

## **BIOTECHNOLOGIES AND PUBLIC OPINION IN ITALY 2004 A SYNOPSIS**

The 2004 fourth edition of the survey on "Biotechnologies and public opinion in Italy", carried out by *Observe-Science in Society*, in collaboration with the *National Committee of Biosafety and Biotechnologies*, identifies some key elements shaping the current attitude of Italians to this issue and also highlights the main changes over the years.

### **How much do people know about biotechnologies?**

As regards public knowledge of biotechnologies, large gaps persist even if these gaps have been counterbalanced by a clear trend towards improvement in recent years: the percentage of those that can be considered to lack awareness of biotechnologies has decreased from 53% in 2003 to the current 41% overall. Knowledge of the current normative law concerning commercialization of foods containing OGM products appears RATHER poor: 42% of Italians think that commercialization is illegal and 16% cannot answer.

### **How do we obtain the information and how would we like to be informed?**

While traditional media – in particular the TV, with a prevalence of news and scientific programs - remain important sources of information for approximately half of the respondents, there is a stronger demand of information: 70% of Italians believe that the media do not pay enough attention to biotechnologies. Not only is more information required, but also – and moreover – a *different* kind of information is deemed necessary: more suitable to one's own perceived level of competence (47% of respondents judge their educational background inadequate to clearly follow current provided information) and more citizen-oriented (55% would prefer to be informed through leaflets or forums between scientists and citizens).

### **Who would we like to inform us? And, more in general, who do we trust?**

Most Italians (42%) consider the Ministry of Health their preferred reference institution for information on biotechnologies. The Italian Biosafety and Biotechnologies Committee is placed second, even if more than half of Italians are unable to correctly identify its role - followed by local institutions and other ministries (Environment, Agriculture). In general, university and research institutions remain the most trustworthy sources on biotechnologies among Italians (35%), followed by consumer (26%) and environmental associations (15%).

## **Research on biotechnologies: how important is it?**

Italians place research on biotechnologies among their three main priorities of research (13% of respondents consider biotechnologies the main field to invest in), after research on alternative energies (26%) and climatic changes (19%) but before neurosciences, nanotechnologies, space and nuclear research. Within biotechnologies, research in medical fields has been assigned a clear priority: 60% would focus on stem cells and 58% on studies for early diagnoses of genetic illnesses. There is significantly less consensus for agricultural biotechnological research, considered a priority by 17% of Italians. Similarly, while nearly all (92%) support the continuation of research in the field of medical biotechnologies, the percentage of those in favor of the continuation of research in the agriculture field decreases to 59%.

## **Unity, risk and moral acceptability of biotechnological applications**

This dualism – a positive attitude towards medical biotechnologies and a considerably more skeptical attitude towards agricultural biotechnologies is also reflected in the evaluations of biotechnological applications, that seem to have become more favorable than in the past. 76% of respondents consider utilizing human embryos with a view to finding possible beneficial cures (68% of respondents think it is morally acceptable and 42% risky), two Italians out of three still judge the production OF parasite-resistant GM fruits and vegetables highly risky (useful for 41% of respondents). An exception is made for human cloning for reproductive purposes, being considered morally unacceptable by more than eight out of ten Italians.

A valuable indication of the perceived “relative dangerousness” degree is provided by the “risk-thermometer” that places gm food in third position (15%), quite below traffic pollution (48%) and electromagnetic pollution (27%).

## **Biotechnologies: who makes the decisions?**

The European Union holds the main responsibility for the decisions to be made concerning biotechnological research according to the 33% of Italians, who believe that an increasingly important role should be assigned also to the scientists in this field. Nonetheless, the request of increasing citizen involvement in these matters is still strong among the general public: one respondent out of five believes that all citizens should be involved in decision making about biotechnologies.

*The 2004 edition of "Biotechnologies and Public Opinion in Italy" was carried out through telephone interviews on a sample of 964 people, representative of Italian population aged more than 20 years.*

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**Observa – Science in Society** is a non-profit cultural association which aims at promoting the study and the discussion of the interaction between science and society, stimulating dialogue among researchers, policy makers and citizens.

Observa focuses on three main areas: **Science Communication, Research and Innovation policy** and **Science, Citizens and Technology**. Its research studies and activities aim at analysing, developing and evaluating solutions for public participation in a scientific, technological, health and environmental context; innovative procedures to involve the public in complex decisions and, in general, forms of dialogue between scientists and the wider public.

Observa conducts research studies on issues like public perception of biotechnologies, the impact of museum and science centers, the evaluation of research activities, food safety and people's perceptions of food related risks, and the attitude of young generations towards science curricula.

With its **Science and Society Observatory**, Observa regularly monitors the relationship between citizens and science in Italy.

Observa organises seminars and training workshops, publishes studies and research materials both on its website and its publication series. With its annual publication **Science in Society Facts and Figures**, Observa provides data and information to help understand the state and transformation of research and innovation in our society.

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