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“Sensemaking of ecogenomics at individual and organizational level”

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ABSTRACT

As part of the Netherlands multidisciplinary ecogenomics programme, "Assessing the living soil", our social psychological project will analyse the conditions that may improve "sensemaking" of ecogenomics at the individual and organizational level. The concept of sensemaking can be described as that what people do to make things rationally accountable to themselves and others when they are puzzled. What is striking then is the difference between people who have allowed themselves to be puzzled

and people who have not. The first will make new distinctions, the latter keep relying on distinctions drawn in the past. We expect that sensemaking will significantly affect the way in which the societal aims of the ecogenomics initiative can be achieved. One of the lessons provided by the example of GM foods is that it is extremely important to consider the conditions that stimulate sensemaking of a new technology in an early stage of its development. How a new technology is framed or introduced may help to determine whether it is used in mindful information processing. It is this type of information processing that can improve communication and understanding by means of new distinctions and an awareness of multiple perspectives, in stead of fruitless activations of previously held attitudes. For example, one of the suggestions to explain people's opposition to certain applications of genetic engineering is that they tend to cultivate the concept of an unmodified nature, especially a pristine type of nature that makes them feel connected with something larger than themselves. Such a connection with nature might be a significant cause of their opposition, but it requires a careful analysis to assess whether people do indeed cultivate this connection and whether they are able or willing to revise it. The paper describes the development of our research strategy aimed to clarify the conditions that improve communication and understanding. Our objective is to put ecogenomics in a proper socio-cultural context, taking due account of the opposition provoked by GM foods, and to get more insight into sensemaking of ecogenomics by people from different socio-cultural backgrounds, inside as well as outside the biotechnology community. Given the early stage of technology development in the field of ecogenomics, we will start by reviewing the literature on sensemaking in relation with topics that are highly comparable to ecogenomics. This review will provide input for the selection of the most relevant combination of methods that can be used to investigate sensemaking of ecogenomics, including the identification of relevant sites, persons and organizations. The fieldwork will include basic research techniques such as interviews and small-scale experiments. Our project will last three years.