

# COMPARATIVE STUDY OF PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT IN RADIOACTIVE WASTE MANAGEMENT

The concluding seminar in the Swedish CARL Project, which has analyzed and compared decision-making processes concerning radioactive waste management in Belgium, Slovenia, Sweden and the U.K.(\*) was held 25-27 September in Oskarshamn, one of two designated host communities for Sweden's high level waste repository.

(661.5835) WISE-Stockholm - In the space of two-and-a-half intensive days, four teams of social scientists, who have studied the respective national processes over the past three years, summarized their findings. The meeting also included three working group sessions in which mixed groups of participants - nuclear industry people, regulators and representatives of presumptive site communities and NGOs - discussed the information presented in the light of their experience.

The four countries contrast in many respects. Whilst the process is nearing completion in Sweden, it is only starting in Slovenia; whereas local government has the right of veto in Sweden and Slovenia, the national government has final authority in Belgium and the U.K. Whereas the participatory process in the U.K. has gone back and revisited 'first principles', in Sweden most of the basic parameters were decided in earlier, less participatory phases of the process. The countries' political structures differ, as does the strength of the respective non-governmental infrastructures, so-called 'civil society'.

Sweden is unique in that the tasks of developing a storage method and designating a site have been left to the nuclear power industry; in the other countries a public body of some sort is in charge. The Swedish project is also unique among the countries in that it includes irradiated nuclear fuel.

All four countries have one thing in common, however: the more or less participatory processes represent second attempts after technocratic, top-down efforts to site nuclear waste repositories in the 1970s and 1980s had failed. In the terminology of the project the study focused on the transition from 'government' to

'governance'.

## Ambivalence

A certain ambivalence was notable among the scholars and the actors in the respective processes alike. Is the prime objective of opening the process to public or stakeholder involvement (SI) to enhance the legitimacy of the process? To facilitate consensus, to oil the wheels of the process? Or, is it to broaden and enrich the basis for decision-making? Most would agree that it is all three, but the emphasis on the former motives surfaced, especially when issues relating to NGO involvement were raised.

In this connection several of the researchers discuss how participatory processes can be used to mask essentially technocratic decision-making. In the words of one team(\*\*): "... [U]nder the surface of formally accepted participative approaches technocratic paternalism remains strong. There are even indications that it is growing again" (p 5). Another team: "... [I]t has been clear that the new culture of transparency and openness requires commitment at the most senior levels and continuing effort if it is to be maintained. ... We have witnessed tokenistic use of public and stakeholder engagement by the nuclear industry" (p 7). And a third: "In fact, a strong separation between technical actors and all the rest is maintained, however disguised by talk and activities framed as stakeholder and public involvement" (p 20)

Similarly, the studies reveal how ostensibly technical decisions and preferences often contain elements that are essentially social, but that it is not made transparent. The authors write: "Examples show that partnership is no guarantee for avoiding a situation where technical experts take care of issues

that include important social choices" (p 18). They urge the processes to "identify the social in the technical" and not to be afraid to broadly discuss technical issues as social choices.

There is inevitably some degree of trade-off between efficiency and democracy in participatory processes. In a discussion of the representativeness of the stakeholder groups the CARL group comment: "...[E]xperience in both Slovenia and the U.K. has shown that attempts to involve critics can be difficult and that the process runs much more smoothly when they leave. This result may seem desirable but in any specific case there is a need to consider whether the loss of critical voices ... could in any way undermine the longer term effectiveness or legitimacy of the process" (p 30).

## 'Trust' - how to 'build' it, how to 'earn' it?

'Trust' was another recurrent topic. The choice of verb raises the question: Can trust actually be 'built', orchestrated? Is it not something that arises out of less goal-oriented factors like mutual respect? One prerequisite, the CARL group note, is a willingness to engage in non-confrontational discussions.

The scope of participation has broadened over the course of all four processes. Speaking of the most participative models, the CoRWM project in the U.K and a similar project in Canada., the team note: "[The consultations] may not have led to full public empowerment, genuine upstream framing of issues or co-determination of decisions. They did however raise opportunities for peripheral actors to have some form of input in the decision-making process" (p 12f). Indeed, in no way does broader participation guarantee the redistribution of power. Genuine power-

sharing or instances of 'co-governance', found in studies of other processes, were not observed in any of the radioactive waste management (RWM) cases, the scholars note.

### **Voluntarism: pro and con**

The issue of 'voluntarism' - that political willingness of local communities assumes greater importance than geological and other technical criteria in the siting decision - was another recurrent topic. In all four countries the siting process ultimately has settled on so-called 'nuclear communities', that is, communities that already host a nuclear power plant or and/or intermediate waste storage facility. This, whether the result of a process of self-selection or designation on the part of national authorities.

Several participants from such communities felt they really had no choice. Although not necessarily coerced, the social and economic pressures within the community, coupled with benefits that can be gained in negotiations with the national government, rendered the choice inevitable. Particularly communities that already have an intermediate repository felt they had no choice. If they said No and the government could find no willing alternative site, the waste would remain anyway - and the community would have foregone the opportunity to bargain for favours.

Voluntarism also has some more broader implications. In a report from 2005 the Swedish CARL team write: "Voluntarism has served to lock the siting process into established nuclear communities in Sweden. ... Physical geology has only assumed a dominant role in the siting of KBS-3 after the commencement of site investigations in 2002. Up until the choice of Oskarshamn and Östhammar as sites for site investigations political geology was the dominant factor."

Voluntarism also presumes that the "how"-question can be divorced from the "where"-question, i.e., that the reliability of the storage method is independent of its physical surroundings. Judgments on this point vary. A key factor is whether the repository's safety depends on natural barriers. Surprisingly, SKB in Sweden,

the only country where the project includes high-level waste, is the most radical proponent of divorcing method from site. The reason, the authors point out, is that SKB hopes to commercialize and export their KBS-3 scheme as a 'global brand' (p 25).

### **National vs. local**

In addition to the tension between governmental authority at local and national level - "the communities discuss, the national governments decide" - the CARL project notes a difference in orientation of the decision processes at the respective levels. Discussions at national level are policy-oriented, whereas the process at local level tends to be more project-oriented, as one researcher put it.

This last observation struck a chord in this reporter, who has represented national NGOs from time to time at local consultation sessions here in Sweden. The mismatch between orientations has been a source of great frustration. Had we NGOs a choice, we would naturally prefer to take part in policy discussions in regional and national consultations, but we have been denied access to those arenas. By and large, public participation in the industry-administered RWM process in Sweden seems to have been much more authentic in the candidate communities than at national level.

One serious pitfall that participative processes must avoid is the frustration caused when participants' expectations of the process are not fulfilled. "Careful management of the process can minimize the problem," the CARL researchers write. In the next breath, however, they recognize that "'managing expectations' can come very close to presetting the terms of the process and allowing little scope for stakeholders to exercise influence" (p 28). Those responsible for the processes tread a narrow path. 'Manipulation' is an ugly word; it lured for the most part offstage at Oskarshamn, but most of the CARL researchers seemed mindful of the ever-present risk. One team offer a radically simple remedy: "Discuss what [can] be changed and what [can] not be changed, and why" (p 19).

The overall purpose of the CARL project (Citizens-Agencies (RWM)-Research organisations-Licensing and regulatory bodies) was to try to identify principles that seem to foster progress and good results of participatory processes. One of the general conclusions of the project, however, is that there can be no general rules; it is necessary to enter into each process with an open mind and to adapt the process to the situation at hand.

The results of the CARL project, too, are dependent on the "situation at hand", i.e., the countries studied. As one researcher put it, "We might have arrived at a very different set of variables, had Germany or France been included."

The studies presented in Oskarshamn seem to be solid social science. Anyone who is or may be involved in this kind of process will find something of value in the findings. Check [www.CARL-research.org](http://www.CARL-research.org) for country reports and the final report, which is expected to appear in the next few months.

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\*\*\*) The quotes in this report are taken from a draft entitled, "CARL Thematic Reports: Summary of Key Findings and Lessons Learned" (September 2007; 31 pp), circulated at the meeting.

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