Public Consultation on Uranium Industry Issues in Québec

SOCIAL ACCEPTABILITY: AN ISSUE

The BAPE inquiry commission tasked with reviewing and holding public hearings on uranium industry issues notes that the industry's development throughout Québec is confronted with the problem of social acceptability.

Most of the civil societies and political institutions that expressed opinions at the public hearings were against uranium exploration and mining, and were firm in their stance. The inquiry commission therefore fears that a decision to authorize the sector's development would have a negative impact on cohesion and social peace in many communities.

The commission notes that some of the key factors contributing to this stance include the many scientific and technical limitations and uncertainties associated with radioactivity, and its potential risks for the environment and public health.

In the commission's view, the fears of many hearing participants were palpable, and were reflected in their distrust not only of the sector and its complexity, but also of technology and science which, they claimed, had been unable to prevent the type of major catastrophe often symbolized by Fukushima and Chernobyl.

According to the commission, the other factor that has strongly influenced public perceptions of the uranium sector is the uncertainty surrounding the management of radioactive tailings. The effect of this factor has been exacerbated by the uranium mining industry's history elsewhere in the world, and the fact that past technologies have had major environmental impacts. The inquiry commission feels that the lack of a reliable waste management technology, tested over time, is a key factor that stands in the way of social acceptability for the uranium industry in Québec. The fact that these uncertainties are combined with other, overlapping social, ethical and cultural factors makes it difficult to identify their respective contributions to the low level of social acceptability.

The inquiry commission also notes the existence of many limitations and uncertainties surrounding the assessment of risks to the health of populations living in the vicinity of uranium mines.

In the commission's view, public perceptions of the risk to human health and the problem of long-term radioactive waste management have solidified due to the many uncertainties surrounding these issues, to such an extent that the perceived risk may now be greater than the scientifically documented risk.

Moreover, the report notes that, despite legislation and regulations in Canada limiting the use of nuclear energy to strictly peaceful purposes, the fear that uranium mined in Québec may be used in the future to produce nuclear weapons has also played a significant role in eroding social acceptability.

In addition, the commission observes that the spatial distribution of Québec's uranium potential, concentrated mainly in northern regions, also affects social acceptability, in that certain Northern communities would suffer most of the consequences of uranium mine development, while the profits would be shared between private interests and the Québec population as a whole – not to mention the fact that most of the production would be exported. Similarly, the industry's environmental liability, exacerbated by the large number of abandoned mines, has also weakened the population's trust in the industry. Considerable effort will be needed to rebuild that trust.

Lastly, the inquiry commission believes that ethical, cultural and spiritual values are necessary facets of social acceptability for the uranium sector, since they colour society's view of quality of life and set public opinions in firmly anchored ideological positions.

Towards social acceptability

The commission has identified a number of avenues from its inquiry into uranium industry issues that it hopes may help achieve true social acceptability and ensure that individuals and organizations are able to engage in rigorous and transparent debate.

1- Social acceptability is based to a large extent on respect for social values: the more closely an initiative, project or policy reflects society's dominant values, the more socially acceptable it will be in the longer term.

2- Social acceptability must be based on participatory democracy that is respectful of municipal, regional and territorial powers, autonomy and responsibilities.

3- Social acceptability is founded on the nature and quality of information and the gradual assimilation of knowledge made available to the general public by sources it considers credible. Government organizations can play a major role in this respect, by using the knowledge of the people who will be affected, especially elders in Aboriginal communities.

4- Social acceptability is based among other things on the proven integrity and probity of research that inspires trust and produces neutral, credible findings.

5- It is up to promoters to identify a credible, transparent process that will allow them to establish and maintain ongoing communication, a flexible approach and a climate of trust between stakeholders, beginning at the project design phase and continuing throughout its life cycle.

6- Public consultation and management organizations must show that they are prepared to harmonize their responsibilities in order to be more effective and maintain a neutral relationship with promoters, so as to convince the general public that they are able to manage the environmental, health-related and public safety aspects of projects by focusing at all times on the public interest and making sure all potential avenues receive equal consideration.

7- Promoters must, as far as possible, consider the ethical principles of fairness and social justice by internalizing costs and making sure the environmental or financial consequences of their projects do not fall on the shoulders of society or future generations.