

# The SERENADE project – A step forward in the Safe by Design process of nanomaterials: Moving towards a product-oriented approach

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## ▶ To cite this version:

Jérôme Rose, Melanie Auffan, Camille de Garidel-Thoron, Sebastien Artous, Gregory Brochard, et al.. The SERENADE project – A step forward in the Safe by Design process of nano-materials: Moving towards a product-oriented approach. Nano Today, 2021, 39, pp.101238. 10.1016/j.nantod.2021.101238. hal-03455690

# HAL Id: hal-03455690 https://hal.science/hal-03455690

Submitted on 1 Mar 2022

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### 1 The SERENADE project - a step forward in the Safe by Design process of 2 nanomaterials: Moving towards a product-oriented approach

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16 Abstract: Recent research efforts have gone into formalizing and standardizing the Safe by 17 Design process of nanomaterials. This usually results in a structured and (most often) sequential 18 approach deliberately putting the focus on hazard and exposure issues regarding the 19 nanomaterial itself in a bottom-up progression of material development. However, this general 20 strategy lacks flexibility. Within the project SERENADE, a case study examining 21 photocatalytic paint failed to validate the generally accepted Safe by Design scheme. This 22 example examined the product (paint in this case) rather than the nanomaterials it contains. It 23 was found that the essential parameters, namely product specification and functionality, failed 24 to fit into a rigid bottom up approach and indicated the need for alternative Safe by Design 25 strategies.

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### 27 Focusing on the nanomaterial (NM): available tools and their benefits

28 A lot of attention has been paid to the Safe(r) by Design (SbD) approach applied to 29 nanomaterials. Some of this research has been part of- or the primary focus of European Union 30 (EU) funded projects, such as Nanoreg and Nanoreg 2 and, more recently, the EU projects 31 targeting nano SbD research Asina, SbD4Nano, Sabydoma and Sabyna. A more comprehensive 32 and detailed view of the nano-related projects can be found on the website of the EU Nano 33 Safety Cluster. {Nanosafety-Cluster, #91} This large deployment of efforts is, in part, an 34 answer to concerns regarding a technology sector for which the risk assessment is still in 35 progress and the regulatory framework is sketchy at best. The strategy is clearly to address 36 safety issues as early as possible in the R&D process to avoid problems further down the value 37 chain.

38 SbD is a concept that existed well before nano-related concerns have been reported. The 39 most notable example is probably the pharmaceutical industry, where SbD is a long-established 40 cornerstone of drug development. Considering that an estimated one third of the drugs not-41 passing clinical trials do so because of safety issues,<sup>[2]</sup> even a modest reduction in the number 42 of tested molecules would represent substantial savings in a traditionally costly approval 43 process <sup>[3]</sup>

44 Since nano-safety concerns have focused on human health, similar to the pharmaceutical 45 industry, it has been suggested that the same tools could be applied to nanomaterials 46 <sup>[4]</sup>.However, in contrast with the pharmaceutical industry, nanotechnologies cover a much wider 47 range of application fields, thus requiring a more diversified approach. For instance, 48 nanomaterials only represent an ingredient or a component of the overall product and their long-49 term stability will depend on the nano-matrix interactions. Exposure to nanomaterials should 50 be controlled through encapsulation, use of embedding matrix or of core-shell structure to limit 51 contact and potential release to workers, consumers and the environment.

52 A popular SbD approach is the stage-gate model that was developed by industry in the 1980s and has recently been reformalized [5-7]. It consist of a linear process that breaks down 53 the development of a new product into a series of phases, separated by gates that are crossed 54 55 when the requirements of the preceding stage are met. In recent years, this general concept has been translated into nano-SbD, in part leaning on the work developed in EU projects.<sup>[8-11]</sup> In 56 57 this linear stage-gate process, the nanomaterial itself is and remains the primary focus 58 throughout the entire decision-making (and thus, development) process. Indeed, failures to 59 progress beyond the iterative development at stage #n can be resolved by corrective measures 60 at stage #n-1, while #n-2 and preceding stages are assumed to be sound. The obvious benefit of 61 this SbD strategy is that flaws in the development of nanomaterials prevent progression to the 62 next stage and only materials passing the sequential validation process are considered for 63 production and commercialization.

64 Nano SbD can also be considered under the three-pillar approach, known as Safe 65 Product-Safe Use-Safe Production. <sup>[12]</sup> Within this concept, the three pillars are informed at each gate of the stage-gate model. It should be noted here that, since the three pillars are derived 66 67 from the stage-gate model, the nanomaterial remains the central focus in this SbD process. The 68 most obvious appeal of the pillar approach, in comparison with the stage-gate model, is that the 69 life cycle of the nanomaterial and worker safety are explicitly addressed (Safe Use and Safe 70 Production). However, while the stage-gate model has an easy-to-follow decision-making 71 process, the general material validation within the three-pillar approach is less obvious.

72 The French project SERENADE, specifically dedicated to nanomaterial SbD, funded a 73 series of coordinated interdisciplinary case studies sharing resources for toxicity assessments. 74 <sup>[13]</sup> There were some difficulties that revealed inadequacies of the stage-gate- and the three 75 pillar- approaches to address the SbD of nanomaterials properly. It should be noted here that 76 the present work will examine only technical aspects of the SbD validation process. More 77 general nanosafety concepts such as nano-risk governance (which includes for instance public 78 and stakeholder perception), are not addressed here (see reference <sup>[13]</sup> for more details). Also, 79 the examination of these technical aspects is outside the coordination strategy of a set of case 80 studies, as it regards the process within a single case study, i.e. a given material or product. 81

#### 82 Limitations of current Safe(r) by Design models

83 At initial technology readiness levels (TRLs), virtually any SbD-driven product 84 development *de facto* follows a process that strictly is (or resembles) the stage-gate process 85 whether intentionally or not. Indeed, at this stage, the three-pillar model cannot be implemented, 86 since safe use cannot be assessed yet. The first synthesis and formulation steps easily 87 accommodate the linear "trial and error" process of the stage gate model. For example, at the 88 earliest stages of development, it is easy to modify size and shape or even the nature of a 89 nanoparticle, or to correct the coating or embedding procedure... Indeed, such design 90 adaptations mostly necessitate switching back and forth between adjacent stage-gates. When 91 done early, this process is in general easy to implement from a technical point of view, and 92 should not be an unacceptable financial burden. In fact, high throughput screening, inspired by 93 pharmaceutical SbD, where the goal is to limit the number of molecules entering costly clinical trials to a minimum, is sometimes recommended for the development of nanomaterials, <sup>[14-16]</sup>
although, except for biomedical applications, the stakes are vastly different.

96 One of the SERENADE case studies examining the SbD of photocatalytic paint, 97 benefited from the support of French paint manufacturer Allios. This support went well beyond 98 a silent observation of the work and its implicit endorsement. The industrial partner participated 99 actively in the experimentation and discussions <sup>[17-20]</sup> resulting in one of the most complete case 100 studies in terms of life cycle coverage and advanced development stage. Indeed, the products 101 tested were actual paint formulations prepared by the manufacturer. The linear bottom-up 102 approach of the stage-gate model was followed since the process aimed at adapting existing 103 solutions to address a niche market. Regarding the three-pillar model, the requirements were a 104 priori met: the Safe Production pillar leaned on the experience of the manufacturer in 105 formulating paint, including the handling of (nano-) powders, which ranks high in terms of potentially hazardous production steps. <sup>[21]</sup> The Safe Product and Safe Use pillars, although not 106 107 validated at that point, were not a severe concern since paint, and especially indoor paint, is 108 usually not considered as a high risk product. In a first approximation, release of nanomaterials 109 from the paint matrix might be an obstacle for validating the Safe Use pillar since aging can 110 cause measurable release. <sup>[22, 23]</sup> In fact, releases from the paints as a result of weathering and 111 mechanical aging (e.g. sanding during building renovation) were determined as part of the paint 112 case study to address this concern.

113 Another important part of this study was to test a range of TiO<sub>2</sub> concentrations within 114 the product for optimal results. In a first approximation, the higher the  $TiO_2$  concentration, the 115 more efficient the photodegradation process. However, high TiO<sub>2</sub> content also translates to high 116 levels of harmful volatile organic compounds (VOCs) released from the paint, {Gandolfo, 2018 117 #29} indicating that optimizing the amount of photocatalytic agent is not a straightforward 118 process in terms of product safety. This strategy was an iterative process, modifying the amount 119 of TiO<sub>2</sub> in the paint with subsequent measurement of the effects to find the best compromise. 120 without challenging the core formulation of the paint. In parallel, it was demonstrated that the 121 paint can have reduced photocatalytic performance after aging as a result of degradation of the 122 paint matrix through photocatalysis and the subsequent accelerated loss of TiO<sub>2</sub>. <sup>[20]</sup> This matrix 123 degradation was predictable to a certain extent, and has been observed before with less 124 photocatalytic compounds. [25] However, the implicit adherence to the stage-gate model (in 125 part because it leans on a series of "certainties") delayed the in-depth re-design of the paint with 126 a matrix capable of withstanding photocatalysis. Stage-gate and three-pillar models failed to 127 lead to a viable product. Indeed, the stage-gate model with its sequential progression scheme 128 led to an aggravation of the situation, since intuition-guided modifications to enhance 129 performance (i.e. the adjustment of  $TiO_2$  concentration to limit the production of harmful 130 VOCs) did not address degradation of the matrix and, thus, the release of TiO<sub>2</sub>. This shows that 131 the stage-gate process is ill-adapted to handle the present paint development example since it 132 turned out that an effective SbD was required to backtrack over multiple stage-gates, thus de 133 facto invalidating the sequential validation process.

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#### 135 **Product oriented approach**

This case study raises the question of how the SbD of nanomaterials should be approached in practice. The stage-gate model has a definite appeal in the earliest development stages. Indeed, inadequate material choices for a targeted application will not pass the validation process. This is also the point when a stage-gate-compliant high-throughput screening can be implemented. As the product development progresses, the three-pillar approach, which leans on the stage-gate model, adds an operational dimension by explicitly examining worker andconsumer safety.

143 Unfortunately, the paint case study reveals that the strict progression scheme, which is 144 undeniably a strength of the stage-gate model for early stage design steps, becomes less 145 effective at later development stages. The reason for the limitations of the model is its lack of 146 flexibility; indeed, at an "advanced" development level, the validation of earlier stage-gates is, 147 in practice, not questioned since this would undermine the relevance of the entire process. 148 Nevertheless, the paint case study shows that unexpected problems, which are hardly 149 predictable, may require the design process to be resumed not one, but multiple stage-gates 150 before, to address the issue properly. This demonstrates that a bottom-up design strategy 151 focusing primarily on the nanomaterial may fail at a higher TRL.

152 This limitation is lifted when the focus is shifted from the nanomaterial to the product 153 itself. Indeed, still using the paint case study, the product initially met the requirements of both 154 the stage-gate and three-pillar models, but proved to be unfit for further development because 155 of the effects of aging. Once the product became the predominant focus, the desired 156 functionality and the expected service life duration naturally led to a profound re-design of the 157 paint to include the development of a base matrix that is resistant to photocatalytic effects over 158 time (see Fig 1) while the active compound remains the same. Admittedly, a product-oriented 159 top-down design is more difficult to implement than a traditional approach, since the initial 160 safety validation steps of a stage-gate based model are no longer verified but become assumed. 161 The benefit of putting the product functionality first is, of course, placing it in a life cycle 162 perspective: the function of the product needs to be maintained until it is discarded. This 163 becomes more difficult if the intended use has a long lifetime, but this is precisely when a top-164 down design approach makes the most sense. For instance, in the case of products with a limited 165 life-time (e.g. cosmetics), matrix stability issues are far less pressing than for products intended 166 to last multiple years. Allowing for the flexibility to re-initiate the design process at an early 167 stage i) avoids wasting time and resources attempting to resolve problems that passed early 168 validation but turned out to be limited at later development stages and (ii) recognizes that not 169 all problems are necessarily foreseeable, resetting the entire design process may become 170 necessary despite stage-gate generated "certainties".

171 An obvious consequence of a product-oriented design process is the need to rethink the 172 testing strategy. Most of the regular physical-chemical and (eco) toxicity assessments become 173 inoperative in this context. Indeed, there are very few "whole product" tests available. Some standardized aging procedures partially address this issue. <sup>[26]</sup> Mesocosm testing is probably 174 one of the best fits to test entire products, <sup>[27-29]</sup> but it addresses only the latest stages of the life 175 cycle. Current efforts to streamline the testing strategy in a nanosafety context rely on grouping 176 and read-across strategies already defined. <sup>[30]</sup> Unfortunately the main initiatives (e.g. H2020 177 Gracious) focus on a bottom-up process <sup>[31]</sup> but leave little- to no- room for a top-down 178 179 approach.

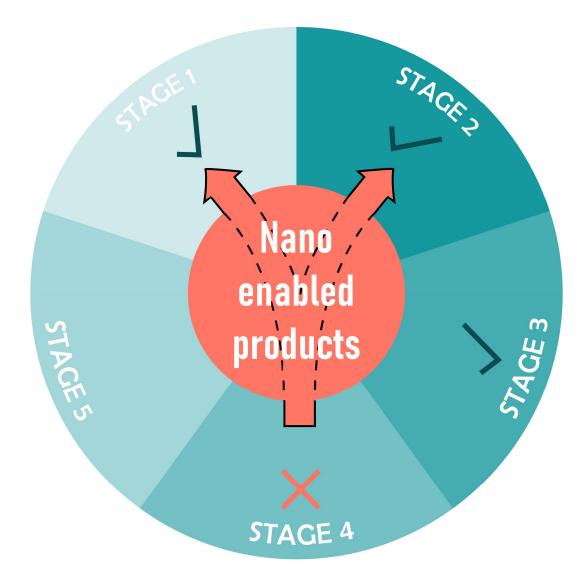
Currently, the main European initiatives do not favor a product-oriented SbD approach because it supposedly conveys a false sense of adherence to an ineffective and tedious case-bycase assessment strategy. In fact, a product-oriented approach does the exact opposite: when the focus is on the functionality, all materials meeting the criteria are on the same level, so grouping can be thought of in terms of the application. A product-, or product-family, based approach admittedly implies a more difficult process, but it also promises far more effective design and testing strategies.

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188 Acknowledgment:

189 The authors wish to thank Fanny Thavot for her help in designing the artwork. This work 190 is a contribution to the Labex SERENADE (No. ANR-11-LABX-0064) funded by the 191 "Investissements d'Avenir" French Government program of the French National Research 192 Agency (ANR) through the AMIDEX project (No. ANR11-IDEX-0001-02). The authors also 193 acknowledge the CNRS for the funding of the IRP iNOVE.

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Figure 1: Example of the non sequential feedback capability for a product oriented value chain
validation approach<sub>-</sub>. Stage numbers 1-5 refer to Cooper's -stage gate approach (see refs 5-7).

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