

# 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 learned. 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 study was published in 2002 under the title *Society and Nuclear Energy: Towards a Better Understanding* and is available free of charge on the NEA website.

Results from this first phase of the project highlighted the importance of risk perception and communication and showed that more work in this field could contribute to facilitate the dialogue between civil society, nuclear energy experts and policy makers. In this connection, it was felt that the analysis of practical experience in different member countries would provide opportunities to draw lessons from successes and best practices as well as failures. An Expert Group on Society and Nuclear Energy has since been created to carry out a study that would provide policy makers with findings, guidance and recommendations on communication and consultation with civil society in connection with nuclear energy policy decisions. The processes used or intended to be used in member countries would be mapped and experiences on consultation and communication aspects reported and analysed. The combined programmes of industry and government would be addressed, and if the examples were too numerous, case studies would be selected. The results of the study would be discussed at a workshop before being published.

## **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 depending 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 2002, the working group discussed topics such as how their organisations handled public questions following the 11 September 2001 events in the US, how to deal with questions from the public concerning terrorist attacks on nuclear installations, the public impact in the US and other countries of the Davis-Besse reactor vessel head corrosion, the public impact from cover-ups of inspection findings by several Japanese utilities, how to communicate to the public information related to radiological releases of nuclear installations, and experience gained with the organisation of public meetings.

The issue of how to communicate to the public information related to authorised radiological releases from nuclear installations was discussed in detail. The problems associated with this issue involve the fact that measured figures are very much below the regulatory limits, variations from one report to the next can be very wide, it is next to impossible to deduce trends, and some safety

authorities prefer to lower regulatory limits (as part of a wider policy taking into account technological improvements, the precaution principle, etc.) while others are opposed to such a change in regulation. The group reached consensus on the following position: changing regulatory limits without giving at the same time good technical justification to support the change may cause communication problems; for this reason, communication strategy should be taken into account in this aspect of the regulatory process.

### Stakeholder involvement in radiological protection decision making

Contemporary society has become increasingly interested in participating more actively in public decision making regarding health, safety and environmental protection issues. As governments have tried to understand these interests better, and to integrate societal needs in their decision-making processes more adequately, it has become possible to begin to glean some common policy-level issues and lessons from the wide variety of situations in which stakeholders participated effectively in the elaboration of decisions.

The trends within the nuclear industry mirror those of broader governance questions, and public interest in some situations can be extremely high. Within the radiological protection community, these stakeholder issues have moved steadily to the forefront of policy discussions, and clearly form key elements in decisions regarding the development and implementation of radiological protection policy.

The NEA Committee on Radiation Protection and Public Health (CRPPH) has explored the details and implications of stakeholder involvement in decision-making processes for several years. Through CRPPH work in this area, and following the results of two workshops hosted by the Swiss Nuclear Safety Inspectorate in 1998 and 2001, the consensus is growing that stakeholder involvement is an important component of the decision-making process, and that in some cases it is an essential component for arriving at an accepted solution and for building (or rebuilding) trust in decision-making authorities.

Based on this experience, the CRPPH has been exploring various process aspects of stakeholder involvement, using three specific case studies to extract commonalities that, to some extent, transcend geographic and cultural frontiers. 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 ICRP discussions on new recommendations.

### Radioactive waste management

Any significant decisions regarding the long-term management of radioactive waste will be accompanied by a comprehensive public review with involvement of a diverse range of stakeholders. These stakeholders include not just the waste generators, waste management agencies and regulatory authorities, all of whom have a primarily technical focus, but also interested or concerned parties with a non-technical focus such as local communities, elected officials, non-governmental organisations and the general public. The Forum on Stakeholder Confidence (FSC) facilitates the sharing of international experience in addressing the societal dimension of radioactive waste management. It explores means of ensuring an effective dialogue with the public, and considers ways to strengthen confidence in decision-making processes.

The latest in a series of international workshops organised by the Forum in national contexts was held in Canada in October 2002 and was hosted by the Department of Natural Resources. Three key areas of inquiry were examined: what are the social concerns at play in radioactive waste management; how can these concerns be

addressed; and development opportunities for local communities. The workshop enabled an analysis and appraisal of the Port Hope case and the longer-range spent fuel disposal programme, and allowed a wide range of Canadian stakeholders to meet and exchange views, in some cases for the first time. External experts in radiological protection, community governance, ethics and stakeholder deliberation provided additional feedback. The site visit allowed the FSC delegates to meet actors in the decision process for the

final clean-up and disposition of mill tailings in Port Hope, Ontario. The Canadian workshop and site visit confirmed:

- the very important role that local communities and municipalities will play, which needs to be encouraged;
- that nuclear municipalities have a special interest in seeing solutions brought forward; they are especially receptive to dialogue and are already active to that effect;
- the importance of having a government body that is active in having the process of dialogue carried out and the decisions implemented.

The FSC also completed several studies that will be available as NEA publications in 2003. They concern the evolving image and role of the regulator, stepwise decision making, and a survey of outreach activities in NEA member countries in the field of radioactive waste management.

The uranium conversion facility at Port Hope, Canada, and the surrounding residential community.

