

## Foundation Discussion 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, economic and other aspects of GM.

### **Status**

Complete

## **Objectives and outcomes of the stakeholder engagement**

The foundation discussions aimed to:

- Elicit lay framings on GM-related issues in an attempt to generate resources for later in the process.
- Establish a baseline understanding of current attitudes and allow the public to frame the issues
- Allow the public to help shape the debate and ascertain how best to engage the public in the debate
- Ascertain how best to engage the public in the debate. The report of the meetings was used to develop a series of 'Framework Questions' which were circulated at subsequent GM Nation events. A pack of 'stimulus material' was also assembled by asking participants to express 'model answers' after the event.

## **Involved Stakeholders**

8 groups of non-interested people were selected, as well as one group specially selected of those classed as 'very interested'.

## **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**

There were concerns regarding transparency in terms of whom the sponsors were and the way in which information was distributed. Meetings were audio taped, and a cartoonist made 'live' drawings during the meeting, which also involved the use of games to elicit responses. Questionnaires were given out at the end of the workshop, asking for people's views on GM before leaving.

## **Further tools used in this case study**

Focus Groups, Tiered Discussion Groups