



Guidelines for organising a public dialogue on the strategy of a biomedical research centre

Methodology and learnings from a public dialogue on the CRG's strategy

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About this guide

This document is based on a public dialogue conducted for the Centre for Genomic Regulation (CRG). The objective of this document is to use this experience to create a simple guide on how to carry out a public dialogue for a scientific research centre.

What is a public dialogue?

There are a number of definitions available. According to Sciencewise¹, a public dialogue is:

“An approach to involving citizens in decision making. Dialogues bring together a diverse mix of citizens with a range of views and values, and relevant policy makers and experts, to discuss, reflect and come to conclusions on complex and/or controversial issues.”

Research Councils UK (RCUK), on the other hand, gives a broader definition:

“Dialogue is generating debate and interaction between individuals and groups and creating a climate where people discuss scientific issues in the way in which they discuss other issues of public and social policy. This dialogue may not lead anywhere in terms of decision-making, but it is stimulating interest in, and awareness of, issues. Scientists may be talking to the public, the public may be talking to each other, there may be television and radio programmes, web chat sites, etc. with no end in sight other than that science becomes just another facet of life, rather than something different and difficult.”

In other words, a public dialogue is a way to create democracy, connect as a society, break down prejudices and stereotypes. A way to ensure that we make informed decisions in the near future.

What should a public dialogue be like?

Public dialogue provides in-depth insight into citizens' views, concerns and aspirations on issues relating to science and technology. These issues are often complex and unfamiliar to citizens and therefore their exploration is better suited to a qualitative approach.

In addition, according to Sciencewise, a public dialogue is:

- **Informed** – participants are provided with information and access to experts;
- **Two-way** – participants, policy makers/ decision makers and experts all give something to and take something away from the process; dialogue is neither solely about informing the public nor extracting information from them;
- **Facilitated** – the process is carefully structured to ensure that participants receive the right amount and detail of information, a diverse range of views are heard and taken into account and the discussion is not dominated by particular individuals or issues;
- **Deliberative** – participants develop their views on an issue through conversation with other participants, policy/decision makers and experts;
- **Diverse** – participants tend to be recruited to ensure they represent a diverse range of backgrounds and views (participants are not self-selecting)
- **Purposeful** – dialogue engages the public at a stage in a decision-making process where decisions are not yet made

¹ <https://sciencewise.org.uk/about-dialogue/what-is-public-dialogue/>

- **Impartial** – public dialogues are often convened, designed, delivered and facilitated by independent individuals or organizations to help ensure the process is not biased in favour of a particular outcome; and
- **Expansive** – public dialogue opens up conversations rather than closing them down

Following the Ipsos experience with the CRG, we would add another item to the list:

- **Flexible**- a public dialogue should be flexible in the design and methodology applied. Capable of adapting to the social circumstances of the moment and to the capacities of the specific organization commissioning the study. The important thing is to reach different representatives from society and create a one-to-one dialogue on the topics that are relevant to the specific objective. The public dialogue mindset and methodology should help us, never encapsulate us!

The CRG's public dialogue case study

Objectives

The primary objective and starting point for the public dialogue commissioned by the CRG was to explore how to incorporate the views and ideas of civil society and different stakeholders into the research strategy for 2021-2024.

With this main objective in mind, other more specific objectives were also set:

- **Explore the different areas of research conducted**, the strategic decision-making processes involved in prioritising this research, and open up a dialogue on ethical and societal considerations around the CRG's research.
- **Identify priorities, concerns, hopes and fears** relating to fundamental research in general and the CRG's work in particular.
- Explore **funding options and opportunities**.
- **Identify the content and messages for communications** and outreach that will enable the public to engage further with all issues.

Additionally, the following specific aspects were covered:

- Observe the reactions of the public and stakeholders to the CRG research.
- Understand how the public and stakeholders rate basic research and pinpoint reasons for investing more in it: basic vs translational research.
- Identify their interests and concerns about the CRG's research and the ethical and social implications of the same.
- Explore insights for communication and activity design, while also finding an optimal positioning for the CRG.

Methodology and approach applied

The initial approach used in this Public Dialogue was:

1. **Stimulus development, scoping and framing.** With the CRG's advisory group involvement, 6 research projects were selected to present to the public and stakeholders and, at the same time, used as the starting point for the discussion of aspects that constitute the objective of the public dialogue.

The material designed for the presentation of these projects consisted of a brief descriptive text along with an explanatory video presented by one of the researchers involved in the project.

A short introductory video about the CRG was also made as an introduction to the dialogue.

2. **The Dialogue.** The initial plan was to conduct **two substantive full-day workshops**, one with stakeholders and one with the public (30 participants at each), followed by a **half-day reconvened workshop** involving 30 representatives, 15 from each of the previous workshops. **All three workshops were to take place in Barcelona, Spain.**
3. **Analysis and final summary report.** A report was to be prepared incorporating all elements of the project that the CRG could use to convene and prompt wider discussion on how basic science and genomics can be open to public debate.

The eruption of the coronavirus pandemic at the end of phase 2 made it necessary to modify the Dialogue methodology. The health and safety measures did not allow groups of 30 people, meaning the objectives had to be adapted to an online format.

Thus, the 3 face-to-face workshops of the PD were replaced with a three-phase design, combining the following methodologies.

Stage 1: 11-day online community with the general public that took place from September 28th to October 13th, 2020, with 30 participants. Using the Ipsos-owned platform Ipsos Live, participants were able to analyse the materials designed and answer the questions put to them.

Additionally, **three online sessions** were held on October 1st, 5th and 7th in which the public, divided into groups of 5-6 people, interacted with the 6 researchers responsible for the case studies shown.

Stage 2: 1 online workshop lasting 3h with stakeholders selected by the CRG held on October 20th, 2020.

With 23 stakeholders and 10 CRG researchers, debate groups on 4 main topics were established: basic research, funding, ethical and moral debates, and science communication.

Stage 3: 1 online workshop lasting 2.5h with 13 participants from the general public (stage1), 11 participants from the stakeholders' workshop (stage 2) and 5 CRG researchers.

This workshop took place on November 4th, 2020 and its goals were to obtain feedback from the analysis of the information collected in the two previous stages and gather all ideas to incorporate into the CRG's strategy.

The design of the general public sample was as follows.

Table 1. Sample profiles

Variables	32 people were recruited and a total of 31 took part	
Location	Barcelona	8
	Madrid	8
	Seville	8
	Bilbao	8
Sex	Men	16
	Women	16
Age Groups	18 to 30	8
	31 to 45	8
	46 to 60	8
	61 to 75	8
Work Situation	Working	20
	Not working	12 (<i>students, unemployed people, housewives and pensioners</i>)
Activity	Services	12
	Industry	5
	Agriculture and livestock	2
	Public administration	1
Social Class (<i>education level, occupation and income</i>)	Upper class	8
	Middle class	16
	Upper middle class	8
Nationality	Spanish	29
	Other	3

In relation to this sample, it is important to observe that:

- **It reflects the Spanish population but is not a statistically representative sample** as occurs with the quantitative studies samples.
- **The switch to an online format allowed for the geographic scope of the sample to be broader** than initially planned, which had only included people residing in Barcelona.

The guest stakeholders invited to the PD process were people with a professional relationship with the centre. Ultimately, a total of 23 took part with very diverse profiles: journalists, researchers from public and private centres, research centre directors, members of a Bioindustry Association and members of the education community.

A total of 15 CRG researchers also took part in the online dynamics of the 3 stages.

Results and outputs

The culmination of this public dialogue was a report that gathered information regarding citizen, stakeholder and researcher perceptions. The information was accompanied by a series of recommendations aimed at taking the findings to a more operational level to enable the CRG to implement them in its strategy.

The main chapters of the report are:

1. Context and views on science and scientists in Spain
2. Perceptions of the CRG and the CRG's projects
3. Perceptions of Basic research (vs applied research)
4. Funding of science and basic research
5. Ethical and social debates around scientific research
6. Communication of science by the CRG
7. Conclusions and next steps

Possible questions and issues to consider

How is this public dialogue useful to decision-making?

A dialogue is a valid and robust way to inform a strategy or even to change a work culture, break stereotypes and find different ways of doing things that lead to success. It is also a particularly valid tool to understand the range of options open to decision-makers that reflect public feeling; and why the public think the way they do. The public dialogue ends with a report that provides detailed and nuanced evidence on how citizens' views, concerns and aspirations can be operationalized.

Other considerations

A public dialogue needs a team of professionals to be successful.

The team must be composed of:

- **Experts to run the public dialogue:** to design the research, recruit participants from civil society, moderate the sessions, analyse and report results. An independent organization (to avoid bias) with experts in qualitative research.
- **Representative of the research Centre:** a person(s) who oversees the dialogue from the inside of the organization, to communicate the objectives to the team of experts, to ask for the participation of the different players from their organization when necessary and, in short, to provide the information necessary to carry out the dialogue.

A public dialogue means involving people

It is important to note that a public dialogue requires the participation not only of the public or external stakeholders, but also professionals from the Centre running the dialogue. Above all, the idea is to involve those with a certain decision-making power to enable informed decisions.

In the case of the CRG, in addition to the internal people in charge of the project, the participation of the general director, members of the advisory group and researchers from different areas was key.