The re-authorisation of Monsanto’s weedkiller glyphosate and the ban of three neonicotinoids – a class of insecticide – have opened a heated debate on the role of science in policy-making.

The discussion about evidence-based policy-making has taken centre stage in Brussels following the glyphosate saga, opening a Pandora’s Box regarding the role of science in EU politics.

Stakeholders, be it industry or NGOs, do not always support the decisions of EU agencies, such as the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA).

In the case of glyphosate, the industry praised EFSA for its decision to re-authorise the controversial substance while environmental NGOs blamed the European Commission for lacking transparency.

On the other hand, the NGOs hailed the ban of neonicotinoids while the industry questioned the method used by the EU agencies in its assessment.

The European Commission insists it always acts in a manner which is “consistent” with science.

But there are cases, such as the discussion on the future of crop-based biofuels, where Commission officials admit having taken into consideration the “perception” of public opinion on a particular issue.
It's crucial for the industry to move from a defensive to a proactive attitude and be able to communicate with the public and social networks in order to achieve a science-based policy making, according to Daniel Guéguen.

Guéguen, a European lobbyist and visiting professor at the College of Europe, noted that regulation should be either linked to facts and evidence or "clichés" and emotions. "It's the core of the Better Regulation project. The trend is good but in practice the Commission and the EU is not moving forward to guarantee a regulation based on science."

On the contrary, he claimed, it's moving backwards and this is extremely dangerous. "If regulations like on biofuels and pesticides are based on emotion it's going to be detrimental for the EU competition vis-à-vis the rest of the world."

Guéguen observed a growing trend in Brussels that the EU agenda is driven by the civil society and NGOs. "And they are asking more and more environment, more sustainability, precautionary principle: I understand it."

"But everything has its limits and the industry needs to react and answer."

He found it “amazing” that Greenpeace managed to collect one million signatures against glyphosate, but wondered “what is the strength of these one million signatures compared to a positive opinion of the European Food Safety Authority?"

Guéguen added it was a “miracle” that glyphosate was re-authorised for five years but noted that the European Parliament immediately set up the PEST committee. "Even from the title, one could have doubts over its objectivity. The balance of power is in the camp of NGOs," he emphasised.

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A BALANCED AND CONSISTENT APPROACH

Ramunas Macius, RRP Corporate Development Vice President of JTI, explained that there are many factors having an impact on decision-making: ideology is one of them, but socio-economic aspects should be also considered important.

“But if we look at economics, this is also evidence, such as jobs generated by different economic operators and this evidence should be taken into consideration,” he underscored.

Macius said not everything was black and white and backed a “balanced and consistent” approach, which will allow different participants to plan better.

“What makes things bad is sometimes the not clear decision-making,” he added.

“One may have the best evidence and science but if people do not trust or understand the scientific evidence then it’s a failure and everyone involved should think about that and explain it in a better way.”

“Make evidence understandable for people. Decisions are not made in isolation from people and especially in the implementation, people should be engaged.”

Macius pointed out that the EU has good principles and Better Regulation is one of them and in general there is a sound procedure in place.

“The question is: is it contaminated by different political interests? Transparency plays a critical role here. The more we debate, the more we understand decisions. And in many cases, the EU is an example for the rest of the world,” he concluded.
The next European Commission should enhance its collaboration with the EU’s Scientific Advisory Mechanism (SAM), which would provide bias-free consultancy and eventually adjust the Tobacco Product Directive to the reality, JTI’s Ramunas Macius said in an interview with EURACTIV.com.

Ramunas Macius is the corporate development vice president for reduced-risk products at Japan Tobacco International (JTI). He spoke to EURACTIV’s Sarantis Michalopoulos on the sidelines of the “Quo vadis, EU evidence-based policy making? Addressing the “evidence – policy” gap” event.

What is the fine line between evidence-based policy and public opinion? Can we rely on science without taking into account the public’s view on specific matters?

Scientific experiments have been the driver of human progress. And therefore science should be the bedrock of wisdom in all policymaking. In terms of public opinion, policymakers need to peer beyond the noisy campaigners to see how consumers are truly being affected. These real-world data points can be just as valuable as results from test tubes.

What is the right balance of evidence and industry interest, and how can policymakers square that circle?

The industry is investing hundreds of millions of dollars into science because it provides a better understanding of the product and enables continuous improvement for better consumer satisfaction. Both the methodologies and the results are transparent and publicly available on the company’s websites. Additionally, the industry is also bringing consumer data and insight to the conference table.

Scientific evidence and industry interests are complementary rather than conflicting. And the role of the...
The snus debate is a tremendous example of how the precautionary principle can be used as a smokescreen against scientific evidence. The principle favours banning novel products while we await scientific data.

Snus has been used for nearly two centuries and there is a wealth of long-term population studies on it. Yet we still have radically different policy approaches – it is banned by the Commission throughout the EU except in Sweden, which has an exemption.

There and in Norway, it is hugely popular with smoking prevalence falling. The Commission and Scandinavia cannot both be right; there is more than enough evidence to make a judgment.

Collaborating with Europe’s academy networks, EU’s Scientific Advisory mechanism (SAM) is designed to deliver bias-free evidence-based consultancy to ensure the Commission’s policy proposals are well informed. SAM could assist with updates needed to adapt Tobacco Product Directive to the reality of a reduced-risk market – and with giving politicians the confidence to change their policies to fit the evidence.

The Commission says that snus is addictive and has negative health effects while being particularly attractive to young people. Snus backers, on the other hand, claim that the risk of dying from a tobacco-related disease such as lung or oral cancer is lower in Sweden than in any other EU country, despite similar levels of tobacco consumption. Is snus a case of lacking evidence-based decision making?

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regulator is to make sure all the right questions have been answered: does the science demonstrate our vaping products’ potential for reduced risk? Does consumer research show that it will be popular enough? Are there ways of mitigating unintended consequences on tax revenues and jobs?

What could the next European Commission do better to ensure that science is “listened to” when it comes to policy-making? Do you have specific suggestions?

Karl Popper, the philosopher, observed that only if we are willing to have our ideas challenged by data – and sometimes proved to be wrong – can we consider our approach to be scientific. All of us – scientists, industry and the Commission – should be open to the possibility that some of our cherished assumptions might be wrong.

Collaborating with Europe’s academy networks, EU’s Scientific Advisory mechanism (SAM) is designed to deliver bias-free evidence-based consultancy to ensure the Commission’s policy proposals are well informed. SAM could assist with updates needed to adapt Tobacco Product Directive to the reality of a reduced-risk market – and with giving politicians the confidence to change their policies to fit the evidence.

The agri-food industry praised the EU food safety authorities on the glyphosate case, while in the neonicotinoids it questioned the scientific method used to ban them. Does this show that the industry also often has a selective approach in the discussion of science and decision-making?

There can never be enough good science. At JTI we invest heavily in properly peer-reviewed science with transparent data and methodologies. We present our results at conferences, publish in renowned science magazines and on our website www.jt-science.com. This means other scientists can see if our experiments can be replicated. The research jigsaw comes together with the consumer data we have unique access to. It all gives policymakers a much more complete picture.

The tobacco industry has launched new products in the market, such as electronic cigarettes and other novel tobacco products, which are seen as an ‘alternative’ to traditional smoking. The Commission admits that e-cigarettes are less damaging than traditional smoking, according to the currently available data. However, it says that people should not use them to stop smoking. What is your opinion?

Over the last eighteen months, more than 1,000 academic papers on e-cigarettes have been published. So there is a lot of data available. However, we accept as this is still a young product category the policy consensus will take time to emerge. Where we want to work with regulators is in hearing from them what their technical concerns are about devices and e-liquids and address them in a systematic and transparent fashion.

These products can be constantly improved. We need a dialogue to make that happen. The serious flaws in the existing Tobacco Products Directive – like the very restricted consumer communication on the benefits of vaping products – are the results of that dialogue not having happened in the last legislative cycle.
Evidence-based policy-making constitutes one of the key slogans of the Juncker Commission and the Better Regulation agenda. But reality reveals a wide gap between theory and practice, writes Daniel Guéguen.

The word ‘evidence’ implies objectivity based on facts and science. But the reality reveals a wide gap between theory and practice, as demonstrated by numerous recent cases, in particular, the glyphosate affair. In the EU, cliché trumps science and emotion win over objectivity – that is my belief.

Two questions come immediately to my mind: are a million signatures collected by Greenpeace against glyphosate more important in the eyes of the legislator than the positive opinions given by the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) and the European Chemicals Agency (ECHA)?

And why, unlike Greenpeace, are the plant protection industry and farming world so incapable of science-based policy making: reality or fake news?

Daniel Guéguen: “Are the million signatures collected by Greenpeace against glyphosate more important in the eyes of the legislator than the positive opinions given by the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) and the European Chemicals Agency (ECHA)?” [Shutterstock]
engaging with public opinion and mobilising local networks?

The beginning of a solution to this worrying drift involves work on three levers:

As a first priority, I consider it necessary to restore complete credibility to EU agencies – notably EFSA and ECHA – while ensuring that any opinions they deliver are respected and supported by the Commission. Get rid of the agencies’ weaknesses, give them greater resources and move in a direction where risk assessment and risk management go hand in hand – none of this seems to be an impossible task. In this context, the European Parliament’s PEST Committee has a positive role to play.

Second priority: it is vital that European trade associations wake up and adjust to the new institutional environment. Is it normal for the EU agenda to be dictated by NGOs? No, it is not. Is it normal for the great majority of industrial lobbies to maintain a defensive (and therefore losing) approach and remain incapable of communicating with authorities as well as the public? In lobbying, modern communication is direct, instantaneous and personalised. It goes out via social media. When will people understand that mass distribution of industry position papers is obsolete lobbying?

Third priority: one hopes that the European Commission, which enjoys the monopoly of legislative initiative, will one day move towards more transparency and simplification of implementing measures. There are barely 20 people in Brussels capable of explaining precisely the decision-making process for endocrine disruptors. To paraphrase a famous quote: “Give me good procedures and I’ll give you effective regulations.”

The influence of emotion, subjectivity and cliche over EU rules grows constantly, affecting all policies linked to public opinion. The fear is that the worst is yet to come. There is an emerging trend in favour of replacing risk-based assessment (e.g. the obligation of producers to respect maximum residue limits) with a hazard-based approach that requires you to demonstrate a total absence of risk in your product.

At first sight, this development might seem logical, but current methods for evaluating substances have become so refined that nothing – not even the tiniest trace – can escape analysis, with the result that anything could be considered dangerous in one way or another, by any ‘expert’ or activist.

Therefore, it is absolutely essential to clarify the exact role of science in regulation, strengthen the credibility of scientific authorities assisting the EU legislator and draw inspiration from (but not duplicate) the US Food and Drug Administration, where genuine scientific expertise prevails over all other considerations.