

Nuclear Energy and Civil Society

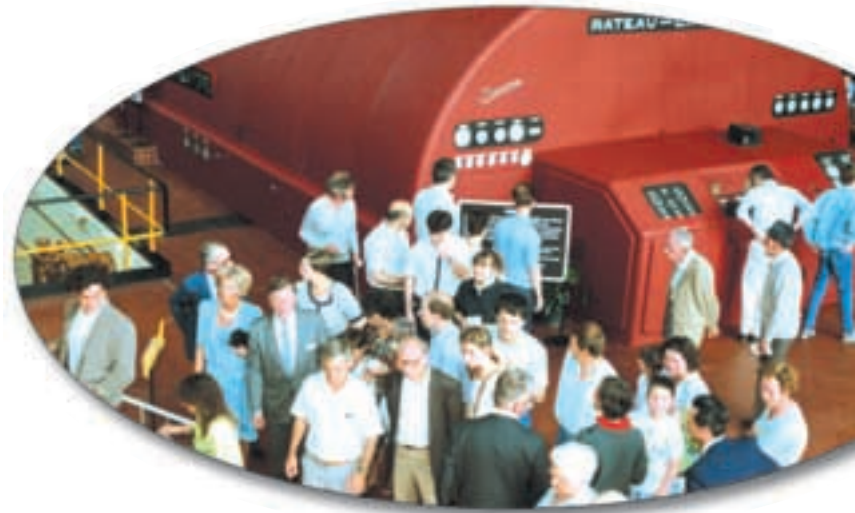
Since 1999, the OECD has been conducting a broad-ranging programme on governance issues ultimately aimed at strengthening pluralistic democracy, promoting economic prosperity and social cohesion, and maintaining confidence in public administration. This programme stems from the view expressed at the 1999 OECD Council Meeting at Ministerial Level that: *"The political, economic and social challenges of the next century require informed and actively participating citizens. Ministers recognise their heightened responsibility to ensure transparency and clarity in policy making, and look to the Organisation to assist governments in the important task of improving communication and consultation with civil society."*

Faced with the complexity of the relationship between government and citizens, and a perceived loss of direct influence over national and local policy decisions, many citizens are looking for ways to make wider use of participatory democracy. For their part, governments increasingly realise that they will not be able to conduct and effectively implement policies if their citizens do not understand and support them. Governments are thus looking to new or improved models and approaches for better informing and involving citizens in the policy-making process.

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: towards a better understanding

As the social dimension is playing an increasingly important role in the nuclear energy policies of Member countries, the NEA Nuclear Development Committee (NDC) initiated a study on society and nuclear



energy, examining in particular public perception of the related risks and benefits. The first phase of the study, an in-depth review of authoritative literature and expert opinions on the topic, was completed in 2001. It covered nuclear-specific issues, the decision-making process and communication issues. The outcomes compiled in this desk study highlight a number of issues that need further analysis to better assess ways and means of improving communication with various stakeholders on nuclear energy matters and broadening public participation in the decision-making process. Preliminary conclusions include:

- Various changing conditions may influence the future of nuclear energy, while nuclear energy itself should also be considered dynamic.
- Risk perception involves not only quantitative assessments, but also variable subjective criteria.
- Potential exists for increasing democratic legitimacy of decisions through enhancing public involvement.
- Intuitive judgements should complement formal methods to support complex decision making.
- In addition, opinion polls show that public involvement in policy and decision-making processes concerning the nuclear energy sector is probably insufficient. People are interested in acquiring information, indicating that confidence in nuclear energy would increase if people were better informed. Building trust through nuclear information sharing may be a prerequisite for the future use and development of nuclear energy.

It is planned to publish the study by the end of 2002.

The NDC will continue to work on this topic in order to identify driving factors and eventually provide help in developing policy and decision-making processes in the field of nuclear energy better adapted to the needs and expectations of society.

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. Indeed, as pointed out by Richard A. Meserve, Chairman of the US Nuclear Regulatory Commission, "Trust is a fragile commodity. Governmental organisations and their relations with the public they serve can be strengthened by trust – or paralysed by a lack of it." It was in this context and based on the outcome of a workshop on "Investing in Trust: Nuclear Regulators and the Public" organised in 2000 that the CNRA established a Working Group on Public Communication of Nuclear Regulatory Organisations in June 2001.

The Working Group will seek to share information, documents and experiences related to new developments, techniques and achievements in public communication. Among the items addressed at its first meeting in November, the Group exchanged information on the way the participating organisations reacted to the September 11 events in the United States. It also explored various networking possibilities. The Group is currently developing an action plan in the area of nuclear regulatory communication to guide its future activities.

Radioactive waste management

The NEA Radioactive Waste Management Committee (RWMC) established the Forum on Stakeholder Confidence (FSC) in 2000, the overall purpose of which is to outline ways of integrating waste management programmes and socio-political considerations, and analyse successful and unsuccessful experiences in interacting with stakeholders. The FSC acts as a centre for informal exchanges on these experiences and for distilling lessons learnt in a form accessible to policy makers and other interested parties. It is intended to alternate regular meetings of the FSC with workshops held in national contexts, at which the representation of civil society will feature prominently.

A workshop was organised on "Stakeholder Involvement and Confidence in the Process of Decision Making for the Disposal of Spent Nuclear Fuel in Finland", in Turku, Finland on 14-16 November 2001. The workshop helped the FSC and the various stakeholders involved to learn from the Finnish experience. It analysed stakeholder involvement in the particular context of a parliamentary "decision in principle" and was a well-received opportunity for the different Finnish groups involved to review their role in the process. Some of the conclusions of the workshop were that:

- Differences between risk perception by experts and lay people have to be understood and public concerns need to be taken into account.
- Stakeholders feel that more attention should be paid to informing people, as well as to listening to them and responding to their concerns.
- Openness, honesty, and early and continuous participation of a variety of stakeholders are key factors in improving confidence and trust.
- Public interest in participation can be maintained only if stakeholders believe that they can have an influence on key decisions.

An executive summary will be issued in February 2002; the proceedings are under preparation and will be available by summer 2002. The next FSC workshop is planned to take place in October 2002 in Canada.

Stakeholder involvement in radiation protection decision making

Starting from the recognition that decision making in several areas of radiation protection can less and less be made in isolation from its social dimension, a first workshop was organised in Villigen (Switzerland) in 1998 to examine societal aspects of decision making in complex radiological situations. A "Second Villigen Workshop" took place in 2001 to investigate the better integration of radiation protection in modern society. Lessons learnt on stakeholder involvement are intended to be incorporated into the improvements to the International Commission on Radiological Protection (ICRP) Recommendations. A policy-level summary report of the workshop discussions has been published, and proceedings will be issued in early 2002. It may be noted from the summary report that:

- Perhaps the clearest lesson to emerge from the workshop is the need to foster mutual trust between the radiation protection community and society as a whole.
- Openness, inclusiveness, and a focus on developing procedures in common will help so that even if there is ultimately an agreement to disagree, all outcomes will merit respect.
- Any engagement with stakeholders cannot be a once-and-for-all exercise but must envisage a future in which circumstances will change, whether in terms of the state of scientific knowledge or of societal attitudes and expectations.
- If an approach to radiation protection, which involves stakeholders, is to fulfil its potential, it must be established in such a way as to encourage mutual learning where all concerned are able to learn from their interactions. This new information must then be factored into ongoing development of common solutions that enjoy general approval.

To facilitate national-level use of the wealth of information developed during the first and second workshops, good practice in the procedural aspects of how stakeholders are involved in the decision-making processes will be studied using regional analyses for North America, Europe and Asia. This will also serve as input for a third workshop which is planned to be held in 2003.