The Forests Dialogue

Scoping Dialogue on Genetically-Modified Trees 10-11 November 2011 | New Haven, CT, USA Co-Chairs' Summary Report

by Peter Kanowski, Joseph Lawson and Roberto Smeraldi

The Forests Dialogue (TFD) convened this exploratory meeting – a 'Scoping Dialogue' – of 26 leaders in the forest sector with an interest in the topic of genetically-modified (GM) trees, at Yale University, 10-11 November 2011. Participants (Annex 1) represented a diversity of interests, including forest sector corporations, other forest owners, non-government and civil society organisations, the World Bank, and universities.

The Scoping Paper prepared for the meeting identified a number of reasons for TFD engagement with the topic of GM trees:

- "on the one hand, there has been significant research progress relevant to the use of GM technologies in trees. Commercial plantations of GM trees have been established on a small scale in China, and the number of field trials of GM trees is increasing globally, principally in the Americas. Proponents of GM trees believe that their use offers a suite of benefits, and that there is considerable potential for and merit in their adoption;
- on the other hand, as with GM agriculture, there has been substantial civil society concern directed at the use of GM trees. Opponents of GM trees believe the risks associated with their use, and perhaps even their testing, are too great. Some opposition to GM trees derives from opposition to industrial-scale, intensively-managed forestry as a land use and production system. As a result, there are strong debates about GM trees in both the scientific community and in civil society;
- there is a window of opportunity, at a stage when there has been little deployment of GM trees, for open and productive dialogue about substantive issues associated with their further development and possible use."

The purposes of the Scoping Dialogue were to build shared understanding of the range of issues and perspectives on GM trees, to identify key areas of agreement and disagreement, and the potential role and focus of any subsequent TFD engagement.

The Forests Dialogue, Yale University, 360 Prospect Street, New Haven, Connecticut, 06511, USA
O: +1 203 432 5966 F: +1 203 432 3809 W: www.theforestsdialogue.org E: tfd@yale.edu

Co-chair Robert Smeraldi

Plenary Discussion

Karen Steer

Co-chair Peter Kanowski

AGENDA

The first day's agenda comprised a welcome and introductions, presentation and discussion of the Scoping Paper, and the identification of key issues and perspectives; all of the agenda was conducted in plenary session. The second day's agenda comprised small-group discussion of an agreed set of key theme areas, and a plenary reporting-back and concluding discussion.

INITIAL DISCUSSION TOPICS

A number of topics emerged from participants' opening remarks, their reactions to the Scoping Paper, and plenary discussion of these. These topics formed the basis for further initial discussion on day one. Each is summarised below:

1. Clarification of TFD's purpose in addressing the topic of GM trees

   TFD members explained that the topic had been identified as a contentious forest sector issue in various fora (eg certification bodies, FAO, WBCSD) and other TFD processes. However, questions such as whether TFD had a role in addressing it and whether the time was right for dialogue about it, remained open, and to be informed by the Scoping Dialogue.

2. Scope of dialogue about GM trees, and representation in dialogues

   The scope of dialogue was important to participants in a number of respects, including: the scope of (bio)technologies under discussion; that of how 'forests' and 'forestry' were defined; and how each of public and private interests and goals were considered. Participants agreed that the scope of dialogue about these issues should be broad: for example, that GM trees should be considered in the context of forests more generally, and the landscape and development contexts of which they were part; and that GM technologies should be considered in the broader context of other technologies. The need for the representation of more constituencies and geographies in any further dialogues, and for engaging with those in their specific contexts and locations, was agreed by all participants.

3. Knowledge and understanding of GM trees

   Discussion of issues of knowledge and understanding addressed fundamental questions such as what comprises genetic modification of trees, the rationale for and against GM trees, the status of relevant science, and the nature and scope of impact and risk assessment. Participants agreed that consideration of GM tree-related issues needs to be informed by high levels of knowledge and clarity of understanding, and that there also remained major knowledge gaps that needed to be addressed.

4. Social and development issues associated with any use of GM trees

Social and development issues of principal concern included the ways in which GM trees might be used in less-developed countries: for example, whether GM trees were necessarily or likely associated with large-scale, corporate investments; the relationships between these forms of investments and the livelihoods, rights and interests of others; and impacts of their use on the rights (e.g. intellectual property, land, tenure, water) of groups such as the poor and marginalised, Indigenous Peoples, and smallholders. Participants agreed the overarching importance of social impact (eg, the distribution of power, benefits, costs, risks and impacts) as a context for assessment of any use of GM trees.

5. Impacts and risks of GM trees

Impacts and risks were discussed in terms of how they were perceived and understood (noting the differences between different countries/ continents/ types of forest, between different stakeholder groups, and between individuals), the 'bottom line' assessments from various participants' perspectives, and regulatory processes and standards (international and national, and state and non-state). Participants agreed the fundamental importance of impact and risk assessment processes, and noted relevant work that addressed this topic , but did not seek to reach further agreement on it.

6. Governance of research

In addition to the broader issues of governance of use of GM trees, the governance of research on GM trees – including field trials – was identified as an issue of general concern. Tensions between the need for transparency and access to data, and commercial and research pressures for confidentiality, were noted. The point of agreement noted in #5 above applies here also.

FURTHER DISCUSSION OF KEY THEMES

Small-group discussion for part of day 2 focused on agreed key themes of social, knowledge, and governance issues, whilst noting that the themes were linked. The plenary reporting-back for each theme is summarised below:

- Social issues - key elements of discussion were:

  1. the relationship of people and trees - which were noted to vary between peoples, communities and individuals, and with different forms of forest;
  2. the issues of who pays, who benefits, and who is impacted – and the scale (eg global to local) at which these issues are manifested and assessed, noting that different values that may be emphasised at each of these scales;
  3. the question of how divergent values are addressed – and acknowledgement that divergent values cannot begin to be reconciled in the absence of trust, which in turn emphasises the need to explore whether and how trust between parties can be established. The lack of trust between many of the actors concerned with GM trees was noted.

SIMONE LOVERA

Knowledge issues

This discussion reflected on contextual mega-trends (eg population, consumption, land use), and the knowledge demands and gaps they are generating (for all forms of trees and forests); on how current knowledge of the potential impacts of GM trees diminishes as the scale of assessment increases, from individual tree to stand and landscape levels; and whether or not the scale of potential impacts of GM trees followed the same trend.


CO-CHAIR JOE LAWSON

Governance issues

Much of this discussion was predicated on the recognition that better governance related to GM trees was needed, that efforts to improve governance might begin with the governance of research. Issues discussed by the Social Issues group (3.1 above)were agreed to be fundamental to governance processes. Links to principles and issues discussed within TFD's Free, Prior and Informed Consent dialogue stream were noted.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION – ANY FUTURE FOR DIALOGUE ON GM TREES?

BRYAN MUÑOZ CASTILLO

Participants exchanged frank views about the value of any future dialogue, mediated by TFD or otherwise, about GM trees. One set of views emphasised the preconditions for and limits of dialogue – noting that dialogue has to be built on common ground, which may not exist between strongly oppositional parties; that dialogue itself does not change the underlying facts of an issue, only the knowledge and understanding (including of others' views) associated with it; and expressed concerns that participation in dialogue might be incorrectly interpreted or used as legitimation by competing interests. Many who held these views felt that there were fundamental insitutionalised barriers to establishing the necessary basis for trust, and thus for meaningful dialogue, between different actors associated with the GM trees debate. One associated conclusion was that addressing knowledge gaps was a higher priority than further dialogue, and perhaps the only option that could be pursued.

KERRY CESAREO AND LINEU SIQUERIA

Another set of views noted that the complexity of issues, values and perspectives associated with GM trees meant that positions about the issues did not exist on a single 'proponent – opponent' axis as might be inferred from the Scoping Paper; and emphasised the transformative power of dialogue built on respect for divergent values and perspectives, whilst acknowledging the strength of those divergences. One associated conclusion was that further dialogue might be useful in improving knowledge and building respect, on the condition that constituencies and perspectives missing from this meeting (eg, those noted in 2.2 and 2.4 above) were represented.

The co-chairs undertook to respect each of these sets of views in their reporting of the meeting , in their thinking about possible next steps, and in discussions within TFD about those steps. The co-chairs note that TFD's Steering Committee will consider this report, whether TFD should continue a process about GM trees and, if so, what form(s) that process should take.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This summary draws on, and tries to do justice to, the work of the participants who participated in the TFD Scoping Dialogue held in New Haven in November 2011. The co-chairs thank the participants for their feedback, which greatly improved an earlier draft of this summary document.

REFERENCES

[1] Kanowski, P. 2011. Genetically-modified trees: opportunities for dialogue *www.theforestsdialogue.org/dialogue/genetically-modified-trees/genetically-modified-trees-scoping-dialogue/*

[2] Discussion at the Dialogue noted that there were other interests concerned about the use of GM Trees - eg. scientists and governments. The use of the term 'civil society' in the Scoping Paper was intended to be inclusive rather than exclusive (see, eg. M. Edwards. 2004. Civil Society. Polity Press).

[3] For further context, see TFD's Strategic Plan 2011-2015, p7. *www.theforestsdialogue.org*

[4] See eg. Steinbracher & Lorch 2008. Scoping paper reference #60.

[5] *www.theforestsdialogue.org/dialogues/free-prior-and-informed-consent/*

DIALOGUE PARTICIPANTS

George Asher	Lake Taupo Forest Trust, New Zealand
Bryan Muñoz Castillo	Instituto Interamericano de Cooperación para la Agricultura
Kerry Cesareo	World Wildlife Fund
Adam Costanza	Institute of Forest Biotechnology
Gerhard Dieterle	World Bank
Yousry El-Kassaby	University of British Columbia
Bob Emory	Weyerhaeuser
Peter Gardiner	Mondi
James Griffiths	World Business Council for Sustainable Development
Steven Hamburg	Environmental Defense Fund
Nancy Hood	ArborGen
Lineu Siqueira Junior	Suzano Pulp and Paper
Peter Kanowski	Australian National University
Skip Krasny	Kimberly-Clark

Gerhard Dieterle and Ricarda Steinbrecher

Bob Emory

Joseph Lawson	MeadWestvaco Corporation
Timo Lehesvirta	UPM Kymmene
Simone Lovera	Global Forest Coalition
Alan Lucier	National Council for Air and Stream Improvement
James Mayers	International Institute for Environment and Development
Anne Petermann	Global Justice Ecology Project
Miriam Prochnow	Apremavi
Heikki Rissanen	Stora Enso
Carlos Roxo	Fibria
Roberto Smeraldi	Amigos da Terra Amazônia Brasileira
Karen Steer	Forest Stewardship Council
Ricarda Steinbrecher	EcoNexus

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All TFD related enquires should be directed to Gary Dunning - gary.dunning@yale.edu