Living with nuclear power: public views not as simple as we thought

A UK study provides the first contemporary investigation of public perceptions of nuclear power among residents living close to existing nuclear plants. It indicates that responses are not simply ‘for’ or ‘against’, but a complex ‘landscape of beliefs’ that will need complex communication from authorities about plans for new plants.

Climate change and energy supply concerns have put nuclear power back on the policy agenda. For example, recent UK government policy proposes that new nuclear power stations should form part of the future UK energy mix1. As in other countries, many of the candidate sites are those that have existing nuclear facilities.

The study examined local response to nuclear power in two UK locations near power stations: Oldbury and Bradwell-on-Sea. It used a technique where participants sorted statements on nuclear power according to how the statements reflect their point of view.

The analysis indicated that there are four different ‘points of view’:
- **Beneficial and safe.** A belief that nuclear power brings both local and global benefits and the power station workers are trustworthy.
- **Threat and distrust.** Nuclear power is unsafe and the government and the nuclear industry are not trustworthy.
- **Reluctant acceptance.** Nuclear power is ‘the best of a bad lot’.
- **There’s no point worrying.** An indifference to nuclear power and a belief that it is out of our control.

These four unique points of view were found at both locations, indicating the results are likely to be reflected in other communities, at least in the UK. Most participants in the study held the first two views.

Despite the apparent opposition between the two majority views, when analysed there appeared to be some overlap. For example, both groups believed in the need to move towards renewable sources of energy.

The reasons for trust or distrust are different between the two majority views. For those that hold the beneficial and safe viewpoint, trust is related to familiarity and competence in local power station staff. For those who hold the threat and distrust viewpoint, distrust is aimed more at the nuclear industry and the government.

While the researchers point out that these views are not fixed and are based on a methodology where the views of a relatively small number of participants are explored, although in very great detail, the study demonstrates that planners should take account of the nuances of viewpoints when communicating with local communities.


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