

Rising concerns about the impact of pesticides: an analysis of the public controversies

Isabelle Haynes, Réjane Paratte and Claire Lamine, INRA, France; Jan Buurma, LEI Wageningen UR, The Netherlands



© PAN Europe; MDRGF, France; Natuur en Milieu, Netherlands

Social Science Insights on Crop Protection No. 3

Background and method

In 1962, Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* was the first of a series of alerts highlighting the side-effects associated with pesticides. Pesticide use became a matter of contention. Political answers to the debate were first conceived as a matter of risk management to avoid acute pollution of nature, risks linked to food intake (maximum residue levels or MRLs) and farmers' exposure to dangerous substances. Our objective was to consider the content of the public debate and to analyse its evolution over recent years. We carried out a web and document analysis completed by twelve face-to-face interviews with non-governmental organisation (NGO) leaders in France, The Netherlands, Switzerland and at the European Union (EU) level.

Public debate on pesticides is animated by a small number of NGOs which target the institutions to gain normative changes

In each country, the public debate is animated by a small number of NGOs of various sizes and origins that establish strong networking for getting their voice heard at national or EU level. Their framing of the pesticide issue can differ from one country to the other. For example, while some of them have a political analysis of pesticides as a tool that participates in the negative impacts of the globalisation of agriculture, others are centred on the protection of nature (see Table 1). This difference doesn't prevent these NGOs sharing many normative demands such as the definition of a treatment frequency index and stricter pesticide registration rules. They also support alternative forms of agriculture (such as integrated pest management (IPM) or organic). Claims about pesticides have to be supported by public opinion if one wants MPs and public institutions to put them on their agenda and raising public controversies is a way of achieving this aim.

The Swiss case

The case of Switzerland is specific because, since 1993, integrated production has been widely implemented thanks to a change of agricultural policy that was supported in 1996 by a referendum. Therefore Swiss NGOs are less active on the pesticide issue. They focus on the follow-up of Swiss agricultural policy but can occasionally campaign, for example, against the sale and promotion of paraquat by Syngenta in southern countries.

Table 1: Framing of pesticide issues by NGOs in France, The Netherlands and at EU level

NGO	PAN Europe (EU)	MDGRF (France)	France nature Environnement (France)	Stichting Natuur en Milieu (The Netherlands)	Milieudefense (The Netherlands)
Framing	The globalisation of agriculture - for which pesticide use is a major tool - has adverse impacts on human health and on the environment	The pesticide industry participates in globalisation and in environmental pollution which are both playing against rural development	The negative impacts of pesticides on fauna and the environment should be targeted without opposing nature and human beings	Government has a duty to protect the environment. Nature conservation alone is not enough	The environment is a part of the food chain therefore food safety and environmental protection are part of the same story in which pesticides play a major role
Place of debate	European institutions	General public, EU institutions	General public through the network of nature conservation associations, French institutions. EU	General public, Dutch institutions, EU institutions	General public, EU institutions

Social Science Insights on Crop Protection No. 3

			<i>institutions not targeted directly but FNE is part of the European Environmental Bureau (EBB)</i>		
--	--	--	--	--	--

Source: ENDURE DR3.7 report

Reducing pesticide risks or reducing the use of pesticides?

Environmental NGOs have focused their action on reducing pesticide risks. In particular, they have emphasised the environmental impacts of pesticide use on biodiversity and water; although pesticide use was considered by most environmental NGOs as something unavoidable because of economic imperatives, the state of farmers' education and knowledge, or the necessity to fight against hunger. However, because they consider that there was no change in either farming practices or agricultural policies (despite the progressive ecological focus of the latter), NGOs have over time stiffened their positions. They started (at dates that vary from country to country, but from 1986 onwards) stronger campaigns against pesticide use.

Public debate is now constructed by the contradiction between the actors of the agribusiness, which target risk reduction without questioning agricultural practices, and NGOs, which demand not only the reduction of the adverse impacts of pesticides but also changes in the very conception of agriculture and the reduction of pesticide use. Since the beginning of the discussion on the thematic strategy on pesticides in 2000, the EU level has become the place for developing lobbying activities.

NGOs create controversy on the ongoing risk reduction strategy on two points:

- > A controversy about the substances that should be banned
- > A controversy about the capacity of Good Agricultural Practices to reduce the environmental impact of pesticides.

Therefore these controversies reflect a controversy about the very conception of agricultural systems. Since 2004, newcomers have been reinforcing the NGOs' position and have created a third controversy about the long-term impact of pesticides on human health.

Controversies about the impacts of pesticides for human health

The newcomers to the debate are NGOs working in the field of public health with the support of medical doctors or organisations. They contribute in raising awareness of the results of medical studies involving chemical use and human health, and on the knowledge gaps that these studies highlight.

In particular, knowledge is lacking on:

- > The impacts of the combination of substances within the same products.
- > The cumulative impacts of pesticides on human health (particularly for susceptible target groups such as pregnant women).

NGOs mobilise the precautionary principle and ask for changes in MRL standards and for the generalisation of IPM. They also expand the debate beyond the boundaries of the agricultural community (hence contributing to the reduction of the importance of the usual stakeholders) by asking for the extension of pesticide-free areas, regulation of home use etc. Actually, we can make the hypothesis that every book, broadcast or programme in which doctors make a link between chemicals/food and health reinforces the credibility of new information about the links between pesticide use and human health.

Tensions with farming communities

NGOs originally concentrated their action on lobbying the institutions and didn't develop their relationships with the farming world and the food chain. However, some NGOs, for example in France, have begun to establish links with alternative agriculture groups. Other NGOs, for example in The Netherlands, have moved to challenging supermarket chains, particularly on the respect of MRLs.

Rising concerns about the impact of pesticides: an analysis of the public controversies

Summary

Not all European non-governmental organisations (NGOs) share the same position about the pesticide issue, but they present homogeneous normative claims in the various arenas of debate.

Public health NGOs are newcomers in this sphere and expand the debate on the uncertainty linked to pesticide use by focusing on its cumulative long-term impacts not only on the health of farmers but also on the health of neighbours of treated areas and consumers of treated products.

By expanding the debate this way, NGOs put policy makers in an uncomfortable position: they have to endorse responsibility not only for the health of farmers but also for the health of the population as a whole.

For further information please contact:

Jan Buurma LEI Wageningen UR, Postbus 29703,
2502 LS Den Haag, Nederland.

Telephone: 00 31 70 3358330.

E-mail: jan.buurma@wur.nl

About ENDURE

ENDURE is the European Network for the Durable Exploitation of Crop Protection Strategies. ENDURE is a Network of Excellence (NoE) with two key objectives: restructuring European research and development on the use of plant protection products, and establishing ENDURE as a world leader in the development and implementation of sustainable pest control strategies through:

- > Building a lasting crop protection research community
- > Providing end-users with a broader range of short-term solutions
- > Developing a holistic approach to sustainable pest management
- > Taking stock of and informing plant protection policy changes.

Eighteen organisations in 10 European countries are committed to ENDURE for four years (2007-2010), with financial support from the European Commission's Sixth Framework Programme, priority 5: Food Quality and Security.

Website and ENDURE Information Centre:

www.endure-network.eu

This publication was funded by EU grant (Project number: 031499), under the Sixth Framework Programme, and is catalogued as ENDURE Social Science Insights on Crop Protection - Number 3, published in February, 2010.

© Photos, from top to bottom: A.S. Walker; INRA, C. Slagmulder; JKI, B. Hommel; Agroscope ART; SZIE; INRA, N. Bertrand; Vitropic; INRA, F. Carreras ; JKI, B. Hommel; INRA, J. Weber; INRA, J.F. Picard; JKI, B. Hommel

