



Nuclear energy: the role of government



In recent times, the environment surrounding the electricity sector has considerably evolved. In many OECD countries, there has been a complete restructuring. New developments include, in some countries, the liberalisation of the electricity market, mergers and acquisitions, an increased role of civil society, energy policy debates, restructuring and reorganisation of government institutions and bodies. The nuclear sector has also been affected by these changes, more so than in other sectors as in the beginning, nuclear facilities were in government hands.

The OECD Nuclear Energy Agency and its member countries have over the last year devoted time and research as well as reflected on the role of government in the nuclear sector in order to assess, in this new environment, what level of involvement is appropriate. Major considerations include security of supply, safety, waste management, research, non-proliferation of radioactive materials and national security considerations. Is there a consensus among countries that apply different economic policies and follow different nuclear strategies? Is there a consensus despite the contrast between market-oriented policies and more government-controlled systems?

On the occasion of the NEA's Steering Committee meeting in April of this year, which coincided with the publication of our study Government and Nuclear Energy, we had the opportunity to discuss and debate the parameters for what is considered essential to guarantee the continued safe operation of nuclear power plants under liberalised, competitive markets. Clearly, recent experience has shown that the market



alone cannot dictate policy. Governments have to juggle many interests, but energy policy must be formulated at that level, taking into consideration a full range of factors. Last year, several NEA member countries experienced severe blackouts and electricity shortages. There has been increased debate on the role of the different production means and distribution grids, evaluating the strength and vulnerabilities of each of them. There has also been considerable discussion in many member countries on how to ensure security of supply in the long-term future, whilst caring for the environment and alleviating climate change when projections show continued growth in energy demand.

The debate is not over. However, it is clear to me that we have reached a common understanding on most of the issues at hand. There are, however, different approaches depending on the member country. The exchange of views has certainly helped many in making progress in formulating sound choices.

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