

Best practice principles to underpin public participation and dialogue activities



Effective public participation needs to be guided by best practice principles that ensure transparency, accountability and equitable participation. These are fundamental to any effective consultative or participatory process that involves a range of competing interests. The following principles draw on those established by the Ministerial Council on Mineral and Petroleum Resources¹, the National Industrial Chemical Notification and Assessment Scheme and the multi-stakeholder process for the management and cleanup of persistent scheduled toxic wastes²

- 1. Articulate the goals of the public participation process.** Establish *why* a public participation is required and what it will achieve. Clearly outline and negotiate the boundaries of the participation process and subsequent decision making. The ability of participants to influence outcomes must be made clear. In particular, there must be no pretence that participants are able to influence decisions to a greater degree than will actually be allowed.
- 2. Ensure balanced and appropriate stakeholder involvement in process design.** All relevant stakeholders must have equal opportunity to contribute to the design and oversight of the public participation process. Balanced representation from industry and the community is essential, as is avoiding under-representation or mis-representation of stakeholder groups (eg academics should not be classed as community representatives). Professional facilitation by public participation practitioners who do not have a vested interest in nanotechnology is essential.
- 3. Establish shared commitment to the process.** Stakeholders should agree that the process offers the best opportunity to meet the process goals. The process should enable diverse forms of participation with multiple 'entry' points.
- 4. Build upon past relevant experience.** The poorly handled case of genetically engineered food and crops and the more successful management of toxic waste provide two useful examples for the design of public participation processes.
- 5. Support participation with appropriate resourcing.** No-one should be precluded from participation on information, logistical or financial grounds.
- 6. Adhere to clear and explicit protocols regarding the conduct, timeliness, accessibility and transparency of the process.** For example see the protocol developed by the *National Advisory Body and Scheduled Wastes Management Group* (<http://www.environment.gov.au/settlements/publications/chemicals/schedule-d-waste/community-consultation.html>).

¹ "Principles for Engagement with Communities and Stakeholders" by the Ministerial Council on Mineral and Petroleum Resources are available at:
<http://www.ret.gov.au/Search/retresults.aspx?k=Principles%20for%20Engagement%20with%20Communities%20and%20Stakeholders> .

² A detailed analysis of the process and the principles are available at:
<http://www.environment.gov.au/settlements/publications/chemicals/scheduledwaste/community-consultation.html>.