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Nuclear Waste disposal: talk to the locals!

Finding sites for the disposal of high level radioactive waste, mostly from nuclear power plants, is a pressing and controversial issue in Europe and beyond. The European Union funded project Argona shows that new methods of participation can make a difference in communicating with the people directly concerned by the disposal of nuclear waste. The scientists presented their findings today at a conference in Prague called “Deliberation - Way to the Deep Geological Repository”, under the auspices of the Czech Ministry of Industry and Trade.

Clearly, successful discussions depend on all the relevant people having the information they need to be able to discuss the issue. To enable this interchange, involved stakeholders build a 'reference group'. The members of the group represent the different parties in the selection process of waste repositories but the group does not make any decisions. This allows a discussion to take place in a "safe space" where free debate is encouraged and nobody can 'lose face', for example, by changing their position. Agreements achieved in this way will contribute to the final decision process in the Czech Republic. The original method – known as the 'Riscom model' - was developed with funding from the European Union and Swedish authorities.

The Czech partners believe the Riscom model to be the most suitable tool for dialogue among all stakeholders. They also believe it is necessary to continue the activities with the reference group. Studies showed that the model could also be used in other European countries where the same issues need to be discussed. Future discussions about nuclear waste deposits in Finland, Sweden and the United Kingdom could benefit from the Argona project's approach, which has demonstrated how new approaches for participation and transparency can be implemented in existing political and legal systems.

Argona is coordinated by the Swedish Radiation Safety Authority (SSM) and managed by Karita Research. The 3 year project had a budget of €1,8 million of which the European Union financed €1,2 million. The project involved 14 partners from 8 countries, including universities, consultants, implementing organizations and government agencies.

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