



## Biotechnology and genetic engineering: What Europeans think about it in 1993. Some key results of the Spring 1993 Eurobarometer survey

*Eric Marlier*  
INRA (Europe) — E.C.O.

- A large number of persons interviewed — particularly in Greece, Spain, Ireland and Portugal — were unable or unwilling to answer certain questions. Compared to the previous survey carried out on the same subject (Spring 1991), this proportion has dropped however.
- As in the 1991 poll, the two main sources of information used by Europeans for what concerns “new developments that affect our way of life” are, in ranking order, television (the supremacy of which has yet again been confirmed) and newspapers.
- In ranking order, the most reliable sources of information on biotechnology/genetic engineering are considered to be environmental organisations, consumer organisations and schools/universities. In 1991, consumer organisations slightly supplanted environmental organisations. If

consumer organisations have lost their predominance as "the most reliable source" it is not because they have become less popular than in 1991 but because environmental organisations have themselves made considerable progress.

- Less than one respondent in five believes that Public Authorities provide a reliable source of information regarding biotechnology/genetic engineering. In Denmark, however, this percentage is nearer one in two. In 1991, the situation was similar but not as pronounced: the Danish result was weaker and the European average slightly higher.
- Each of the seven new technologies analysed is perceived by a large majority of persons interviewed as "improving our way of life in the next 20 years". The only two technologies for which this majority is not absolute but relative are genetic engineering (as opposed to biotechnology) and space exploration. As in 1991 these find, overall, less favour. The level of "optimism" regarding genetic engineering has lessened considerably since the last survey. This drop is very pronounced in Germany and particularly in the five new Länder.
- 48% of interviewees believe that biotechnology/genetic engineering "will improve our way of life in the next 20 years" ; 15% think the opposite. In 1991, "optimism" was at 50% and "pessimism" at 11%.
- In general, when there exists a significant difference, the term "genetic engineering" is less well known and has a more negative connotation than the term "biotechnology". This was already the case in 1991.
- Support for biotechnology/genetic engineering, as well as "optimism" regarding it, is a positive function of what is known on the subject. As in the survey two years ago it depends to a great extent on the type of application and is linked to the risk associated with it; a risk which is considered to be neither negligible nor dramatic, regardless of the application analysed.
- Except for research on farm animals and, to a lesser extent, food research, where opinions are mixed, those interviewed "tend to agree" that the various kinds of research into biotechnology/genetic engineering discussed in the questionnaire are "worthwhile and should be encouraged". It was already the case in 1991.
- Regardless of the nationality and the application of biotechnology/ genetic engineering in question, demand for governmental control of the various applications is massive. This was even clearer in 1991.
- The classification of the different types of research according to the degree of support given to them is identical in 1991 and 1993. It is the same for the classifications linked to the associated risk or related to the level of "demand for control".



- Since the last survey, support for the different applications analysed has, overall, slightly dropped. In Germany and especially in the five new Länder this drop in "global support" is particularly pronounced. The "global risk" associated with these applications has remained stationary whereas the level of "global demand for control" has somewhat dropped.
- Whereas the perception of risk is particularly high in Denmark (it is the highest in the Twelve), the support recorded here is around the European average. Although weaker than that registered in Denmark, the perception of risk is also very high in West Germany (it is the second highest in the Community). On the other hand, support here is a great deal lower than the Community average (it is the weakest in the Twelve). This divergence in attitudes has increased in comparison to 1991. One plausible explanation of this result is that the Danes (see above), even more now than two years ago, are proportionally many more than the West Germans to trust Public Authorities "to tell the truth about biotechnology/genetic engineering".
- In Luxembourg, global support, perception of risk as well as global demand for control have noticeably increased since the previous survey. In Portugal, on the other hand, we observe a considerable rise in the global perception of risk, accompanied by a significant drop in global support and global demand for control.
- As for research into biotechnology/genetic engineering involving human beings as well as animals and plants, at least three out of four interviewees declare that "there should be clear ethical rules" indicating when research "may not in any way" be undertaken.

The questionnaire, the names of the institutes involved in the research, various technical details (sampling method, composition of the sample, ...), and an in-depth analysis of the results related to these questions can be found in the full report of the survey findings. This report can be obtained from:

Mr. O. DIETRICH  
European Commission  
DG XII.E-1  
SDME 02/64  
Rue de la Loi 200  
B-1049 Brussels  
Tel.(32.2) 295.50.33  
Fax(32.2) 295.53.65

Mr. K. REIF  
European Commission  
DG X.B-SRA  
T120 01/108  
Rue de la Loi 200  
B-1049 Brussels  
Tel.(32.2) 299.94.41  
Fax(32.2) 299.92.05