

Report: Public must be involved in nanotech policy debate

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Decision-making on science - especially emerging technologies such as nanotechnology - must become more democratic, a new report on science policy released today argues. The group of leading European academics behind the 'Reconfiguring Responsibility' report argue forcefully that current governance activities are limiting public debate and may repeat mistakes made in managing GM.

The DEEPEN report comes in the wake of a move within UK and European science policy-making to govern 'upstream' in a technology's development, before its impacts become irreversible, and to involve the [public](#) in decision-making. Analysing this move in the context of nanotechnology, the 'Reconfiguring Responsibility' report argues that these developments do not go nearly far enough.

According to Professor Phil Macnaghten - who is based at Durham University and who has led the EU-funded project involving researchers from the UK, Germany, the Netherlands and Portugal - while talk of 'responsible development' is a step in the right direction, it often hides outdated assumptions: "Technologies are being driven forward with insufficient reflection on why they are being developed and on what this is likely to mean for future society. The public is keen to be involved in deliberating the often far-reaching questions that science is addressing, and policymakers need to find new ways to ensure that public views are heard, treated with respect and used to inform science policy."

Professor Richard Jones FRS, a leading nanoscientist who until recently

was the senior advisor for nanotechnology for the UK government's science funding agency, agrees. "I believe that involving the public in decision making on science can lead to better outcomes - as well as being fascinating and rewarding for the [scientists](#) involved. If we are to continue to make nanotechnology a more socially responsible science we need to build on research such as that discussed in the 'Reconfiguring Responsibility' report."

The need for action is made more pressing by the fact that nanotechnology has the potential to fundamentally change everyday life and thus raises profound social and ethical questions. Attention has recently focussed on the uncertainties surrounding its long-term effects on human health and the environment, but the 'Reconfiguring Responsibility' study indicates that public concern also focus on the kind of society being created by such technologies. "It's great that there is a move towards public dialogue and more responsible development of new technologies," continues Macnaghten, "but at the moment this move doesn't go far enough. In the case of nanotechnology we find public hunger to be included in shaping the technology's development. However, policy processes don't yet fully take this into account. We'd like to see the terms of the debate being shaken up."

As with the GM debate, the research has found that most non-scientists accept that a degree of risk is inevitable, but are concerned about the motivations driving technology. Indeed, many people question whether the vaunted benefits of nanotechnology - in everything from defence to cosmetics to communications technology - will in practice be beneficial at all.

The report gives a number of recommendations to policy makers involved in governing [nanotechnology](#) and similar technologies, including the need to be innovative in finding ways to involve the public and to move away from policy making that simply reacts to new findings

or applications. "We want our analysis to be helpful to those at the cutting edge of decision making in science," says Macnaghten, "while at the same time not shying away from the fact that this presents a challenge to the way that things are being done."

Source: Durham University ([news](#) : [web](#))

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