

From Transparency to Trust – Civil Society Perspectives on Nuclear Decision-Making

Nuclear Transparency Watch (NTW) contribution in the frame of 4th NEA Stakeholder Involvement Workshop, October 2025

Introduction

Nuclear Transparency Watch's, a European civil society organisation that advocates for nuclear safety and transparency, mission is based on a simple but powerful belief: that **safety and transparency are inseparable**.

We believe safety can only be achieved when decisions are made openly, when citizens are informed and can participate, and when institutions are accountable.

Civil society, in this sense, serves a **dual role**: as a *watchdog*, ensuring that commitments are respected, and as a *bridge*, connecting experts, authorities, and ordinary people.

In the nuclear field, decisions often carry long-term implications for health, the environment, and trust in institutions. Therefore, transparency is not just a procedural requirement, it is the very foundation upon which confidence and cooperation must be built.

Before moving on, we would like to express sincere appreciation to the Nuclear Energy Agency (NEA) for its leadership in advancing stakeholder engagement in the nuclear sector. In particular, the Fourth NEA Stakeholder Involvement Workshop “Optimisation in Decision Making: From Insight to Action” provides an invaluable forum bringing together regulators, operators, civil society, and researchers to strengthen inclusive and trust-based decision-making processes. The NEA’s continued commitment to such initiatives reinforces the importance of dialogue and shared responsibility, principles that lie at the heart of NTW vision.

Transparency and Trust

Transparency and trust are deeply intertwined, but they are **not identical**. Transparency can provide the light that allows people to see, but trust is what allows them to step forward.

Our understanding of transparency draws upon the **Aarhus Convention**, which guarantees the right to **information, participation, and access to justice**. Yet, experience shows that providing information alone is not enough. Data released without explanation, context, or dialogue can even widen the gap between institutions and citizens.

True trust emerges only when **transparency is coupled with genuine participation, responsiveness, and accountability**. It is not the volume of information that matters most, but the *quality* of interaction and the *openness* to listen and respond. Trust is something that must be **earned through consistent behaviour**, not demanded through authority.

Lessons from Civil Society Experience

Over the years, NTW has been involved in numerous European and international processes, observing both progress and persistent challenges.

In **radioactive waste management**, for example, we have seen projects succeed when local communities were involved early, had access to expertise, and could see their feedback reflected in decisions. On the other hand, where engagement came late, or where technical language excluded ordinary understanding, mistrust quickly grew.

During **emergency communication**, clear and timely information has proven vital to maintaining public calm, yet when citizens sense selective disclosure, confidence collapses.

Similarly, with **legacy contamination** issues, affected populations often feel unheard unless institutions take time to acknowledge their lived experience.

Across these areas, recurring barriers persist: **technical jargon**, **selective disclosure**, and a sense of **tokenistic consultation**. These patterns show that openness must be paired with respect and genuine dialogue, otherwise transparency risks becoming an empty gesture.

Practical Pathways Towards Trust

So, how can we move from transparency to trust in practice? Civil society proposes several pathways that we have seen make a real difference:

1. **Early and continuous involvement of stakeholders:** People must be part of the process before decisions are made, not merely informed afterwards.
2. **Independent access to expertise and resources:** Citizens need tools and knowledge to assess technical claims, otherwise participation remains symbolic.
3. **Ongoing dialogue, not one-off events:** Engagement should be seen as a relationship, not an obligation.
4. **Traceability of public input:** People need to see that their views have a visible impact on outcomes.
5. **Respect for international frameworks**, especially the Aarhus Convention, which sets the global standard for participation and justice in environmental matters.

When these elements come together, decision-making becomes not only more democratic but also **more resilient**, because trust provides institutions with protection against future controversies.

Role of Civil Society in Nuclear Governance

Civil society plays an essential role in ensuring that nuclear governance remains both credible and responsive. At NTW, we see our task as creating a **platform for dialogue** that brings

together concerns about health, environment, and ethics - all dimensions that technical analyses alone cannot cover.

By representing societal voices, civil society helps institutions see blind spots and **identify emerging issues early**. This is not obstruction, it is **constructive accountability**.

Engagement with society enhances both **legitimacy** and **flexibility**. When the public is genuinely involved, institutions are less vulnerable to opposition later on, because they have built a sense of shared ownership over the decisions taken.

In other words, **participation is not a delay, it is an investment** in social stability and long-term success.

Looking Forward

Looking ahead, several steps can strengthen trust-based governance.

First, authorities and industry must **move from “informing” to “co-deciding”** wherever feasible. This does not mean surrendering technical authority but rather **sharing responsibility** for outcomes.

Second, **long-term engagement strategies** should become standard practice. Dialogue should not start only when a new facility is proposed or a crisis occurs, it should continue throughout the lifetime of a project and beyond.

Third, we must **build trust before conflicts arise**. Once confidence is lost, rebuilding it is far more difficult than nurturing it from the beginning. This means creating a culture of openness, where listening is valued as much as explaining.

Ultimately, transparency opens the door, but **trust is the space** in which we can make decisions that are both scientifically sound and socially sustainable. To enter that space, institutions must walk together with citizens, not ahead of them.

Takeaway Message

In the nuclear field, **sound technical decision-making alone is not enough**. It must be accompanied by **social legitimacy** — the recognition that decisions are fair, participatory, and responsive.

Transparency is the **entry point**: it allows people to see what is happening. But **trust is the destination**: it allows people to believe that what is happening is right. Civil society’s role is to keep that bridge open, ensuring that knowledge and accountability flow both ways.

When transparency and trust work hand in hand, nuclear governance becomes not only more effective, but also more humane, resilient, and worthy of public confidence.