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Nuclear Energy in Southeast Asia: Public Engagement Before Policies

By Sofiah Jamil

Synopsis

As nuclear power development plans in Southeast Asia increase it is necessary for governments to sustain clear lines of public engagement to gain the confidence of their communities.

Commentary

THREE YEARS after the Fukushima nuclear disaster several Southeast Asian governments have revived their nuclear plans, with Vietnam leading the way for six nuclear plants. The moves have been galvanised by Japan's U-turn to retain nuclear energy after initially wanting to phase out nuclear power plants after the 3-11 disaster.

Like it or not, the prospects for nuclear energy in Southeast Asia are likely to grow, thus making it necessary for governments to give sufficient attention to their public awareness strategies on nuclear energy.

Attractive and available option

Notwithstanding the Fukushima disaster, nuclear energy remains an attractive option for Southeast Asian countries. There is growing availability of nuclear technology/expertise particularly from countries that are willing to export their nuclear capabilities, such as Russia and Northeast Asian countries, which seek to strengthen their own economies and soft power in the region.

One of the earliest forms has been to provide nuclear technology and expertise by way of overseas development assistance (ODA). The significance of ODA is clear in Vietnam, where the capital for the first proposed nuclear power plant in Ninh Thuan is entirely dependent on ODA from Russia and Japan. Post-Fukushima, Japan particularly under the Abe government has also resorted to exporting nuclear expertise to revive its stagnating economy, such as working with France to build Turkey's second nuclear power plant.

Aside from nuclear technology and expertise, Southeast Asia can potentially tap into uranium supply from Australia, which is the third largest exporter of uranium after Canada and Kazakhstan. Australia's uranium exports make up about 33% of Australia's energy exports which are currently going to Northeast Asian countries. It is in the process of sealing a deal with India. Southeast Asia would thus be a possible market for Australia in the future. Given these circumstances and the fact that the cost of other sources of energy remains high, it is no wonder that nuclear energy remains an option for developing Southeast Asian economies.

Avoiding nuclear life cycle concerns

Given the growing push for nuclear energy, international cooperation and public awareness on nuclear safety are of prime importance for countries seeking to embark on nuclear energy development. However, a focus on nuclear safety measures is insufficient. What requires further attention is the extent to which countries' governance structures are equipped to address gaps in the nuclear life cycle. Even today, Japan continues to face challenges in treating contaminated water as a result of the Fukushima disaster.

The lack of attention to various stages of the nuclear energy development cycle – from construction, generation to waste disposal – can result in ineffective management of nuclear energy. This is particularly so when there is limited consideration of the environmental risks of nuclear energy development in order to cut costs. Attention must also be given to medium-impact risks that accumulate over time such as the impacts on health and food security.

In terms of health several studies have discovered links between lung cancer and uranium mining. This therefore highlights non-communicable diseases, which are on the rise but have not had as much attention as communicable diseases in human development. With regard to food, improper nuclear waste disposal will have impacts on food security. Since many nuclear power plants are located near coastlines, nuclear leakages at sea can affect the fisheries sector, which contributes substantially to some ASEAN economies. These are therefore issues that governments must incorporate in their public awareness and education strategies.

Public education vs public engagement

Effective public awareness and education should not, however, simply mean a process of socialisation, as socialisation efforts in East Asia have met with both success and failure. Research on Japan by Daniel Aldrich, for instance, highlights several governmental strategies like compensation programmes to counter-balance expected risks of projects on local communities (and therefore ensure consent), visits to areas with communities living near existing nuclear facilities, and amendments to the content in school syllabi to be more pro-nuclear.

Recently, Vietnam has also reportedly arranged for heads of villages living within the immediate distance of its proposed nuclear power plant sites to visit nuclear power plants in Japan, including Fukushima just a year before the nuclear crisis.

In Indonesia, on the other hand, socialisation efforts with a budget of close to US\$ 16 million in the Bangka Belitung province failed as local communities were reportedly unhappy with socialisation programmes taking place in their villages, and also remained unconvinced that Bangka was geologically safe for a nuclear power plant. So, public awareness and education needs to be a dynamic two-way flow of information that engages various stakeholders.

Public engagement strategies such as public consultations are therefore necessary, albeit messy processes. Participants at such events often have varying perspectives and knowledge about the topic, and some may push for specific agendas more than others. Although this is tedious to manage, it is necessary for government agencies to listen to public concerns and for the public – at the very least – to be aware of the various considerations needed to be taken into account given the specific circumstances facing the country.

It is important that the mechanics of public engagement be sensitive to stakeholders' views. Who is able to attend these consultations, how much time they are given to process new information or propositions tabled for the agenda, and to what extent their views and opinions are taken into account also matter.

Conversely, a common code of conduct must be observed by stakeholders attending such public consultations such as openness to listening to conflicting viewpoints and compromise, and awareness that a one-off event would not necessarily yield immediate answers to complex issues. Rather, a series of long-term sustained public awareness sessions with transparent communication lines across sectors are crucial elements for effective public engagement and building long term public confidence between governments and their peoples.

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