

Background

Partly because nuclear energy technology continues to provoke profound controversy, the 'Flemish institute for technology assessment' (viWTA) took the initiative to order a study aimed at mapping out the historical dynamics of the societal debate on nuclear energy. This study was carried out by the 'Belgian Nuclear Research Centre' (SCK•CEN, under the research programme PISA) together with the 'Free university of Brussels' (VUB, research group MEKO) in 2004. In 2007, the report was updated and published by Acco (Leuven) under the title "Kernenergie (on)besproken".

Objectives

This study had three main objectives: 1) to discuss the societal debate on nuclear energy in Belgium in relation to major events (Chernobyl, TMI, etc.); 2) to elucidate the role of social actors in the controversy on both a national and international level and 3) to discuss possible alternatives for a better structuring of the debate in the future, building on existing approaches.

Principal results

The book is based primarily on findings of a literature and archive search complemented by interviews with key actors in the debate. The book also gives an overview of the societal debate and policy-making initiatives in the Belgian and European context. We have chosen to subdivide the historical part of the text into four big periods: the 'prehistory' (the early choice for a nuclear programme in Belgium, 1945-1970), the 70's, 80's, and 90's up to 2007.

The book tries to situate the nuclear energy controversy in relation to the most important events or 'hinge points' (e.g. the impact of the Chernobyl accident on Belgian nuclear energy policy). The historical 'story' gives attention to the role of interest groups, NGO's, the authorities, experts, and other actors involved. The book also includes a large annex of summaries of interviews with people who have played an active role in the controversy. Because questions concerning the financing of the nuclear sector with public funds continue to play an important role in the societal debate, an overview of the funding of the SCK•CEN since its foundation is included. This overview gives a first idea about funding mechanisms in the nuclear sector but at present, it was not yet possible to include other financial streams.

The controversy itself is elucidated by the use of three parallel 'axes'. On the first axis, we sketch the evolution of public perception and the general cultural background: the post-war technological optimism, general faith in progress, the first report of 'the Club of Rome', the advent of the principle of sustainable development, etc. Next to this cultural-historical evolution, the second axis is concerned with policy choices: policy-making initiatives and actions (e.g. the principal agreement on Doel, Tihange and Zeebrugge as the designated sites for nuclear power production, the resulting siting discussions, the structural reforms of the nuclear sector and the phase-out decision) and the influence of regulation on technological choices. This allowed us to present a view on the level of involvement (of interest groups, NGO's and the public) in policy making. It is remarkable that throughout the history of nuclear energy in Belgium, a well-structured societal debate was never organised – setting aside a few isolated attempts on the political stands and in the field – despite the fact that clear choices concerning energy options have been made. The third axis gives an image of the societal debate itself, i.e. the arguments used by the different actors in order to clarify their own position or undermine the position of other actors.

Based on these 'lessons from the past', the book also aims to understand the present and to formulate some reflections that could be of help in a potential future debate on energy policy based on a vision of sustainable development.

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Main references

Laes, E., Chayapathi, L., Meskens, G. en Eggermont, G. (2007), "Kernenergie (on)besproken", Acco, Leuven, 367 p.

