

Regional development and community support in radioactive waste management

A national workshop and community visit in Hungary

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The NEA Forum on Stakeholder Confidence (FSC) held its sixth national workshop on 14-17 November 2006 in Tengelic, Hungary. The workshop focused on those factors that contribute either to the success or failure of a repository siting process. Experience gained in Hungary over the past two decades provided the context for the discussions. In particular, the workshop highlighted the role and operation of local public oversight and information associations.

Hosted by the Hungarian national waste management agency PURAM, major institutional authorities, local residents and stakeholders, 11 mayors, and more than 30 FSC delegates from 12 countries learned about Hungary's management initiatives. Overall, some 40 volunteer local residents responded to PURAM's invitation to attend the workshop, taking time away from their working lives to engage with interest in the discussions with the FSC delegates. The workshop included a visit to the community of Bataapati, where PURAM is developing an underground repository for short-lived, low- and intermediate-level radioactive waste (L/ILW).

The safety and management of radioactive waste in Hungary is governed by the Act on Atomic Energy. According to this law, the licensee of a nuclear facility must support the establishment of a public oversight and information association and grant assistance to its activities. The purpose of establishing such associations is to facilitate the provision of regular information to the population of

the neighbouring communities. The law also establishes the legal basis for providing financial incentives to groups of local municipalities. Associations may use part of the funding provided for regional development purposes.

Four public oversight and information associations are active in Hungary. These include associations near: the existing near-surface repository for medical and research waste at Puspokszilagyi; the repository for L/ILW generated by nuclear power production, under construction in Bataapati; the interim storage facility for spent fuel at Paks; and the candidate siting area for a high-level waste (HLW) repository at Boda. These associations bring together members of the host community as well as neighbouring communities for discussions with implementers about issues affecting the local area. They provide a forum for airing differences and for identifying common objectives, and have been instrumental in fostering agreement among the relevant actors.

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The FSC national workshop and community visit

The workshop's first day served to inform delegates about the history and status of the Hungarian radioactive waste management programme. Representatives of the Hungarian Atomic Energy Authority spoke, as did sociologists and the Mayor of Boda. Delegates then visited the community of Bábaapáti (as described below). Over the next two days, delegates listened to presentations by a wide range of Hungarian stakeholders and experts on issues relevant to the workshop theme. Round-table discussions took place after each session. Here, small groups of foreign delegates and Hungarian stakeholders had in-depth exchanges with the help of translators. One FSC member from each round table then summarised in plenary the results of that table's discussions.

Workshop participants first examined the means for implementing a regional development plan in concert with facility development. Researchers, an NGO representative and a local mayor gave insight into the interests and views of different stakeholders: national, regional and local. The mayor of Kismédy, near Püspökszilágy, where the institutional waste repository has operated since 1976, highlighted political changes and their effect on decision making. Before the 1990 regime change in Hungary, authorities simply announced decisions and made no efforts to learn whether local people accepted them. After 1990, a decision to begin storing low-level waste from the Paks nuclear power plant (NPP) implied the need to ask for residents' agreement. The local governments received the authorisation to do so, and the new tradition of "social control" commenced at this time. A control group was set up to inspect and check the data concerning the radioactive waste delivered. This was the first point of contact where civil society organisations and state-managed organisations responsible for nuclear activities met each other under the

terms of partnership. The mayor found that, as a result, a positive relationship between local communities and nuclear companies emerged that continues to develop to this day.

Workshop discussions then centred on local participation and regional development. A representative of the Paks NPP explained the process according to which affected regions were defined and public associations established. A mayor and experts outlined regional development needs and initiatives. A delegate from the South Transdanubian Regional Development Agency explained exchanges between his international organisation and the Hungarian utility. In 2005, the Agency concluded a contract with Paks NPP to create opportunities for future participation in European Union projects favouring economic development and innovation. The Agency is permanently invited to Paks activities and reciprocates with full information to the plant management about projects and ideas to be supported.

Finally, participants discussed aspects of building a sustainable facility. Mayors told the FSC about local expectations of a long-term relationship with the implementer, the regulator and the waste management installations themselves. Here issues of local development, information needs and expectations concerning citizen oversight and monitoring of arriving waste were discussed. Plans for the PURAM visitors' centre at Bábaapáti were shared. The FSC report on fostering a sustainable relationship between a waste management facility and its host community was also presented.

Lessons learnt about confidence

The community visit included a tour of the existing underground facility in Bábaapáti and a meeting with the village mayor, the school principal and the vice-president of the local oversight association. Bábaapáti is a small village with about 500 residents,

of which 30% are under the age of 18 years. While rural, the village benefits from water, electricity, gas and sewerage. It used to be a village of about 1 000 residents, of which 800 were German-speaking. In 1946, the Germanophone population left. The village itself struggled, but over time, families came from all over the country into the area. During this period the village was joined with another village in the area, but in 1990 a new history started when it became independent again and had its own leadership. The village decided that it would repair its roads and reopen the school because it wanted to keep young people in the area. The primary school, closed for many years, reopened. This allowed village children to attend school near their home and to avoid a daily 15-km journey to school. Many people in the village work in the winery or find jobs directly or indirectly related to the construction of the repository. While Bataapati is small, it has two shops and four civil organisations. Cable television gives residents access not only to entertainment, but also to detailed information on waste management activities. The FSC found many reasons that contribute to the community's confidence in accepting the facility.

There is a very good working relationship between PURAM and the community, which has grown over almost two decades. The fact that members of the community work in the facility gives the most confidence to the population, as these people interact with their neighbours daily. There is an agreement between PURAM and the village that the facility will employ local people. This provides added confidence in the long-term stability of employment in the area and prospects for a continuing relationship of trust with facility operators.

Safety is the key concern for the community, who has confidence in the regulatory and licensing process, in part, because of the multiple agencies involved. The community believes that the repository will receive a license only if it is safe. The community recognises that technical issues are not their area of expertise and have brought in independent technical support. Additional confidence comes from the active involvement of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences on behalf of the community.

The community believes there is a benefit from hosting the facility. At the same time, it also recognises that there will be impacts. One key impact, identified by the community, is the increased traffic associated with building the L/ILW facility. This results in increased noise, vibration and dust in the area. Discussions continue about mechanisms that would minimise or eliminate these impacts altogether. A new ringroad has been proposed. In addition, an Environmental Impact Assessment will be prepared for the facility and will address these issues.

Another factor that builds confidence is the role the community will have as a guardian of the future safety of the repository. Members of the community will receive training to monitor both the waste coming into the facility and the facility's operations. The training will take a year and will give members of the community expertise to be able to scrutinise the facility. The community thus has a role in the working of the facility and the means to reassure themselves that everything is working as planned.

Community representatives advocate on behalf of local young people, recognising that they will need job opportunities, and will need to develop corresponding skills and qualifications for those jobs. The community looks for assurances that its youth will receive job and training opportunities to enable them to benefit from the presence of the facility.

Finally, the local oversight association is active in involving both the community and its neighbours in discussing issues with PURAM and raising their concerns. The association is instrumental in fostering agreement between PURAM and the local communities.

Conclusions

The FSC workshops have become known for their capacity to provide a platform for both national and international participants to learn from each other's experience. The FSC will document the workshop so that lessons learnt today may be shared with others now and in the future. As for the Hungarian stakeholders, overall there appear to be many reasons to be optimistic about the waste management facility under construction in Bataapati. The facility will bring employment, an increase in money spent in the area and an assurance of long-term employment stability in the region. The village will go on developing from a small rural location. Family tourism in the area is expected to increase once the visitors' centre opens to provide both scientific and historic information, as well as the opportunity to enjoy a barbecue or picnic. Other important measures will help place Hungary's projected waste management facilities in a productive regional context. Amendments to legislation have made it possible for the successful local oversight associations to participate in planning and to administer funds for development. The Transdanubian Regional Development Agency has signed accords with the Paks NPP that allow for a strong synergism between planning competence and the major economic presence in the region. Co-ordinated foresight is possible; for instance, consideration is being given to making this area of the country better connected with other regions and the capital by improving road infrastructure. Overall, the success of dialogue among stakeholders, thus far, bodes well for continuing to move forward. ■