

Electricity

A guide to best practice in transparency, accountability
and civic engagement across the public sector

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The collaborative aims to expand the impact, scale and coordination of funding and activity in the transparency and accountability field, as well as explore applications of this work in new areas.

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National departments of energy produce long-term plans that are variously called 'power development plans', 'national power plans' or 'integrated resource plans'. These plans are based on forecasts for the amount of electric power that a country will need over the next 10–20 years, and propose a plan for how this need will be met. Elements of the plan include how many new power plants will be built, how much electricity will be imported, how much will come from renewable energy sources and how energy efficiency measures can reduce demand.

Power development plans thus indicate the resource mix that the department of energy intends to use to meet demand for electricity, and the amount of funding that will be needed to implement the plan. Total investments can be significant in this capital-intensive sector. Public oversight of these major investments of public resources is critical in a sector that has dramatic impacts on the national economy as well as global and local environmental impacts on public health and quality of life.

Initial steps

Goal

Each country's relevant department of energy commits to the timely and accessible publication of its national power development plan, as well as documents relating to the technical, economic, social and environmental assumptions that inform the plan.

Justification

Access to the information in these documents will allow the public to understand proposed future investments in the power sector. The documents also provide a window into how public funds are being used to meet national objectives that depend on the power sector, such as economic growth, increased access to electricity and reduced greenhouse gas emissions. The assumptions underpinning the plan allow the public to understand how the relative costs and benefits of different types of resources (fossil fuels, renewable resources, energy efficiency) are being considered.

The public must have access to these documents in order to understand how power will be supplied, how much is needed and how much it will cost. Since these documents are technically complex, sufficient time needs to be allowed for analysis. Civil society organisations (CSOs) with the appropriate technical expertise should also have enough time to prepare non-technical presentations and to organise public information forums to explain the plan in terms that can be understood by all citizens.

Recommendations

1. At a minimum, the plan should be posted on the department of energy website.
2. More robust transparency would include a timeline of the decision-making process, together with the key actors that will be participating in this process, including public disclosure of the members of advisory committees.

Country examples

The departments of energy in Thailand and South Africa have published their national long-term plans on their websites. In South Africa, the DOE created a website portal for sharing information about the development of the plan. Civil society used the Promotion of Access to Information Act (PAIA) to release the composition of the advisory committee into the public domain and the Administrative Justice Act to enforce the 30-day minimum comment period. CSOs in both Thailand and South Africa have produced analyses of the plans and prepared non-technical presentations, which they have shared with the public.

More substantial steps

Goal

The department of energy (or higher level of government) commits to a process for public engagement around a draft power development plan.

Justification

Power sector planning involves political vision as well as technical inputs. Because multiple objectives need to be aligned, the public should participate in a dialogue on investment decisions and priorities that might otherwise be determined by an exclusive group of stakeholders. This allows stakeholders who are usually excluded from debates about energy to understand the decisions that are being made.

The energy sector is rapidly evolving, and engagement by specialised civil society groups can augment the expertise available to government decision-makers. Such expertise can be particularly valuable where new energy technologies are emerging and are not yet well understood by government.

Recommendations

1. A public comment period of at least 30 days should be held prior to the finalisation of the power development plan.
2. In addition to processes for submitting written comments, public hearings should be held that would allow for oral inputs. These may need to be held in multiple geographic locations.
3. A written record of all comments received and how they have been addressed should be made public.

Country examples

Thailand has held public hearings on its power development plan. South Africa held stakeholder consultations on its integrated resources plan in 2010 for the first time. As described above, non-technical presentations of the plan were prepared to facilitate an inclusive process.

Most ambitious steps

Goal

A multi-stakeholder advisory panel should develop a draft vision statement for national power development that is subject to wide public comment and review.

Justification

True public engagement in power sector planning requires that civil society experts have a seat at the table alongside government in strategy development, beginning with a preliminary articulation of the desired outputs of the power development plan as it relates to national objectives.

Recommendations

1. A multi-stakeholder advisory panel should develop a draft vision statement.
2. The government-led technical team should produce scenarios based on the modelling of the costs and benefits of various options for achieving these outputs.
3. These scenarios should be publicly reviewed, allowing for at least a 30-day comment period and preparation for public hearings.
4. A written record of all comments received and how they have been addressed should be made public.

Country example

The Northwest Power Planning Council in the USA began its most recent power plan review by asking for a public response to its characterisation of the major issues of concern to the region and also asking for suggestions of other topics. The council established a number of advisory committees, including committees on conservation resources, demand forecasting, generating resources and natural gas. Through public meetings with the advisory committees, the Council

obtained the views of the Bonneville Power Administration, its customers, relevant public interest groups, the region's ratepayers and other important participants in regional power policies. These included broad issues, such as the effects of climate change, capacity to meet loads, integrating renewable resources, power system interactions with the fish and wildlife programme etc.

The Council continued to release papers and draft forecasts for further public comment over the following two years that it engaged in the power planning process. These were more technical papers, including draft fuel price forecasts and draft demand and economic forecasts. Views from the public and advisory committees continued to be solicited through public meetings.

The Council then released a draft power plan for public review. It received 750 written comments over a 60-day period, and held public hearings in nine cities across the region, receiving the testimony of hundreds of interested individuals and representatives of organisations, utilities, businesses, public interest groups and government agencies. Transcripts of the public hearings and written comments received were published on the Council's website. The final power plan included responses to comments received.

The Council followed the requirement of the Northwest Power Act to facilitate widespread public involvement in the preparation, adoption and implementation of the plan, and the Notice and Comment procedures in the Federal Administrative Procedures Act that require at least 30 days' notice.

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