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NGO Discourses in the Debate on Genetically Modified Crops

Ksenia Gerasimova

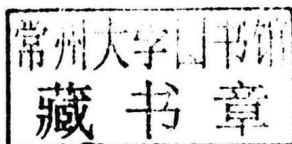


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 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

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First published 2018
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Gerasimova, Ksenia, author.

Title: NGO discourses in the debate on genetically modified crops / Ksenia Gerasimova.

Other titles: Non-governmental organization discourses in the debate on genetically modified crops

Description: Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY : Routledge, 2017. |

Series: Routledge explorations in environmental studies |

Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017002800 | ISBN 9781138223899 (hbk) |

ISBN 9781315403502 (ebk)

Subjects: LCSH: Transgenic plants—Political aspects. | Transgenic plants—Social aspects. | Transgenic plants—Risk assessment. | Non-governmental organizations.

Classification: LCC SB123.57 .G489 2017 | DDC 631.5/233—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017002800>

ISBN: 978-1-138-22389-9 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-40350-2 (ebk)

Typeset in Goudy
by Apex CoVantage, LLC



Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

NGO Discourses in the Debate on Genetically Modified Crops

The development and use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) has been a contentious topic for the last three decades. While there have been a number of social science analyses of the issues, this is the first book to assess the role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the debate at such a wide geographic scale.

The various positions, for and against GMOs, particularly with regard to transgenic crops, articulated by NGOs in the debate are dissected, classified and juxtaposed to corresponding campaigns. These are discussed in the context of key conceptual paradigms, including nature fundamentalism and the organic movement, post-colonialism, food sovereignty, anti-globalisation, sustainability and feminism. The book also analyses how NGOs interpret the debate and the persuasive communication tactics they use. This provides greater understanding of the complexity of negotiations in the debate and explains its specific features such as its global scope and difficulty in finding compromises.

The author assesses the long-term interests of various participants and changes in perceptions of science and in public communication as a result. Examples of major NGOs such as Greenpeace, Oxfam and WWF are included, but the author also provides new research into the role of NGOs in Russia.

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NGO Discourses in the Debate on Genetically Modified Crops

Ksenia Gerasimova

This book is dedicated to Miss Jean Ila Currie and her late aunt Miss Edith Whetham, the two women who inspired me to develop my interest in agriculture.

Tables

1.1	Definitions of the NGOs	1
9.1	Changing positions in the debate	154
11.1	Summary of analysed discourses	188

Acknowledgements

This research project has been developed under the essential support from the Cambridge Malaysian Commonwealth Studies Centre, the Cambridge China Development Trust, the Cambridge Malaysian Education and Development Trust and the John Templeton Foundation. I express my sincere gratitude to Dr Anil Seal, Fellow of Trinity College, University of Cambridge, Director of Cambridge Malaysian Education and Development Trust (CMEDT), Malaysian Commonwealth Studies Centre (MCSC), Sir Brian Heap, St. Edmund's College, University of Cambridge, Professor Peter Nolan, Founding Director of the Centre of Development Studies, University of Cambridge, and the Director of the project 'The Role of NGOs in the biotech policy-making for food security and climate change' Dr David Bennett, Senior Member, St Edmund's College, Cambridge UK. Thank you!

The Global Food Security Strategic Initiative, University of Cambridge, has served as an important foundation for successful implementation of my research, and I express my gratitude to the Chairs Professor Howard Griffiths and Professor Chris Gilligan and the Coordinator Ms Jacqueline Garget. The Isaac Newton Trust has kindly provided necessary support at a later stage of the project.

I would like to acknowledge the funding support received from the DAAD-University of Cambridge Research Hub for German Studies with funds from the German Federal Foreign Office (FFO).

Many thanks go to Mrs Suzy Adhock, Mr Christian Theil, and Mrs Doreen Woolfrey and to all my students in MPhil in Development Studies who took Paper 600 and contributed to our discussions on genetically modified agriculture. I also thank my proofreader Mrs Sandra Boyd.

Preface

In 2012, I was searching for a new research project after reaching the final stage of my doctoral studies. My main research interest has always been NGOs. A conversation with Cambridge-based plant scientists introduced a new subject – the involvement of NGOs in the debates on genetically modified (GM) crops. As with most members of the general public, those who are not biologists, I had a passing knowledge of genetic manipulation and the first image, to be honest, that would pop up in my mind would have been Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. By the end of 2013, I had embarked on a new research project, enrolling in the University of Cambridge as Research Associate in Social and Biological Studies, which by no means should suggest that I am a biologist. In reality, there was neither monster nor crazy scientists but rather a lot of interviews, talks, observations and reflections.

This project has been a very exciting and unexpected journey. The process of research itself, which includes different interactions, deserves special attention. A second thread in the research has emerged: a study of what it takes to conduct research on GM crops. In the following chapters, I have included these episodes which tell my experience of studying the views of NGOs on GM crops.

Contents

<i>List of tables</i>	viii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
<i>Preface</i>	x
1 Introduction	1
PART 1	
Discourses in the debate	17
2 Nature fundamentalism	21
3 The colonial discourse	39
4 Regionalism, food sovereignty and GM crops	60
5 The sustainability discourse	78
6 The alterglobalist discourse	96
7 The feminist discourse	115
PART 2	
Processing the debate	129
8 Different kind of science	133
9 Changing sides in the debate	152
10 The global transfer of ideas	171
11 Conclusions	187
<i>Appendix 1: List of NGOs participating in the GM debate</i>	197
<i>Appendix 2</i>	207
<i>Index</i>	208

1 Introduction

In this introductory chapter, I will discuss the nature of NGOs and why debates on GM crops are such a contested subject.

What are NGOs?

Every work on non-governmental organisations (NGO) starts with a search for their definition and the usual answer is that it is complicated. The Indian parable about an elephant and six blind men, who were able to grasp only one feature of a complex system, is a very suitable analogy for the challenge in defining NGOs. A wide range of synonyms, such as a non-profit organisation, charity or civil society organisation, suggests that these organisations have many characteristics. A GONGO – or government-organised NGO – is an oxymoron which is rather common among NGOs. In other words, NGOs cover a wide range of organisations with different characteristics and that is also why, we argue, different ones present different views on the use of GM crops.

To be able to see NGOs as a whole phenomenon and surpass grasping only one of their features, several definitions might be useful. Thus, NGOs are a truly interdisciplinary subject, and most of the Social Sciences have developed concepts that prove to be relevant in the analysis of NGOs. Table 1.1 provides a summary.

To make sense of this array of definitions, some scholars such as Salamon and Anheier (1992, 1997) have suggested the use of the ‘structural/operational

Table 1.1 Definitions of the NGOs

Discipline	Definition of NGOs
Sociology	Associations
Economics	Third sector
International Relations	Non-state actor
Development Studies	Development agency
Experimental Social Sciences	Network, system

2 Introduction

definition' and a method of classification to identify systematic differences among NGOs. Their structural/operational definition includes five criteria that define NGOs. NGOs are 'formally constituted', 'non-governmental in basic structure', 'self-governing', 'non-profit-distributing' and 'voluntary to some meaningful extent' (Salamon and Anheier, 1992, p. 268). It is possible to counter-argue every criterion from this list, as there are GONGOS, profit-making organisations, others that are complex in membership and not formally recognised, particularly in a hostile institutional environment, NGOs. On the contrary, a classification exercise might be useful, since it is less exclusive and allows the researcher to discern different features of these numerous organisations. The International Classification of Nonprofit Organizations (ICNPO) is an example of a comprehensive but imperfect NGO typology.

This classification was elaborated upon by the Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project on the basis of material from 12 countries. This classification was a step forward from previous classifications that distinguished only 'public serving' and 'member-serving' (Salamon and Abramson, 1982) to a more comprehensive approach that included the 'civic' side of NGOs. Authors themselves are aware that,

Certain of the distinctions proposed may be difficult to make in practice. Numerous environmental organizations are principally engaged in advocacy activities, for example. Should they be classified accordingly to their area of activity or the nature of their activity? . . .

Beyond this, the nature of a particular type of organization may vary depending on the stage of political and economic development in a country. For example, associations of doctors and lawyers that would be treated as member-serving trade or professional organizations in most developed countries often function as significant promoters of free speech and human rights in developing countries. Unfortunately, the ICNPO system does not take this into account.

(Salamon and Anheier, 1992, p. 284)

The project has identified 11 broad groups of activities in which NGOs get involved (culture and recreation; education and research; health; social services; environment; development and housing; law, advocacy and politics; philanthropy and voluntary activities; international activities, religion, business and professional activities), and one extra group was reserved as not otherwise classified (Salamon and Anheier, 1997, p. 40). It is also true that one organisation can participate in a number of activities named in the list. This is particularly relevant when NGOs take up the case of a complex issue, such as GM crops, which includes education and research, health, social services, the environment, development, lobbying, international activism and culture. The subject that can be agreed upon with the ICNPO relates to the important role played by the institutional context in allowing NGOs to conduct their

activities. The level of socio-economic development, the type of political regime and the state of civil society determine what activities NGOs can do and how well.

Almost every modern author working in a subject area has acknowledged the rise in the NGO numbers. Feld and Skjelsbaek recorded the speed at which the sector has grown since the last half of the twentieth century. From around 500 organisations in the 1960s, mainly located in Europe and North America, they increased to the enormous number of thousands and, indeed, millions of organisations internationally (Feld, 1972; Skjelsbaek 1971). Since then, NGOs have been recognised as remarkable actors in international and national political arenas.

Different disciplines have offered explanations as to the rapid growth in numbers and the rising influence of NGOs in international politics. In transnationalism, NGOs are seen as one group of transnational actors that shape transnational networks, a part of a bigger process of globalisation that has been captured in such concepts as global governance and global public space or 'global agora' (Rosenau, 1992; Stone, 2008). There is also a more recent reference linked to these new public arenas (Della Porta et al., 1999).

On the one hand, many issues such as environmental degradation and human rights have become international and interdependent, that is, one actor cannot solve these on its own, and require international cooperation. On the other, transnational networks have become axes of struggle for dominance, leading to asymmetry in power and institutional development (Lennox, 2008). With the example of internationalisation of human rights regimes, Risse and Sikkink showed that both national and international NGOs can be used to circumvent the dominant role of the state and have become very handy in circulating new norms and ideas in surpassing opposition to new principled ideas through tactical concessions, strategic bargaining, moral consciousness-raising and persuasion (Risse and Sikkink, 1999).

While NGOs cannot oppose states on a one-to-one basis, they can appeal to the global polity which include international nongovernmental organisations (INGOs), international organisations (IOs) and other states which can jointly exercise pressure on the state, often successfully. Thus, in this new model called the 'boomerang model', NGOs have become a tool for pressure on states 'from below' (at domestic level) and 'from above' (via transnational networks). It is also clear from the boomerang model that the core of NGO influence is based upon the ideals and ideas (ideology) they propose and promote and how much support can be received for those ideas from other actors.

There also tends to be a geographical pattern: most NGOs are associated with the global North and the global South with social movements (Bendana, 2006). There is also the practice of northern NGOs extracting ideas from the global South and sending it back to southern NGOs 'repacked' as their own (Ludin, 2003). The exchange of ideas and creation of knowledge takes place through networks, as a part of the social movement process.

NGOs, social movements and networks

The relationship of NGOs to networks and social movements is an important question. NGOs are arguably part of the social network. Social networks are described as social movements which bring together different groups and organisations (i.e. NGOs) with various levels of formalisation and interaction among one another (Diani and McAdam, 2003). Both have a target to bring about social and ideological change.

In a social movement process, organisations and individuals are brought together by common goals which then define their strategies for collective action. And although they interact, these interactions are a combination of coordinated and independent actions (Della Porta and Diani, 2006). Through networks, which can then be described as platforms for co-creating ideologies, NGOs interact with one another and participate in social movements. Today, most networks are international which allows them to form 'transnational collective action' (Della Porta and Tarrow, 2005), a set of actions, coordinated along the whole network in the form of campaigns against international organisation, business and states. Three broad processes are found in transnational politics: diffusion ('spread of movement ideas, practices, and frames from one country to another'), domestication or internalisation (external conflicts are mounted at national level) and externalisation – international actors intervening in internal conflicts (Della Porta and Tarrow, 2005, pp. 2–6).

Through transnational collective actions, NGOs have become powerful actors that are potent in bringing three types of change: cognitive, relational and environmental (Della Porta and Tarrow, 2005). Cognitive changes refer to the common adaptation of ideas and strategies leading to formation of newly coordinated and internally negotiated transnational identities and relational changes explain new power dynamics. Environmental change refers to the institutional context in which NGOs operate. It is explained earlier in the boomerang model.

The difference between NGOs and social movements is in the degree of institutionalisation. NGOs are more organised, registered organisations with paid professional staff, while movements are amorphous entities whose members can get together on a particular event and then part. Often as a movement evolves, it produces an NGO. The NGO then professionalises, and issues relating to transparency and accountability appear. Movement members are aware of that and may intentionally choose to opt for civic networks rather than NGOs, and NGO leaders have accepted such restructuring (Bendell and Ellersiek, 2009). This phenomenon has been referred to by activists as the 'movement of movements' (Mertes, 2004).

New networks, these 'movement of movements', have also attracted a new generation of activists who are members of several networks. Such networks may compete and ally with each other for audiences and resources for some campaigns and cooperate in others. This allows high levels of strategic flexibility and dynamism in the interaction between different networks. Tarrow and Della Porta have offered a new vocabulary to describe this phenomenon:

- by 'rooted cosmopolitans', we mean people and groups who are rooted in specific national contexts but who engage in regular activities that require their involvement in transnational networks of contacts and conflicts;

- by 'multiple belongings', we refer to the presence of activists with overlapping membership linked within loosely structured, polycentric networks;
- by 'flexible identities', we mean identities 'characterized by inclusiveness and a positive emphasis upon diversity and cross-fertilization, with limited identification' that 'develop especially around common campaigns on objects perceived as "concrete" and nurtured by an "evangelical" search for dialogue.'

(Tarrow and Della Porta, 2005, p. 237)

Both NGOs and social movements run programmes and campaigns, these being their tools of influence and the execution of ideas. It is difficult to evaluate success of such actions, as there is no unified set of indicators, and there are different types of campaigns. Some are short term, some action driven, others are about long-term impact. As most NGOs receive external funding to run, they must then prove to their donors how successful their performance is; this comes in contradiction to the reference of NGOs to their constituencies as the ultimate authority (Bendana, 2006).

In this regard, it makes sense to briefly discuss who forms NGOs, how they are connected to civil society and how democratic is that process.

Anyone can form an NGO, and such organisations can be a group of just a few people or a huge international organisation with thousands of employees and millions of supporters. For example, in 1979, David McTaggart convinced half a dozen loosely connected early groups to join in a single organisation called Greenpeace. Today, with headquarters in Amsterdam, Greenpeace has gained 2.8 million supporters worldwide and has opened national/regional offices in 41 countries (Greenpeace, 2009). But does the number of necessary global supporters mean that Greenpeace is really representing the views of all its supporters? Or perhaps all these people are reached by different channels, mostly online, and influenced by Greenpeace's formation of ideas.

The fourth position model by Fowler has taken NGOs out of the third sector position (civil society), proposing they be looked at as negotiators and validators located among three sectors: state, business and civil society (Fowler, 2002). Thus, NGOs have a great quality of connectivity, connecting individuals who come together to work on a common cause; they reach out to other groups and movements, organising civil society. They also reach out to state and business through either cooperation or opposition, implemented in the form of campaigns. Generally, NGOs are part of civil society despite moving beyond it in the way their actions are directed.

They are 'a body of individuals who associate for any of three purposes: (1) to perform public tasks that have been delegated to them by the state; (2) to perform public tasks for which there is a demand that neither the state nor for-profit organizations are willing to fulfill; or (3) to influence the direction of policy in the state, the for-profit sector, or other non-profit organizations.'

(Hall, 1987, p. 3)

To reiterate, the main tool of NGOs is ideology and action that support promoted ideas. One of the conceptual frameworks to describe it is the social capital concept. Social capital is generally understood as being connections between individuals, and the common civic values that influence society, and the nature, extent and impact of these interactions (Putnam, 2000; Coleman, 1988).

Putnam argued that these networks 'foster sturdy norms of generalized reciprocity and encourage the emergence of social trust'. When economic and political negotiation is embedded in dense networks of social interaction, incentives for opportunism are reduced (Putnam, 1995, p. 67). Thus, individuals form groups and networks which accumulate trust and are able to overcome the 'free rider' problem and, in that sense, enhance the efficiency of the social interaction and a grassroots democracy. It could have been expected that this would be reciprocated at global level. Yet this process is not straightforward. While Americans and other global citizens meet less to play games, their communication has not ceased; it has simply been transferred online and become global. The intense activity of social media that is seen today suggests that social capital has been created and accumulated online.

Anheier and Kendall (2000) posed a question about the connection of trust, social capital and non-profit organisations. They have distinguished three approaches to the study of trust based on economics, sociology and political science. Interestingly, these three approaches can be relevant to three sectors (business, state and civil society). For example, in market transactions, trust is 'an efficient mechanism to economize transaction costs'. In the social order, trust is a socially constructed reliability, and in social networks, trust is a social capital, a 'civic virtue' (Anheier and Kendall, 2000, p. 347).

Trust in networks becomes a tricky matter. On the one hand, within smaller networks, members of the same network have more interaction; similar backgrounds, interests and goals; and opportunities to build trust. These operate as safety nets for members and word of mouth is highly trusted. In larger networks, those across the globe, trust becomes more complicated. In order to attract members into their network, the organisers of global networks must choose a global cause – an issue that is universal or at least of interest and relevance to many – communicate it in an easily comprehensible manner and also bring emotion to the subject, so that potential members do not choose membership on the basis of rational choice logic or question the achievability of the network's goals; sometimes it may be enough to have high ideals. Environmental issues are a perfect subject on the basis of these criteria.

Conversely, smaller networks may choose neither to reach out to a larger audience nor create a large database of followers and partners; they can simply opt instead for a more closed model of membership and remain as a professional clique.

The increasing number of reported cases of malfeasance by NGOs has raised the question of trust in NGOs and their credibility in general (Gourevitch and Lake, 2012). At global level, NGOs have become serious participants in the political process and have gained the role of ideological arbitrage. But while the classical participants – political parties prove their authority by participating in elections

by obtaining public support, that is, they have a democratic mandate to offer their ideas, NGOs involved in political activity do not have to prove their right, yet can suddenly become 'equal to vox populi' (Narochnizkaia, 2008). Calls for accountability and suggestions to clarify and legitimise transparency are hardly new and have long been present in the academic literature and guidebooks for NGOs (Pratt, 2009). But what is in the guidebook and what occurs in reality is a different matter.

To conclude, the major definitional question about NGOs remains the same and unresolved. What NGOs can do is still unclear. In the period 1980 to the present, the world has borne witness to an unprecedented experiment of transferring institutional responsibilities from the state to NGOs. Shockingly, they are not fully understood, since most authors acknowledge the absence of a comprehensive NGO definition (Salamon and Anheier, 1997). Without a definition, they continue to hold the imposed, assumed but not proven, role of real change-bearer. The only part we know is that NGOs, together with other groups and individuals, form social movements and often communicate their ideas via social networks.

GM plants: why plants?

Now we move on to the second object of the study: genetically modified crops, a bone of contention in the studied debates among NGOs.

Genetically modified crops are plants that have genes modified in the laboratory. Genetic modification is 'a technique where individual genes can be copied and transferred to another living organism to alter its genetic makeup and thus incorporate or delete specific characteristics into or from the organism' (Bainbridge et al., 2000). The definitions within genetic engineering on organisms include host or recipient, the microorganism to be modified; the vector or carrier of the new genetic information; insert, or the new genetic information (nucleus acid); donor, the source of new genetic material; and resultant GMO (host(+vector)+insert (Bainbridge et al., 2000).

Manipulations with genes of humans, animals and plants have been met with a certain degree of suspicion and opposition based upon a number of arguments, socio-economic and ethical. While the experiments with animal DNA have raised ethical concerns, they are not comparable with the strength of opposition received by transgenic plants. There seemed to be little opposition to the creation of oncomouse, a mouse used in research to find a cure for cancer (Harraway, 1997). It is an interesting case of the asymmetry under examination:

The technologies used to produce GM crops are about the same as those for many human drugs including human insulin, and many of the companies involved are the same. It's true that most drug biotechnology involves microorganisms and not higher plants or animals. However, a strain of genetically-modified chickens was recently approved for human drug production – with scarcely a peep from the anti-GMO lobby.

(Daynard, 2015)