

Tiered 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 main objectives of the tiered discussion meetings were to kick-start the public debate as well as to feedback opinion to government. The meetings were based on the material developed from the earlier Foundation Discussion Workshops. They were designed to initiate the public debate and develop feedback to government on public views about GM. Some meetings were professionally facilitated whilst others consisted of presentations and Q and A sessions, or were simply local meetings based on a toolkit supplied to interested members of the public. The intention was to gain insight across a range of stakeholders. The methodology employed inviting groups of up to 20 people with no prior knowledge of the issues to meet for around 3 hours and discuss their reactions to and concerns about the GM issue. The meetings were taped and the outcomes used to develop topics and issues for subsequent debate in later meetings. After the events participants were asked to respond to a series of questions in order to help in development of so-called 'stimulus material' for later use.

Involved Stakeholders

All participants were effectively self-selecting.

Implementer of the participation process details

Consultants employed by the Agriculture and Environment Biotechnology Commission on behalf of the UK government. Tier 1: Professionally facilitated, Tier 2: managed in partnership with local authorities, Tier 3: Organised locally with no facilitation.

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 and Foundation Discussion Workshops