

NOTE #9

Providing information to society on plants and biotechnology

By Daniela Moyankova and Dimitar Djilianov



RRI IMPLEMENTATION IN BIOSCIENCE ORGANISATIONS

GUIDELINES FROM THE  STARBIOS2 PROJECT



Andrea Declich with the STARBIOS2 partners



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Within the framework of Social Engagement, the Agrobioinstitute (ABI) Core Team focused its efforts on performing a structural change inside the institute with the idea to reach out to society.

ABI was established in 1985 to be a leading unit of plant biotechnology in Bulgaria. This aim was achieved and maintained in the first 20 years of the institute by strategic management and vision.

There was enormous progress in biology and especially in genetic engineering at the beginning of the 21 century. However, it was met, quite unexpectedly by controversial or even, negative public reaction in Europe. In this respect, Bulgaria's entrance into European Union in 2007 challenged its plant biotech politics, which resulted in a drastic U-turn and a total ban on plant genetic engineering. Facing this difficult situation, ABI realized that along with the broadening of its scientific topics, it should start to talk to society on controversial hot topics. In the years before the STARBIOS2 project, these efforts however, were more or less sporadic and often, not very successful, primarily due to the absence of a dedicated conduit for information and public communication.

Accordingly, the first step for the ABI Core Team was to propose a structural change in the institute aimed at establishing an independent unit focused on public information and dissemination of scientific findings and hot topics. The fact that the newly established Plant Biotech Information Centre (PBIC) includes STARBIOS2 Core Team members only is a specific characteristic that needs more elaboration. We decided that it would be easier, faster and more responsible, for the Core Team to take this action

upon itself, as scientists with solid backgrounds, known by the lay society and well-respected by the scientific community. This enabled the unit to critically assess the new information and to transfer directly the project's main ideas for implementing RRI practices.

For 2.5 years, PBIC has already made significant progress in its activities – both vertically and horizontally. Working with various administrations (vertical), the Centre provided updated information and scientific opinions to improve decision-making by the administration. With regards to the horizontal activities – contacts with NGOs, other scientific units and with the educational system – even more important and successful progress was made! This, obviously, appears to be the right way to promote science to society and to provide a platform for open and honest discussion on the more controversial issues of contemporary biological science. Participating in public events and scientific conferences, providing lectures and open science areas for students – these are among the main activities that produced demonstrable positive results. The most popular and successful events were National essay contests for young people, and they will be maintained by ABI.

From the very establishment of PBIC and its web page, our main task was to make this structural change sustainable and long-lasting! In this respect, being already in the second part of the project, it appears that the Centre is not only an information hub, but also an impartial and responsible platform to exchange new ideas and to discuss controversial issues. We feel we have created a well-recognized conduit for exchange with society and established its future post-STARBIOS2 role.

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ABOUT THE STARBIOS2 GUIDELINES

This guideline aims to help readers formalize and trigger structural change aimed at introducing appropriate RRI-related practices to their own organisations. This is not a series of prescriptions, but an itinerary of reflection and self-interpretation addressed to different actors within the biosciences. To support this itinerary of reflection and self-interpretation, the document provides...

- a description of a general RRI Model for research organisations within the biosciences, that is a set of ideas, premises and “principles of action” that define the practice of RRI in bioscience research organisations,
- some practical guidance for designing interventions to promote RRI in research organisations in the Biosciences, putting into practice the RRI Model,
- a set of useful practices in implementing the structural change process,
- and information on particular STARBIOS2 cases and experiences, as well as materials, tools and sources, are also provided in the Appendix and in the Annex.



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