

Nuclear Energy and Civil Society



NEI, United States

Understanding and dialogue are key elements in building trust.

Nuclear energy is among those industrial activities that are particularly challenged to show transparency and accountability in decision making. Care must be taken to address citizens' concerns over its potential implications, particularly for public health and safety, including in respect of future generations. The NEA began studying specific aspects of the issue of nuclear energy and civil society two decades ago, and more recently several of the Agency's standing technical committees have launched activities that aim to analyse national and local experience and to communicate lessons learnt. NEA activities currently under way are briefly described below.

Society and nuclear energy policy

The NEA Expert Group on Society and Nuclear Energy began work on a study intended to provide policy makers with findings, guidance and recommendations on communication and consultation with civil society in connection with nuclear energy policy decisions. The Group intends to map the processes used or intended to be used in member countries, and to analyse consultation and communication experience. Preliminary findings will be discussed at a workshop to be organised in 2004.

Nuclear regulators and the public

Regulatory bodies, in fulfilling their responsibilities to inform the public about their role in contributing to nuclear safety, face increasing communication needs. At the same time, good governance and efficiency in decision making by government authorities are increasingly dependent upon mutual trust and confidence between those authorities and the public. It was in this context that the NEA Working Group on Public Communication of Nuclear Regulatory Organisations was established in June 2001.

In 2003, the working group discussed such topics as public communication in relation to the April 2003 Paks-2 incident in Hungary; the public impact of the April 2003 HSK (Swiss nuclear safety

authority) report on aircraft attacks of nuclear power plants; lessons learnt from the Swiss vote in May 2003 in favour of nuclear power; Swedish public opinion of nuclear power; and follow-up to inspection findings on core internals in Japan. Preparations were also undertaken to organise a workshop on "Building, Measuring and Improving Public Confidence in the Nuclear Regulator", to be held in Ottawa, Canada in May 2004.

Stakeholder participation in decision making involving radiation

The NEA Committee on Radiation Protection and Public Health (CRPPH) has explored in detail the implications of stakeholder involvement in decision-making processes for several years and held important workshops in this area in 1998, 2001 and 2003. Specific case studies have been analysed to extract commonalities of stakeholder involvement process aspects that, to some extent, transcend geographic and cultural frontiers.

The CRPPH organised the 1st Villigen Workshop in January 1998 on "Societal Aspects of Decision Making in Complex Radiological Situations", which reached the broad conclusion that radiological protection must adapt to meet the needs of society, and not the reverse. To deepen the understanding of this important subject, the CRPPH launched further studies that resulted in the organisation of the 2nd Villigen Workshop, held in January 2001, on "Better Integration of Radiation Protection in Modern Society". This workshop concluded that although broad stakeholder participation was not needed to reach agreement in the vast majority of regulatory decisions, it can be the best and sometimes only way to achieve agreement in certain blocked situations. In addition, the workshop showed that it is important to develop a common understanding of stakeholder roles and responsibilities, to distinguish clearly between scientific knowledge and social judgement, and to foster an atmosphere of mutual learning.

These analyses were used as fundamental input to the 3rd Villigen Workshop on "Stakeholder Participation in Decision Making Involving Radiation: Exploring Processes and Implications", which took place in October 2003. Although the results of this workshop are still preliminary, case studies appear to show that focusing on the sustainability of a decision is a key aspect. This means that it is essential to clearly understand the concerns of stakeholders, and to identify the common values of all parties to create a "natural decisional framework"

in which an agreed solution can be identified. This requires, however, that decisions strike a balance between national policy and local stakeholder needs. It is also essential that, early in the process, stakeholders clearly understand how their input will be taken into account in the final decision, and who is, in fact, mandated to “make a decision”. The NEA will perform a thorough analysis of the results of this workshop and publish the results in 2004.

Given the growing importance of stakeholder interactions in risk governance, the roles of the radiological protection professional as scientist, regulator and decision maker, would seem to merit further study. Stakeholder aspects also form an essential element in the evolution of the system of radiological protection. This work will therefore also serve as NEA input to the discussions of the International Commission on Radiological Protection (ICRP) on new recommendations for the system of radiological protection.

Stakeholder participation in radioactive waste management

Issues of public perception and confidence have been most critical in gaining approval for the development of repositories for long-lived radioactive waste at specific sites, which raises the question of how best to achieve confidence regarding the ethical, economic, political and technical aspects of a waste management strategy, and disposal in particular. The “public”, however, is not a homogeneous group, and its various components and the concerns they have need to be better identified and understood. The NEA Forum on Stakeholder Confidence (FSC) facilitates the sharing of experience in addressing the societal dimensions of radioactive waste management.

The FSC workshops held in national context have proven to be successful instruments for sharing national experience in interacting with stakeholders. Last year, the FSC organised its third workshop of this series in Belgium, following previous experiences in Finland and Canada. The workshop examined how to deal with different interests, values and knowledge in managing risk. It centered on innovative “local partnerships” established between the national RWM agency ONDRAF/NIRAS and four local communities that are developing integrated concepts for the safe, long-term management of low-level waste. As customary for FSC workshops in national context, the FSC delegates also had the opportunity to visit each partnership and interact with the local stakeholders.

Under the aegis of the FSC, a survey on *Public Information, Consultation and Involvement in Radioactive Waste Management* was prepared which benchmarks stakeholder involvement practices by radioactive waste management institutions and gives an international overview of approaches and experiences in this area. The analysis of this material gave insights into generic elements for credibility and effective means of communicating; it also showed that perceptions, values and interests are the most important factors influencing stakeholders’ attitude. An important aspect is that stakeholders should be afforded opportunities to interact as early as possible in the process. The process by which proposals are brought forward must also be trusted, and decisions made with sensitivity to local concerns. The report provides a valuable baseline of detailed information on stakeholder dialogue, consultation and information practices. Important developments or events are taking place quickly, however, and the information communicated in this survey represents a snapshot within an evolving picture.

The survey also showed that the regulatory and licensing bodies have a very important role to play in all phases of a high-level waste (HLW) programme. The success of public outreach programmes hinges, in large measure, on the extent to which regulators effectively make their presence and role known, and communicate their independence – showing the capacity to make their own evaluations and the integrity to put forward their requirements.

The FSC analysed the regulator’s evolving role and image in radioactive waste management and provided a summary of the lessons learnt by regulatory authorities in carrying out their mission. It noted that amongst all the institutional actors in the field, it is perhaps the regulatory authorities that have restyled their roles most significantly, beginning to overturn the traditional worldwide approach according to which regulators should not be too intensely involved, if at all, since that might bring their independence into question. Today’s experience shows, however, that the regulators can play an active role with involvement in the community processes while maintaining independence for later licensing actions. Ideally, and subject to any legal constraints, the regulators should be “guarantors” of safety and the “peoples’ expert”, acting as an accessible resource for stakeholders. To be fully effective in carrying out their mission, regulators need not only to be independent, competent and reliable; they must also strive to obtain the confidence and trust of stakeholders and the public at large.

