

Peter Hocke-Bergler / Fritz Gloede¹

Collective Action of Experts in a Stalemate Situation. Central Results of Evaluative Research on the Work of “AkEnd” in Germany

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1. Introduction

Nuclear waste management is a current topic of German public policy-making. Experts, politicians and authorities try to reduce the specific risk arising from nuclear power and its high-level radioactive waste. This happens in the context of a nearly thirty years old societal conflict about the use of nuclear power and doubts about the suitability of the existing final disposal projects. The coalition parties of Germany's Red-Green government have concluded at the end of the year 1998 that the basic elements of the previous waste management concept have failed (Committee 2001: 56). They intended to develop a new national waste management plan.

¹ Institute for Technology Assessment and Systems Analysis (ITAS) at Karlsruhe Research Centre. Comments on this paper are welcome: hocke@itas.fzk.de, gloede@itas.fzk.de. - We are grateful to Sylke Wintzer (Karlsruhe) for her translation of this paper.

Against the background that large parts of the public were opposed to the final disposal sites already considered or approved, and that also some experts and decision-makers had doubts about the suitability and/or enforceability of the final disposal projects Gorleben and Schacht Konrad, the Federal Ministry for the Environment established the commission of experts “AkEnd” (“Committee on a Site Selection Procedure for Repository Sites” or in German “Arbeitskreis Auswahlverfahren Endlagerstandorte”) in February 1999. Main task of AkEnd was to develop an unbiased and fair approach as well as suitable criteria for the search and selection of the best possible site for safe final disposal of nuclear waste in Germany.² According to AkEnd’s guidelines, the interested public, but also the national and international community of experts should be integrated into this new attempt for a German search for a final disposal site already during the development of AkEnd’s proposal. ITAS had the task to critically accompany and evaluate this process of elaborating a procedural proposal and developing criteria, which lasted for more than three years. AkEnd presented its final report (AkEnd 2002) in December 2002. The final ITAS report was completed in the following year (Hocke-Bergler / Stolle / Gloede 2003). Before summarising the main results of this evaluation study, the empirical basis and the assumptions used as starting points will be outlined.

2. Data and Methods

² Here, individual procedures developed in other countries as well as the experiences gained with them should also be taken into consideration. – For details on these considerations from the view of a governmental organisation see Rösel 2003.

Subject of analysis from the conceptual perspective was the examination of expert communication in the conflict of nuclear waste disposal. A central framework condition for the expert communication to be analysed was the stalemate process of decision-making the national disposal policy was in, particularly in the search for a final disposal site for high-level nuclear waste. Besides the concrete advisory services ITAS provided for AkEnd, it was examined on a further level how far AkEnd actually succeeded in developing a constructive and promising proposal for a new beginning in the German search for a final disposal site and thus in creating the required conditions for overcoming this stalemate situation in decision-making (see Hocke-Bergler et al. 2003: 205-211). Within the framework of the ITAS study, various established methods of empirical social research were used in combination. Of special importance were:

- two standardised representative surveys (2001 and 2002) conceptually developed and empirically analysed by ITAS,
- interviews with participants of the Workshops held by AkEnd in the years 2000, 2001 and 2002,
- participating observations in stakeholder discussions performed by AkEnd parallel to its work, as well as
- quantitative and qualitative content analyses of media data collected by ITAS.

The analytical focus was on the effects achieved by AkEnd in view of the “general public”, the “media public” and the “interested public”. Central results of these analyses are presented and discussed in the following chapter.

3. Basic Results

The evaluation of AkEnd’s work by ITAS is predominantly positive. However, regarding some important points our results are ambivalent. To be positively noted is the fact that AkEnd has reached several of its central objectives. The Committee presented both a set of geo-scientific and a set of socio-scientific criteria for the suitability of a final disposal site. Moreover, it submitted a procedural proposal for the search and selection of a final disposal site for radioactive waste in Germany.

However, some specific sub-goals which were supposed to create the conditions for a dialogue-oriented procedure for a comparative and criteria-based selection with broad public participation were not achieved by AkEnd. First to be mentioned here is the insufficient mobilisation of the interested public whose attention has already been focused on “nuclear waste disposal” and specifically on final disposal sites, and who should have been won over to the new beginning in the search for a final disposal site under conditions of dialogue. Second, certain deficits in view of addressing the media were also identified.

All in all, AkEnd’s work is an important effort to restart the search for a final disposal site. In order to successfully manage this new attempt, it would have been necessary to break up the confrontation between supporters and opponents of nuclear energy in this question and thus to create the conditions for a dialogue and subsequent negotiations on the modalities of a new search for a final disposal site. AkEnd did have quite a number of discussions with representatives of various interest groups. However, nothing indicates that the confrontation in this arena could be substantially reduced.

3.1 Public Opinion

According to the results of the two representative surveys, opinions are already divided with regard to the urgency of the disposal problem. While the supporters of nuclear energy did not see the disposal problem as very urgent and classified the existing final disposal projects as suitable, the assessments of the opponents of nuclear energy were different. They considered the disposal problem to be particularly urgent and classified the present final disposal alternatives as absolutely unsuitable.

Generally very high importance was attached to the specified criteria for a safe final disposal of nuclear waste (particularly strict safety standards, protection of the environment and health, removability, consideration of the interests of residents, voluntariness of the region, etc.) that were to be evaluated in the representative surveys. Medium or low importance was attributed to these criteria only by a small percentage of the respondents.

Extreme differences were recorded regarding the question about the credibility of information provided by different actors on the subject of nuclear energy use. Particularly some of the central actors in the search for a final disposal site were seen very differently. While the information provided by environmental research institutes and environmental associations was regarded as reliable by more than half of the population, such confidence was placed in information from the nuclear industry only by less than a fifth of the respondents. In recent years, Neidhardt (2002: 17) and Weingart (2001: 234) have come to similar results; the structural fact itself, however, has already been known much longer (Gloede / Bücken-Gärtner 1989: 346, 416; cf. also Gloede 1990).

Survey results further showed that the problem of nuclear waste disposal is not perceived as an independent topic but always as a sub-topic of the use of nuclear energy – this was largely confirmed by the media analysis.

3.2 Media Resonance

The media resonance to expert action of AkEnd can be assessed as being relatively limited. On the one hand, this has to do with the fact that the subject of nuclear waste disposal was no outstanding topic in the media reporting in 2001 and 2002. This was shown by the quantitative content analysis of mass media coverage carried out by ITAS (see Hocke-Bergler / Stolle / Gloede 2003: 115-134). On the other hand, the reporting on scientists and experts in general was very limited, while political decision-makers in this subject area received much more attention.³

Only in the fourth year of its work AkEnd was given greater attention in the mass media. However, only certain segments of the media landscape reported more detailed. These included “Frankfurter Rundschau”, “Süddeutsche Zeitung”, “tageszeitung”, and “Das Neue Deutschland” as national print media, as well as the “Elbe-Jeetzel-Zeitung” as a local newspaper of the region of Gorleben. In politically rather conservative media, like “Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung” and the news magazine “Focus”, AkEnd did not receive attention.

For a future process of selecting a final disposal site, we consider it necessary to develop target-group-specific argumentation strategies addressing the different assessments of opponents and supporters of nuclear energy. At the same time, professional public relation has to be established with the aim to more continuously attend to the media. Here, it is particularly important to consider also politically more conservative media as well as the economic press.

For this purpose, however, far more extensive personnel and material resources would have to be made available. Such engagement in public relations (and not only this) also requires that the final disposal experts manage to win a larger number of politicians as advocates in a new search for a final disposal site, since these will be important multipliers in the public debate on a new final disposal site.

3.3 The Interested Public

Also from another perspective our analysis of the communication of AkEnd led to similar results: AkEnd's communication with representatives of the interested public, as to be mainly observed during the three workshops carried out by the Committee but also in specific stakeholder discussions, has shown that the adopted course of a dialogue- and discourse-oriented procedure has had only limited effect.

In order to structure the search for a final disposal site, AkEnd had proposed a procedure in three phases: Phase 1 consists of the elaboration of proposals for procedures and criteria. Phase 2 includes societal discussions as well as negotiation processes on the proposals put forward in the previous phase which finally are to be concluded by political decisions. Phase 3, finally, is determined by the implementation of the decisions taken in phase 2. Taking AkEnd's subdivision into phases as a basis, phase 1 can be regarded under a process-related aspect as *discourse-oriented*, phase 2 as *negotiation-oriented*, and phase 3 as *participation-oriented*. In this perspective, AkEnd's work was to be mainly assessed by whether and how far the Committee succeeded in promoting the

³ Similar results which underline this observation have been found e.g. by Schütz / Peters 2002.

societal discourse on locating a site for final nuclear waste disposal through its activities during the observation period.

Although the three mentioned workshops were predominantly evaluated very positively also by their participants, it should be noted that, on the other hand, the limited chances for discussion were repeatedly criticised. The final report presented at the Berlin Workshop and the recommendations included did reply to some of the previously unanswered questions, but they also showed the need for further specification or controversial discussion. Therefore, such problems could and should be subject of the second phase of the overall process recommended by AkEnd, in which relevant societal actors are to enter into closer dispute and negotiation on the report in question (see Hocke-Bergler / Stolle / Gloede 2003: 212-244).

During the whole observation period, AkEnd found it relatively difficult to (publicly) reflect upon the given political and social conditions, even though the problem of its “embedding” in a long and partly sharp conflict about the use of nuclear energy in general and on the final disposal problem in particular has accompanied the Committee since the beginning of its work and though it owed its existence not at least to this conflict.

However, this restriction in a generally rather positive perception of its activity by the interested public obviously didn't do much harm. In the end, accusations by the representatives of this public were mainly addressed to politics.

4. Conclusion

Based on our evaluation study which includes the observation of AkEnd's public activities as well as a comprehensive media analysis and representative surveys, it is essential for a final evaluation to interpret the overall site selection process in the context of the cross-cutting field of conflict on the use of nuclear energy. Our final assessment is accordingly: For an expert group such as AkEnd it would have been possible and necessary to stronger mobilise and extend the interested public already formed around the

issue of “final disposal”. “To stronger mobilise” means to possibly win all existing and identifiable stakeholders as clear supporters for the new beginning in the German search for a final disposal site. “To extend” means that the circle of people to be won would have had to exceed the circle of people addressed in the AkEnd Workshops and in direct discussions. AkEnd probably aimed at such a target. However, it has to be stated that such a goal of “addressing an extended issue-oriented community”, as we call it, has not been achieved to the necessary extent.

Whether this would have led to the targeted goal of initiating a real new beginning in the search for a final disposal site, is certainly questionable. However, a more offensive and inclusive expert communication with the interested public would have made it possible to identify the required intermediate steps for conflict handling and to discuss if and – if yes – what win-win situations might be realistic. Instead, the dispute on the final disposal of radioactive waste stagnated again in the last two years, as shown by the refusal of individual parties and German “Länder” to participate in a negotiation group for a consensus-oriented further development of AkEnd’s proposal (see e.g. Vorholz 2003 and FAZ 2004). It is feared that the policy of non-decision making in dealing with German nuclear waste will continue and that in case of concrete site-related activities a revival of the conflict about nuclear energy might set in. Under this perspective, further losses of confidence are to be expected for politics, business and experts.

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