical, but not the whole plant, which has undergone many other genetic and epigenetic modifications that cannot all be eliminated by conventional techniques. Technically, there is no obstacle identifying and distinguishing these NGTs, it is just a matter of making the necessary investments in research programmes to develop standards for detection and distinction, as it was done for transgenic plants after the adoption of Directive 2001/18. Even if it were not possible to distinguish, there is nevertheless an obligation in European legislation for traceability in the food chain to provide guarantees to farmers and consumers.

**Technopolis:** In this case, how would international trade be organised (e.g. soya imports), and how would controls be carried out?

ECVC: If genetically modified oilseed rape, e.g. by directed mutagenesis, arrives from Canada to Europe: there is no traceability requirement in Canada, but if the EU imposes traceability requirements, then it is up to Canada to indicate the presence of genetically modified oilseed rape in its exports. Initially there may be some unregulated imports, but if the trade sanction is sufficient, then these practices will stop. We see similar dynamics with, for example, meat imports being blocked because of swine flu. It is a issue of political will.

**Technopolis:** If we take the scenario where the current legislation is maintained, what would be the effects on agriculture, trade, etc. in Europe?

ECVC: For ECVC, the current regulation must be maintained, but in order to apply it strictly, it must also be adapted to these new techniques which are different from transgenesis:

ECVC is in favour of maintaining the current legislation, but the Commission must finally decide to set up research programmes to develop protocols for detecting and distinguishing new, undeclared GMOs, as well as penalty systems that are severe enough to discourage any attempt at fraud. We must adapt to these new techniques so that traceability and information for farmers and consumers are maintained.

The second impact is patents on native genes. Breeders say that GMOs derived from NGTs are identical to what is done naturally or by conventional breeding, but these techniques are still patented. If there is no way of distinguishing these patented traits from those obtained by conventional breeding methods, then the scope of patents on these patented traits extends to any plant (or animal) expressing similar native traits as stated in Article 9 of the Biotech Directive 98/44/EC. If the patent holder is not required to publish information on the processes by which the patented trait can be distinguished, i.e. a public disclaimer, we will end up with a few companies extending the scope of their patents to all conventional and farmer seeds, and thus controlling all plant genetic resources.

**Technopolis:** What you are proposing here is not part of the scenarios proposed by the Commission?
ECVC: It should be remembered that the Commission is only the European executive, and that the Council and the Member States have clearly expressed the will to keep traceability and consumer information. The Commission is overstepping its executive role by allowing itself to propose, with the scenario where there is no traceability and information to consumers, a political choice contrary to that expressed by the vast majority of Member States.

**Technopolis: So ECVC does not agree with the argument that it is the evaluation costs that cause the concentration of the seed market?**

ECVC: That's not true, what causes concentration is primarily the cost of patents. Smaller companies cannot afford to pay for patent rights and are absorbed by a handful of large companies that own almost all these patents.

**Technopolis: Can you elaborate on why you do not wish to participate in the targeted survey?**

ECVC: The questions assume that there will be an increase in the use of plants produced using these techniques. Answering the questionnaire means accepting this assumption, which we reject, so we did not answer. It does not respect the will of the vast majority of consumers, peasants and Member State governments, who have clearly expressed that they want consumer information to be maintained. If we continue to provide information to consumers, who do not want GMOs, there will be no increase in supply.

**Technopolis: What is the state of the peasantry in countries where new GMOs have been deregulated?**

ECVC: Today, in Canada for example, it is impossible to grow organic rapeseed. Why is that? Because of pollination contamination problems, but also because transgenic rapeseed remains in the fields (no machine can harvest all the rapeseed, about 10% fall in the field and are dispersed by the wind), and therefore all the agricultural soils in Canada are contaminated by transgenic rapeseed ready to germinate, for a period of 15 years. If these techniques are deregulated, coexistence is impossible, with a very high risk of contamination in the field for cross-pollinated species such as maize, but also contamination in the supply chain for self-pollinated species such as wheat.

With the patent model that can be extended to native traits, the companies that hold the patents can appropriate all the seeds, the industrial model will become widespread and peasant and organic farming will be destroyed.