PARTICIPATION IN ITALY: THE PUBLIC AND GENETICALLY MODIFIED CROPS

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A. Introduction

Distrust of the public, risk, and uncertainty associated with the development and use of technological products elicit calls for the inclusion of lay citizens in the decision-making processes that oversee the adoption of controversial technological products (Irwin 1995). EU policy makers assert the necessity and value of implementing forms of governance that include the broader public in making decisions related to controversial technologies (Abels 2002). Among policy scholars there is a general understanding that increased public participation yields both better and more democratic decisions. However, researchers have only recently begun to scrutinize the effectiveness of actual participatory efforts. In the context of food biotechnologies, a European Union Directive requires all Member States to consult the public before genetically modified crops are cultivated in the open for experimental purposes (EU Directive 2001/18). The various ways in which such consultations with the public have been devised and carried out in different Member States, and the notion of citizenship entailed by those country-specific participative forms, have been the objects of a multinational study (Bora & Hausendorf 2004; Bora & Hausendorf 2006) conducted with both a sociological and socio-linguistic approach. Building on the results of the Bora and Hausendorf study carried out in Italy (Collavin & Pellegrini 2004) the present work proposes data-rooted reflections over the nature of public participation in Italy in the context of food GMOs.

First I will briefly illustrate some of the key features and philosophical assumptions of inclusive forms of assessing new technologies. The Italian case suggests adopting a perspective built on the notion of public participation in conjunction with current processes of representative democracies. In the following I will consider the Italian situation. I will look closely at key texts in the record of public engagement with food
biotechnologies in Italy. I will answer the following questions: How has public participation taken form in Italy in the context of food biotechnologies? What has been the impact of public participation in Italy on the current regulation of GM farming? This paper is therefore a contribution from an empirical perspective to the ongoing discussion on participatory science and its current relevance for governance.

B. Participation and power

Biotechnologies have become a key terrain for confronting the challenge that scientific developments pose to democratic forms of government. Worldwide public debate has encouraged theoretical discussions among political theorists (David 2005) and stimulated an array of experimental and empirical attempts to better the decision-making process by admitting – in one form or other – more individuals into the procedure, especially more diverse and dispassionate individuals. The reason for having participation in a democracy is first of all normative. All democratic theories imply some level of participation of the public, at least as citizens with right to elect their representatives. However, for both theorists and policy makers advocating strong democracy, the reasons for greater and more direct participation of the public are primarily functional. Increasing public participation is assumed to democratize decisions, particularly in highly complex domains pertaining to the fields of science and technology (Bechmann 1993). EU policy makers oft en use “participation” and “democratization” as causally correlated concepts, where the former is assumed to lead to the latter. Participation is given a number of positive normative, epistemological, ethical and societal attributes. A good example of the discursive repertoire (Potter & Wetherell 1987) of this type of participatory stance is offered by the 2001 White Paper on European Governance. The programmatic document begins acknowledging a widening gap between citizens and institutions. With the aim of regaining both the trust and interest of citizens, the White Paper enlists participation as one of the five recommended principles of good governance:

Participation. The quality, relevance and effectiveness of EU policies depend on ensuring wide participation throughout the policy chain – from conception to implementation. Improved participation is likely to create more confidence in the end result and in the Institutions which deliver policies. Participation crucially depends on central governments