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“The Concerns of Italian Consumers about GMO-related foods”

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ABSTRACT

The theme of biotechnologies in the field of foodstuffs has become the object of a heated socio-political debate which has led consumers and supply chain to confront hitherto unsuspected issues, whilst raising strong doubts and making clear the need for correct information (labeling) and chain strategies (traceability, etc.).

It is a well-known fact that the European Union, unlike some Asian countries and the largest part of the American continent, has adopted an extremely cautious attitude towards GMOs (Genetically Modified Organisms), an attitude expressed by several normative documents aimed at a strict regulation of this phenomenon.

The first part of the paper will be devoted to a carefully analysis of the main European normative interventions in this area divided mainly into four sections:

1. Norms concerning deliberate environmental emissions
2. Norms concerning the protection of intellectual property
3. Norms concerning labeling
4. Norms concerning chain management (traceability)

The second part will analyze the National Legislation, which is principally composed of those decrees which adopt Community directives and prescribe their application plus national intervention due to the application of precautionary principle.

We will add also regional intervention, mostly without any legal effect but very important as a lobby and social act.

From 2001 we are carrying research not only on the legislation, but we have examined the vast bibliography on consumers' perceptions about those biotechnologies involved in the production of human and animal foodstuffs.

This material was the starting point for the elaboration of a first questionnaire delivered to a sample of about 400 people responsible for family shopping in 2002. Now we are collecting a second round of 400 modified questionnaire partially equal to the previous but modified after the new regulations and we are preparing an analysis of the results of this second questionnaire and a comparative analysis between the two version.

Questions in the questionnaire may be broadly grouped into three categories:
those aimed at verifying a knowledge of biotechnologies and GMOs;
those aimed at verifying people's opinion on GMOs;
those aimed at verifying the need for safety and guarantees, as well as the existing level of information.

Here enclosed some information about the first questionnaires (2002).

What do citizens/consumers know about biotechnologies and GMOs ?
(Questions 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 18)

What emerges from an analysis of the results is that people often hear of biotechnologies and GMOs (probably from the media and because they are topical issues) and therefore think they know something about them, although actually only very few people are really informed! This is also borne out by the fact that all the interviewees know the agri-foodstuff applications of biotechnologies, that is those which are most often discussed on television and in the newspapers, whereas just a few know of their environmental and medical applications (although this should be verified with further questions).

It is important to stress that there is no relation between the level of education and knowledge of biotechnologies: about 20% of the interviewees who have defined biotechnologies as industrial processes have a degree, and few are acquainted with the legislation on labeling. This is further evidence of the fact that information proceeds mostly from the mass media.

Similarly, no obvious correlation emerges from comparing answers on the basis of sex and age. Also in this case the distribution appears to be homogeneous.

The main outcome, however, is that no one has answered all the questions correctly, and this confirms that information on this topic is fragmentary and superficial.

What is people's attitude towards GMOs?

(Questions 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15 and 16)

Only few interviewees have indicated that GMOs may be potentially damaging for human beings. The major preoccupations, instead, concern the environment and economic consequences (the profits of multinationals). Most people indeed consider GMOs as useful instruments that may solve the problem of famine in the poorer areas of the world. Among the risks for human beings, one interviewee has made a reference to cancer, and in general people cannot quantify such risks.

Answers, however, appear to be very contradictory: GMOs are not thought to be damaging but the interviewee would choose another brand or change shop if he/she found out any such substances in a product.

What emerges from these results is rather a form of diffidence towards the use of GMOs, rather than any total condemnation. This diffidence is probably linked to the fact that people do not have any clear ideas on this topic: what seems a significant piece of evidence is that most people would be ready to pay more for a product which does not contain pesticides, which are notoriously bad for human beings, whereas only one would pay more for GMO-

free products, and this person turned out to be the most knowledgeable interviewee on this issue.

Level of Information and Demand for Safety

(Questions 17, 19 and 20)

The answers to the question on information confirm what has already been highlighted: information on GMOs is poor!

It must be remarked that all the interviewees have indicated that the Public Authorities should be responsible for guaranteeing the absence of GMOs in products, and that the Ministry of Agriculture should be the designated body in charge of controlling the implementation of safety rules. Thus, according to the interviewees, monitoring procedures should be the responsibility of the State. A few people have moreover ticked off all the options, as if mutual and intersecting control procedures might ensure more efficient guarantees.