

Green genetic engineering : "Greenpeace has failed"

- By Juliette Irmer
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As was the case here in Riedstadt in southern Hesse, Greenpeace launched massive campaigns of intimidation against science two decades ago. Picture: dpa

A worldwide initiative of Nobel Laureates will rehabilitate genetic engineering as a key technology for global nutrition. Sir Richard Roberts is all about the poorest. And the moral aberrations of anti-GM activists.

In addition to health, the 68th Nobel Laureate Meeting in Lindau also dealt with a topic of the future that not only moved Nobel laureates to medicine: plant breeding with the help of [genetic engineering](#). The Briton Sir Richard-Roberts launched a campaign of laureates some time ago, which promotes high-tech methods from biotech laboratories (see article [here](#)).

We interviewed Roberts on the margins of the Lindau meeting on the socio-political project.

Professor Roberts, you have been fighting vehemently against [Greenpeace](#) and other GM opponents for three years . What brought you into this role as a lawyer for genetically modified crops, the GMOs?

I was invited to the 80th birthday of a good friend who was instrumental in the development of GMOs. Many plant biologists present spoke about the difficult working conditions in Europe due to the massive anti-GMO propaganda of Greenpeace and others. About the fact that they could not express themselves publicly, because they would be immediately discredited.



Those who work for the agricultural industry are automatically implausible. I was wondering if it was not possible to correct the misinformation of Greenpeace. Their anti-GMO attitude is devastating in developing countries. In various lectures, I realized that the voice of a Nobel Prize winner has weight, and so I started to win other laureates for the cause.

How can GMOs help developing countries?

In many of these countries, people need to grow their food. Otherwise they have nothing to eat, supermarkets do not exist. On their little land they should be allowed to grow the most productive crops. Genetic engineering is the most advanced method of plant breeding. We shorten the breeding process, which can take a good twenty years in conventional breeding, to a few years, and it is also much more precise: We select certain genes with specific properties,

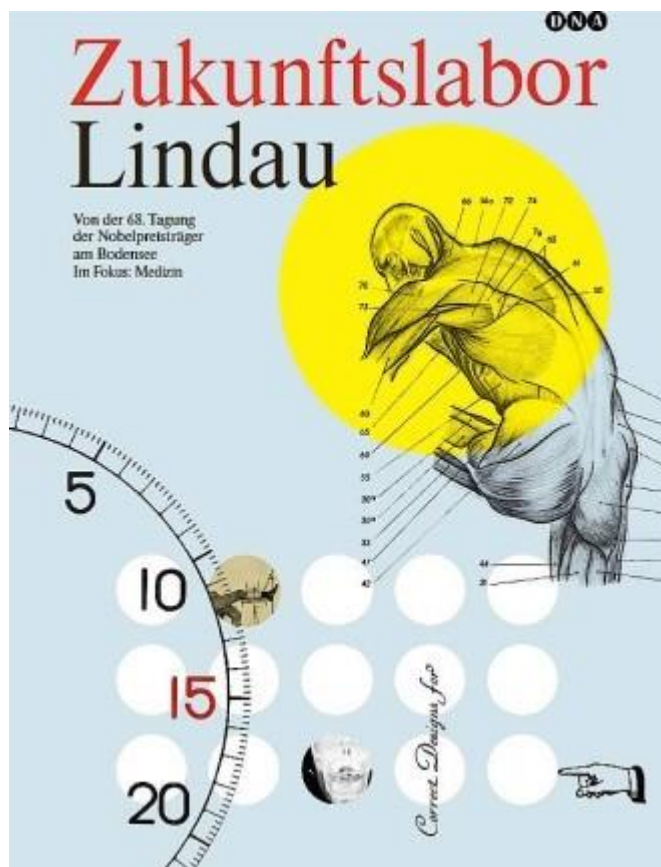
insert them selectively and control the result. If you have a car driving five kilometers per hour and one driving fifty kilometers an hour, which one do you choose to get from A to B?

Can you give an example where genetic engineering is superior to traditional plant breeding?

In Uganda, bananas are a staple food and threatened by a bacterial-induced wilting disease. Traditional breeding methods do not help, because there is no natural resistance. The researchers there have managed to breed resistant bananas that carry a paprika gene. The farmers want to plant the bananas, but they are not allowed because the local government is under the influence of anti-GMO propaganda. If we do not want to eat such foods in Europe, that's fine. We have the choice. Other countries do not have this choice. If developing countries do not grow GMOs, the number of famines will increase. And thus the number of migrants outside the gates of Europe.

And the risks of GMOs?

Which risks? Greenpeace claims for more than twenty years that there could be risks. Mind you, they use the subjunctive. Not a single event could be proven. All reputable scientific institutions advocate GMOs, millions of people eat them, billions of animals. In Europe, we wear all cotton clothing from such plants and take medicines made by GMOs. Greenpeace has never condemned diabetics for injecting genetically engineered insulin. No question, Greenpeace does a great job in many areas. But they completely fail on this topic.



Why this sentiment, when there are no scientific concerns?

Greenpeace has successfully blended the anti-GMO campaign with a campaign against major corporations like Monsanto. That has brought them many donations and political power. In the meantime it has become an ideology. People are afraid of genetic engineering, at least when it comes to food.

Why do not scientists succeed in taking away their fear?

First, many scientists are not trained to communicate with the public and often talk about facts. But many people are overwhelmed with scientific facts. I give my grandmother's test to my students: they should explain to their grandmother what they are working on. So good that she understands it and can tell her friends. In addition, scientists are not as well organized as Greenpeace, and financially they are not well-endowed. We can not do such an impressive publicity.

Scientists rarely engage politically. What experiences have you had with it?

I often get positive feedback from colleagues. I convinced 132 Nobel Prize winners to sign the open letter. Many politicians are also interested. As a rule, they do not want to risk losing voters by publicly positioning themselves. I've tried several times to talk to Greenpeace, but they refuse.

What do you want to achieve with your campaign?

I continue until Greenpeace publicly states that it was a mistake to demonize GMOs. And I want to try to win the Pope for my campaign. That would help.

Source: FAZ