

# Genetically modified food and labeling: the need for transparency



## Introduction

### *The need for transparency*

The tenth principle of the United Nations Global Compact states that: "Businesses should work against corruption in all its forms, including extortion and bribery." While the UK is relatively corruption-free in business, merely avoiding corruption is not enough an effort: the objective of the tenth principle is also to develop policies and concrete programs to address corruption, such as transparency enhancement programs that contribute to a more transparent global economy.<sup>4</sup>

### *Genetically modified food*

To this regard, a subject consumers are actively concerned about and have buying power to influence is genetically modified food (GMF). While the scientific debate fails to bring adequate findings to either prove or disprove that GMF might endanger consumers' health, or not; consumers demand transparent and informative information over what they are eating and explicit transparency on part of food groups, some of them who do not wish to label food as genetically modified in order to avoid the risk of losing sales and customers. The following makes the case for transparency in GMF labelling, reviews the current state of affairs in regulation and explores gaps in transparency to be filled, while encouraging transparent GMF labelling.

### *Consumers and GMF*

Attitudes towards GMF have evolved towards greater acceptance of GMF, a Food Standards Agency (FSA) research shows. Figures illustrate an increase in public support for GMF in the UK, from 10% in 1999 to 19% in 2008.<sup>5</sup> Attitudes may have changed, but as GMF is more commonly found in supermarkets than 10 years ago, new challenges arise. One of them is conciliating the demands of consumers for information and GMF labelling regulations, with the demands of the food and grocery retailing industry; and to provide regulation over labelling practices.

## The case for transparency

### *Consumer demands*

Consumers have been feeling confused by currently available information on GMF and demand clearer, more factual information, easily available when they shop. Furthermore, the appearance of "non-GM" (non genetically modified) or "GM-free" labels have sparked concerns in the public on how widespread the use of GMF is in other products.<sup>1</sup>

### *Impact on the environment*

Consumers are concerned about the effect of GMF consumption on their health in the long-term as well as the environmental impact of GMF.<sup>2</sup> Greenpeace notably warns of the serious threat to biodiversity GMF presents for crops, as cross-pollination with non-GM crops and contamination of the surrounding environment with 'genetic pollution.' In addition, the organisation underlines that there is no fundamental need for GMF, and it merely contributes to the commercial gains of a small number of biotechnology companies.<sup>3</sup>

### *Impact on health*

Health-wise, plenty of safety assessments are carried out, more than for non-GM food; the World Health Organisation (WHO) lists a number of safety aspects generally assessed: "(a) direct health effects (toxicity), (b) tendencies to provoke allergic reaction (allergenicity); (c) specific components thought to have nutritional or toxic properties; (d) the stability of the inserted gene; (e) nutritional effects associated with genetic modification; and (f) any unintended effects which could result from the gene insertion." Although the WHO refrains from making general statements on the safety of GMF, it states that: "GM foods currently available on the international market have passed risk assessments and are not likely to present risks for human health. In addition, no effect on human health has been shown as a result of the consumption of such foods by the general population in the countries where they have been approved."

## Labelling genetically modified food

### *The presence of GMF in our diet*

Although no genetically modified crops are grown in the UK, many animals are fed on a GMF diet from imported animal feed, sparking consumer demand for an honest GMF labelling of meat and milk.<sup>9</sup> The Soil Association investigated and found that a large proportion of non-organic milk, dairy products and pork sold in the UK originated from GM-fed animals. The organisation recommends consumers to buy their milk and meat from retailers or food producers that guarantee their products are GM-free or organic. In response to consumer demand and increasing awareness, Marks and Spencer has been first to offer exclusively fresh milk, eggs and meat produced with non-GM feed sold under its own brand<sup>10</sup> since the 1990's.<sup>11</sup> Historically, consumers have had a hard time answering the question: "what is in it for me?" They could see no apparent direct benefit for me in GMF, it was not cheaper, it did not have a longer shelf life, nor did it taste better. Food scares in the latter 1990's, although not related to GMF, have further diminished the confidence of consumers in GMF. Arising debates led to greater consumer demand for GMF labelling, in order for them to be able to make an informed choice,<sup>12</sup> and to support, or not, GMF through their own consumption.

### *Current regulation*

Overall, there is a consensus between consumers: labels should include all GM processes, including the use of GM technology or of GM animal feed, while under current regulation they do not have to be labelled.<sup>13</sup> It is also worth noting that unintentional use of GM ingredients does not have to be labelled. If in that case, accidentally used GM ingredients represent only traces (below 0.9% for approved GMF varieties) they do not have to be labelled. The UK mostly follows European Union legislation; and the FSA emphasizes its focus on offering consumer choice, through accurate information and labelling and also affirms its confidence in the careful safety assessments GMF food goes through.<sup>14</sup>

In addition, non-regulatory issues arise as nearly two thirds of soya imported to the UK, mostly from the US, is genetically modified and although it is used mostly for animal feed, it risks infiltrating other foods' supply chain without being easily detected. Overall, it is likely that if we were to test supposedly GM-free foods on supermarket shelves, traces of GMF would be found.<sup>6</sup> Hence, suspicions and actual cases of genetic contamination of non-GM crops might harden the task for the industry, lobbyists and politicians.

### *Transparency and GMF*

The 2009 FSA research on attitudes to GMF concluded that "the principles of transparency and consumer choice were clearly a priority for people holding a range of attitudes towards GMF and this shaped their views on regulation and labelling."<sup>7</sup> Hence, consumer views, the GM biotech industry and food industries and regulation should all put a clear focus on transparency and enhance it through labelling. Although adverse business effects may occur, regulation in Europe and in the UK seem to be moving towards more transparent GMF labelling, which consumers also support. To ensure future compliance, companies using GM products may adopt further voluntary GMF labelling schemes and go ahead of potential future changes in regulation. The adverse effect of transparency however, although it can be mediated through consumer information and through marketing, is likely to be drops in sales of GM products, in a market where non-GM foods can be marketed as such and transparently labelled GMF foods competes with 'non-GM' labelled foods. The milk market in the United States is a prime example of that, as when milk started to be labelled and 'GM-hormone free,' sales of GM milk dropped and food companies such as Walmart or Starbucks switched to non-GM milk for their own products to follow consumer demand, which explains the vigorous opposition of GM companies to transparent GMF labelling.<sup>8</sup>

## Conclusion

### *Consumer needs*

Genetically modified food tends to be, in spite of a lack of conclusive research and evidence as far as human health is concerned, a product that consumers are rather opinionated about. If current regulation forces foods containing GMF ingredients to be labeled as such, gaps still remain as products from animals fed on a GMF diet for instance do not have to be labeled as containing GMF food. As experience demonstrates that transparent labeling of GMF food tend to slow down sales and encourage food producers to switch for non-GM foods, and as GM companies fight against transparent labeling, the need for clear and transparent GMF labeling is even greater for consumers who oppose including GMF to their diet and fear the environmental consequences of GM crops, as well as for their own health.

### *The consequences of transparency*

Consumer choice must be preserved through accurate consumer information, and companies using GM products should go beyond current regulation and anticipate future regulation on animals fed a GMF diet and either review their labelling practices or switch for an animal diet that does not create such controversy and does not threaten nearby biodiversity. Alike regulatory practices, the widespread implementation of “non-GM” labels in the UK on competing products could threaten sales as well for non transparent companies that could not hide GM in milk, eggs or meat.

Hence, transparency, either voluntary, imposed by future regulation or by contrast with “non-GM” labeled products, may translate into further acceptance of GMF on part of consumers for instance, as the FSA already found greater public support (almost twice as important) for GMF in 2008 than in 1999; or may as well translate into food producers switching back to non-GM ingredients for their animal food. In any case, transparency should prevail, ensure accurate consumer information and support the right to consumer choice.



<sup>1</sup>[http://www.theecologist.co.uk/News/news\\_round\\_up/369542/public\\_wants\\_labelling\\_of\\_all\\_GMF\\_food.html](http://www.theecologist.co.uk/News/news_round_up/369542/public_wants_labelling_of_all_GMF_food.html)

<sup>2</sup><http://www.thisislondon.co.uk/standard/article-23774938-GMF-still-seen-as-frankenstein-food.do>

<sup>3</sup><http://www.greenpeace.org.uk/GMF>

<sup>4</sup><http://www.unglobalcompact.org/AboutTheGC/TheTenPrinciples/principle10.html>

<sup>5</sup>[http://www.eatoutmagazine.co.uk/online\\_article/FSA-publishes-research-on-attitudes-to-new-food-technologies/10374](http://www.eatoutmagazine.co.uk/online_article/FSA-publishes-research-on-attitudes-to-new-food-technologies/10374)

<sup>6</sup><http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2009/oct/16/too-late-to-stop-GMF>

<sup>7</sup><http://www.food.gov.uk/multimedia/pdfs/GMReportnov09summary.pdf>

<sup>8</sup><http://www.soilassociation.org/News/NewsItem/tabid/91/smId/463/ArticleID/215/reftab/247/t/Soil-Association-calls-for-compulsory-labelling-of-food-from-GMF-crops-in-light-of-new-FSA-research/Default.aspx>

<sup>9</sup><http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1230995/Consumers-demand-honest-GMF-labelling-meat-milk.html>

<sup>10</sup><http://www.soilassociation.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=bkVSpF9FMZc%3d&tabid=390>

<sup>11</sup><http://corporate.marksandspencer.com/page.aspx?pointerid=e0a4ee75b1d4494fac2e6abbdfc7c552>

<sup>12</sup><http://www.who.int/foodsafety/publications/biotech/20questions/en/>

<sup>13</sup><http://www.foodqualitynews.com/Public-Concerns/Consumers-want-better-GMF-labelling-Report>

<sup>14</sup><http://www.eatwell.gov.uk/healthissues/factsbehindissues/GMFfood/>