

Dialogue in Biotechnology

- *Why dialogue?*
- *Achieving dialogue: round table meetings*
- *Ten points in organising dialogue meetings*
- *Some examples*

Modern biotechnology has been accompanied by public debate from the start - about safety in the laboratory, on the ethical implications of changing the genetic make-up of an organism or on the environmental impact of transgenic crops. This meant that biotechnology could not be developed "behind closed doors", as "just another" production technology. Scientific progress, legislation and consumer acceptance will all influence which developments and applications will eventually succeed and which will fail.

This briefing paper, which results from a Task Group survey, draws together the experience derived from organising round table meetings with participants from different groups - industry, public interest organisations, government, retailers, scientists - around Europe. This paper results from the combined contributions of representatives from all of these groups.

WHY DIALOGUE?

Science, industry and, to a large extent, governments generally tend to be supportive of biotechnology. Non-governmental organisations, such as environmental, animal welfare, consumer and genetic disability support groups, vary from clear opposition to cautious support.

Because of their different backgrounds, goals and interests, representatives of supporting and opposing groups are not natural partners. Frequently they come from different networks and have different frames of reference from which they think and speak. But at the same time both sides play an important role in influencing public opinion and political decision making.

Parties with opposing opinions can choose between two general strategies in dealing with the contentious issues surrounding biotechnology - conflict and dialogue. In a conflict strategy, the various parties tend to

articulate their arguments with each other mostly via the media or in the political arena. It is a very clear strategy in which each party tries to win by overpowering the others, both with arguments and in emotional appeals to the public. Eventually, the conflict may result in political decision, for example in new legislation. With the uncertain and ambivalent attitude of the general public and even politicians in the biotechnology area, it is often very difficult to predict the outcome of such conflict. And even if the proponents of biotechnology win, the inevitable polarisation may have caused resentment. This may influence, directly or indirectly, eventual market success of biotechnology products. Another aspect of such a power struggle is that real learning and understanding has not taken place.

The dialogue strategy starts with the assumption that parties with different opinions may learn from each other. Learning will only take place if, firstly, contending parties interact directly and, secondly, problems are defined and discussed, leading to mutual articulation of the issue. It should not be expected that dialogue will result in one party convincing the other to change its basic views. Conflicting opinions around biotechnology are often rooted in fundamental values about what is best for the world and for mankind. The dialogue approach respects this and recognises that the same facts can have different meanings and values for different people. For example, herbicide resistance in crops may represent an opportunity for environmental improvement to people who trust or depend upon a technological approach to weedkilling, but may be considered to be a potential ecological threat by others.

Dialogue attempts to prevent the polarisation of opinion that may develop if the conflict strategy is used. In a situation of polarisation, even the moderate groups in the middle will eventually take sides. A

EUROPEAN FEDERATION
OF BIOTECHNOLOGY

EFB

TASK GROUP ON
PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS
OF BIOTECHNOLOGY

INFORMATION

For further information concerning Briefing Papers and other publications and activities of the European Federation of Biotechnology, Task Group on Public Perceptions of Biotechnology, contact:

Chairman:

Prof John Durant
Research and Information Services
National Museum of Science & Industry
GB-SW7 2DD London
Tel: +44 171 9388201
Fax: +44 171 9388213
Email: j.durant@ic.ac.uk

Secretary:

Dr D J Bennett
Secretariat, EFB Task Group on Public
Perceptions of Biotechnology
Oude Delft 60
NL-2611 CD Delft
Tel: +31 15 2127800
Fax: +31 15 2127111
Email: efb.cbc@stm.tudelft.nl

© Copyright EFB Task Group on Public Perceptions of Biotechnology, 1997.

This Briefing Paper is intended for information and does not represent the views of the European Federation of Biotechnology or any other body. This publication may be reproduced for the purposes of research or study only, with due acknowledgement of the copyright owner and a notice in terms of this notice. No part may otherwise be reproduced without the permission of the copyright owner. The Task Group gratefully acknowledges the continuing support and funding of the European Commission for this and other issues.

Briefing paper

7

October 1997

dialogue strategy aims to influence developments by achieving constructive interaction between a broad range of parties. In a successful dialogue, the more moderate parties will be able to find a way forward, if only on partial agreements or on certain issues. Minimally, dialogue would result in parties being thoroughly informed of each others arguments and underlying values. This clearly has value if parties wish to anticipate further developments and adapt strategies accordingly.

Conflict relies on the exchange of (sometimes extreme and simplified) statements via the media or in public arenas. Dialogue aims at differentiation of views and issues, understanding the concerns of different parties, and a search for ways forward. It takes place on a face-to-face basis. Meeting the other in person shows that the other is as human as oneself and leaves less room for scapegoating or stereotyping. Respecting the fact that the other has different views is the next step. Finding common points of interest and exploring ways forward may follow if there is sufficient mutual trust and if all parties recognise benefit in the exchange. Dialogue differs from one-sided attempts to inform the other about the "real facts". It works if all parties are willing to learn from each other.

ACHIEVING DIALOGUE: ROUND TABLE MEETINGS

For real dialogue, it is not enough for the parties involved just to meet. This happens for example at conferences or congresses. Exchange of information takes place, but there is no time nor opportunity for more thorough discussion, let alone for working out a way forward to solve problems. Other open meetings with these aims such as consensus conferences, citizens' courts and lay panels are intermediate arrangements designed to involve members of the public. However, in open meetings with, for example, the public or journalists present, participants are more likely to maintain established positions. Although it may seem contradictory, closed meetings are more likely to lead to open dialogue.

This paper focuses on one type of closed meeting: round table meetings. These are meetings between people with differing views and interests who are explicitly invited to discuss a specific, contentious subject and, ideally, to achieve practical progress on a common issue. Closed workshops are also designed to achieve dialogue but differ from round tables in that they involve larger numbers of people. A workshop has a somewhat more open character, is more suited to the exchange of information and arguments, is usually broader in focus and is less suited to solving actual problems.

Before starting to organise a dialogue meeting one should think about the following:

What is your role in the biotech debate?

If you represent certain interests in biotechnology, it is quite possible that some of the people you propose inviting to a dialogue meeting will not trust your intentions, however honest and well-meant they may be. If you think that this will be the case, it is advisable to look for an intermediary organisation or person who is likely to be trusted by all parties and can build the necessary (personal) bridges.

What is the status of the dialogue?

Have the intended participants met previously and exchanged views on a person-to-person basis? If not, the first meeting is unlikely to go further than getting acquainted, exchanging information and views, and exploring general issues. It is likely that more constructive aims will be achieved if people have met before. For a dialogue to lead to real learning, and even negotiated conclusions, respect for each other's differing views and mutual trust is needed; this takes time and more than one meeting.

What is the intention of the dialogue?

If you are thinking of starting a dialogue and using it for public relations reasons, please don't. This will have an adverse effect and may well turn participants against you. People do not like being co-opted, for example by finding a picture of themselves at the meeting in your annual report. Furthermore, starting a dialogue is all about establishing a two-way process. You cannot expect to impose your views on others. In a true dialogue your own views, and subsequently, conduct, are also likely to change and its outcomes may be quite different from what you expected beforehand. If you do not want this to happen, then organise something else - such as an information meeting or an open day - but be clear about what you intend.

TEN POINTS IN ORGANISING DIALOGUE MEETINGS

1. Taking the initiative

Any party may take the initiative to start a dialogue: a company or an industry organisation, a public interest organisation, a governmental body, an intermediary organisation or a combination of various groups.

2. The meeting's aims

The first step is to decide on the aim, or aims, of the meeting. These, progressing from the easier to achieve to the more difficult, may be:

- information exchange
- clarification of issues
- establish dialogue and mutual learning

- obtain comments from non-governmental organisations on industrial products or activities
- find shared key issues to work on
- reach consensus or agreement on (the way forward with) a shared issue

It is very important to realise that the more difficult aims cannot be reached without the first two: exchange of information and clarification of issues. To achieve progress, it is necessary that parties come to use a common language and understand the background from which the other is speaking. This may take a considerable amount of time, depending on the initial situation, since there are representatives from groups with widely varying backgrounds.

Three stages are necessary before the more difficult aims can be achieved:

- i. opportunity for persons who have not seen each other before to become acquainted
- ii. exchange of opinions on issues considered relevant which may lead to identification and clarification of issues.
- iii. actual understanding and respect for each others views and opinions.

The general principle is to first put the record straight and then to go on to the more strategic elements. This means, for example, that if you want to find solutions, you should be sure that there is no misunderstanding about what the problem is. In other words, the basis on which the meeting, or the discussion during the meeting, is held should be perfectly clear.

If the meeting is international, one should allow for even longer time to establish the necessary conditions for real dialogue. Both cultural differences and language barriers compound the initial confusion over which social rules are to be followed, and over what we are actually talking about (subject and problem definition) and which words are used for which concepts.

In practice this means that in a one-day meeting between people from different groups who have not met before, it is impossible to achieve much more than a clarification of issues. This in fact may be considered a very good result and, to achieve it, good preparation is needed.

3. Choice of subject

The subject has to be specific, focussed and one in which progress can be achieved. It needs to be relevant to all participants. The people you would like to come to your meeting are often busy experts with a lot of meetings to go to. They will select the ones where they expect to learn something new or achieve results. It is therefore important to monitor the issue and to determine where

it is on their agenda. For a round table a really focussed subject should be chosen and one in which some progress can be achieved. The freedom available for discussion and learning is another important element. If decisions have already been made, or the subject, for example, will be decided by a forthcoming referendum, then it may be less suitable for a dialogue meeting.

4. Length and frequency

In practice, there are several forms:

- a one-day or half-day meeting with, on some occasions, a follow-up meeting.
- a one-day meeting, preceded by an evening session with dinner
- a meeting of several days (eg a long weekend)
- regular meetings with the same group (eg once every three months)
- a fixed number of one-day meetings (eg to achieve a concrete goal or complete a task)
- several meetings of more than one day

For exchange of information, one-day or half-day meetings are reasonable. The results of such one-day meetings can be strongly enhanced by good preparation, for example, by a round of interviews or bilateral, informal talks with participants preceding the workshop. Organising an evening session with dinner on the day before your one-day meeting is a very helpful way to establish a more relaxed and informal atmosphere. This works well for improving mutual understanding and respect - which is a condition for achieving further aims.

Achieving partial agreement on a key issue cannot be reached in one day. The building of mutual trust takes time; establishment of communication is the first step, strategic elements follow. The choice of the form of the meeting depends on the type of result aimed for. Maintaining a network between the different groups involved is important. Regular meetings may be held with items placed on the agenda by participants. The group may then continue as long as participants perceive a benefit from it. If one wants to achieve a certain concrete goal or complete a specific task, the sessions need to be organised within a restricted period of time prior to predetermined deadlines.

5. Agenda, programme and venue

Involving the participants in setting the agenda for the meeting (beforehand or during the first session) is an important component in motivating them and gaining their commitment. In principle, there should be room to discuss the choice of topic, and the programme and procedure to be adopted. In a well-prepared meeting most participants will readily accept what is proposed, but irritation and lack of

commitment can result when participants feel overruled. Consultation is crucial in gaining confidence for a successful meeting.

A meeting may have various elements, such as presentations, working groups, plenary discussions. A useful start for a first meeting can be a "tour de table" introduction, during which each person gives a brief description of their background and the key issues important for them from their viewpoint. Afterwards, the key issues can be taken together and transformed into the agenda.

Presentations are very useful to put participants in the picture. If one chooses to include presentations in the meeting, each party should be represented by a speaker (eg a speaker for the public interest groups, a speaker for industry, and a speaker for government). Speakers should be briefed not to overload their audience with information and to restrict their presentation to a small number of key messages.

Smaller working groups are helpful in making practical progress during a meeting. More people can then contribute actively simultaneously. A smaller group invites people to become more involved. The face-to-face situation in a small group invites participants to exchange arguments and respect each other's views whereas larger groups tend to lead to people maintaining established positions. If it is intended to report the conclusions from small working group sessions to a subsequent plenary session, then the instructions to the working groups have to be very clear in order to achieve comparable results for presentation. It is possible to give all working groups the same instructions (eg to discuss three statements), or to divide different discussion topics between several working groups.

Working groups can be homogeneous (representatives of one interest group) or heterogeneous (a mix of representatives from different interest groups). Participants may feel more secure in homogeneous groups. These are a good way of obtaining a particular group's views about an issue. Since the members of a homogeneous group can assemble their arguments together, they will be clearly laid before all participants during the plenary presentations. Heterogeneous groups are often more exciting for the participants, especially if they have not met their counterparts in other interest groups before. Heterogeneous groups can be used to work towards a better mutual understanding (eg defining the nature of the problem) or to identify common points to work on. Alternating homogeneous with heterogeneous working groups during a longer meeting is a good way of making use of the benefits of both settings.

The venue is important so that participants feel at ease, and a comfortable room and good food are well invested if ice is to be broken. It should be on neutral ground for all participants. The round (or rectangular/square) table setting, in which all seats are equally arranged and people are face-to-face, is conducive to discussion and hence lecture room seating arrangements are to be avoided.

6. Whom and how many to invite

Whom to invite depends on the aim of the meeting. A much discussed question is whether one should invite participants with extreme views. If the aim is true dialogue, in principle no one should be excluded. Excluding people will provide them with more arguments to disregard or reject your intentions. A minimal requirement is that every participant - independent of his or her position - should commit to the process of the meeting but not necessarily to its outcome! Be aware, however, of the hidden agendas of participants and avoid being manipulated by these. Participants with hidden agendas may appear to be committed but in fact wish to hamper a successful meeting. In practice, people with extreme opinions may not always be keen on participating in a dialogue, because they choose the conflict strategy and feel that they lose credibility when interacting with the 'enemy'. Experience with dialogue meetings shows however, that attitudes in various parties towards participation has improved over the last few years.

It should be clear whether the participants are invited as representatives of a group or organisation (perhaps even with a mandate to negotiate) or on a personal basis. This is especially important for meetings which should reach agreement on certain issues. Participants who take part on a personal basis are able to be more free in their discussion, but the outcomes of this discussion may consequently have less formal impact.

The larger the number of participants in a round table, the more difficult will it be to achieve results. In round table situations involving more than, say, 12 persons, smaller group sessions can be very helpful in making practical progress. In workshops, the number of participants can be higher (somewhere between 20 and 60) than in round table meetings. Some participants may remain observers in workshops without making input themselves, while in round tables meetings every participant is expected to contribute. Subdividing a workshop into working group sessions gives participants the opportunity for active involvement, with benefit for the results. Working groups usefully have a minimum of 4 and a maximum of about 12 people. If the groups are larger, involvement becomes too low and there is not enough time for everyone to contribute.

7. Budget

A clear and as accurate as possible budget for all foreseeable costs and incomes is a prerequisite before making any commitments. All financially interested parties, including financially involved participants in the meeting, need to know and agree their entitlements and liabilities. As there are different forms of workshops and round tables, it is difficult to give indications for the budget which would be required. The main components of a budget for a round table meeting are the costs for organisation and administration, the venue, travel and accommodation for participants (especially for international meetings), and for dissemination of reports, papers etc. The proportion of the total budget which each of these represents varies greatly according to the way in which the meeting is organised. It is sometimes possible to involve people from low budget organisations (often public interest groups) by inviting them to give a presentation or to help in a workshop session, in return for paying their travel and accommodation costs. There is, however, a trend for representatives of public interest groups to act as consultants for a fee and this should be clarified.

8. Chair or facilitator

The chairperson or facilitator is responsible for helping the meeting to achieve its aims. He or she should be a person who is independent, or can maintain independence. It goes without saying that a chair person should not get involved in the content of the discussion, should be open to all opinions and should not be interested in one specific outcome. He or she should be acceptable and trustworthy to all parties. A good chair has a respected, likeable personality so that people do not mind being led, adequate background in the subject, and is experienced in chairing meetings. The more tense the situation with extreme or rigid opinions, the greater are the demands on the chairperson's skills. In international meetings, it is important that the chairperson is either a non-native speaker with a good command of the language of the meeting, or a native speaker who is sensitive to the problems of non-native speaker participants.

The chairperson needs to be very well briefed before the meeting - its aims, key issues likely to be raised, positioning and personalities of participants and practical matters such as time-keeping and breaks. To this end it is often desirable to involve the chairperson in the preparations for the meeting.

9. General rules

Social rules are observed in any group of people. When participants have different

perceptions of these rules, conflicts can arise which have nothing to do with the subject under discussion. To prevent this type of confusing situation, there are some general rules which lead towards an open and honest dialogue situation, in which participants can feel safe and free to contribute constructively:

- Be absolutely clear about the objectives of your meeting to all participants.
- Stick to the purpose of the meeting which you defined and communicated in advance, unless the purpose is redefined and agreed upon by the participants during the meeting.
- Participants have to commit to the process, but not to the outcome of the process (which is uncertain).
- All participants should be treated equally (all equally informed, equal chances to speak, be reported etc.)
- Leave ample room for open discussions and prevent the meeting from being too closely controlled.
- Transparency is important, so behave in a way that can be openly documented and confirmed.
- For more open discussion, rules need to be agreed by the participants about the use of their contributions, eg "Chatham House rules" (statements are quotable but not attributable).
- Make clear how confidential information should be handled (if it is a closed meeting).
- Be sure that all parties agree on the methods used to reach consensus on the eventual results. This is especially so when aiming at unanimous decision.
- When aiming for unanimous decision be aware that the same experience may be interpreted differently by different individuals, but equally validly, and that these interpretations may be mutually incompatible.

10. Results

It is always important to consider how the outcomes of a meeting will be used and therefore in what form they should be - an inventory of key issues, a common statement, an executive summary, a set of recommendations for further action, a

discussion paper, a full report for circulation or submission to other bodies etc. Participants will be more motivated if they know that they are contributing to a definite product. The outcomes should be relevant to all participants. If they have not reached agreement this should be expressed so that the results can be supported by everyone involved. It is sound practice to summarise and review the main conclusions at the end of the session, so as to ensure a common understanding of the most important points of the meeting. It should be clear, though, how the results will be used. If the meeting is intended to contribute to the public debate on biotechnology, the results should be available to the public or the media, to avoid the impression of secrecy or 'closed door policy'.

SOME EXAMPLES

There are various examples of initiatives for dialogue between industry, NGOs and other groups. To name a few: the BioIndustry Association (BIA, GB) organised a meeting between industry and NGOs with the explicit goal to get to know each other, in 1991. In the Netherlands, a continuous round table called "*Informal Consultation Group*" is functioning, in which the food and agricultural industries, consumer organisations, environmental organisations (until 1996) and retailers are represented. In April 1995, a partial agreement was achieved on food labelling. The European Commission organised a Europe-wide meeting between industry and NGOs to establish dialogue, in 1996. In 1997, the Green Alliance together with the EFB Task Group of Public Perceptions of Biotechnology organised a meeting between industry and environmental organisations to talk about potential environmental benefits of biotechnology. Danish multinational Novo Nordisk achieved progress in its annual meetings with representatives of environmental organisations from all over Europe. Both willingness to participate and mutual trust increased over the years. After the initial stage of getting to know and respect each other, the meetings are now progressing from information exchange to real learning and constructive work, eg advice on Novo Nordisk's environmental report.

FURTHER SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Communicating Genetic Engineering in the Agro-food Sector to the Public by K. Menrad, K. Koschatzky, S. Massfeller and E. Strauss, Fraunhofer Institute for Systems and Innovation Research, Karlsruhe (D), 1996

Fairness and Competence in Citizen Participation - Evaluating Models for Environmental Discourse by O. Renn, T. Webler and P. Wiedemann, ISBN 0-7923-3517-1. Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht (NL), 1995

Roundtable Experiences in Biotechnology by A. Hamstra and C. Smink, SWOKA/EFB Task Group PPB, Leiden/Den Haag (NL), 1997