

Focus Groups

Case Study: UK GM Nation

Country: United Kingdom

Date of Latest Update: June 2013

Background Information:

In 2002 the Agriculture and Environment Biotechnology Commission (AEBC) suggested to the UK government that there would be benefit in conducting a public debate about the issue of possible commercialisation of Genetically Modified (GM) crops in the UK. The AEBC recommended a core programme with two main elements. The first would be a series of grass roots debates in local communities, stimulated by a specially made film and other material and linked to regional and national events involving representatives from local groups. Public views emerging from these events would be reported, and synthesised and assessed by independent professional experts. The second would be a research component based on a series of discussion groups, involving members of the public, to give more depth of analysis and to act as a “control” to test the information coming out of the set-piece debates.

Phase of decision making process

Initial information gathering was conducted in 2002 prior to the main debate to be held in summer 2003.

Formal framework of decision making process

To identify, using methods which focus on grass roots opinion, the questions which the public has about GM issues, avoiding as far as possible the polarisation that had characterised so much of the discussion to date.

Objectives of the process

The GM Nation? public debate which took place during the summer of 2003 was, for the UK, an unprecedented experiment in public participation. The aim was:

- to identify, using methods which focus on grass roots opinion, the questions which the public has about GM issues, avoiding as far as possible the polarisation that has characterised so much of the discussion to date
- To develop, from this framing of the issues and through a wholly open process, the provision of comprehensive evidence-based information to the public on scientific, economic and other aspects of GM
- To provide people with the opportunity to debate the issues openly and to reach their own informed judgements on this subject
- To provide information to government on how questions raised by the public have shaped the course of the debate, including on the scientific and economic aspects of GM.

Status

Complete

Objectives and outcomes of the stakeholder engagement

These groups were intended to act as a control on the other activities. In the first meeting they were exposed to the GM Nation stimulus material. Between the two meetings participants were encouraged to collect more information, and kept a diary to record their thoughts. They were asked in a questionnaire whether their opinions had changed. Many participants felt that the discussion was too late in the decision making process on GM, but did feel that notice would be taken of their comments. The findings were used to develop an overall final report by the sponsoring organisation, the Agriculture and Environment Biotechnology Commission (AEBC).

Involved Stakeholders

Participants were specifically selected to represent a cross-section of the uninvolved public. 10 different groups were convened, and each met twice over a two week period.

Implementer of the participation process details

Consultants employed by the Agriculture and Environment Biotechnology Commission on behalf of the UK government.

Financing

Overall budget for GM Nation? including the Programme Management was £500,000.

Points to consider

The consultants noted a great lack of initial knowledge as to exactly what GM means, although this improved with the provision of extensive material to participants, including cartoons from the earlier Foundation Workshops (Template#1) etc. and the diary exercise between the 2 sessions.

In selecting a broad cross section of 'uninformed' public, the lack of knowledge of the issue can limit the usefulness of the outcomes. Reconvening the same group following a period of 'research' was a useful process. It is important to explain how the results of the process will be used.

Further tools used in this case study

Discussion Workshops