STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT IN THE BELGIAN SURFACE DISPOSAL PROGRAMME

From information to co-creation



STORA (Dessel)
GMF meeting • Tabloo, 14 October 2026

Why this case matters

What do we talk about?

- low-level + medium-level waste
- 300 years radioactive
- 70.000 m^3
- surface disposal site



Surface disposal is more than an engineering project

- technical challenge
- societal challenge
- long-term responsibility => need for trust

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The beginning

STORA and MONA

- Established in 1999 (STORA)/2000 (MONA), following the failure of a purely technical approach by NIRAS/ONDRAF
- Partnerships between municipalities of Dessel/Mol and NIRAS/ONDRAF
- 80 volunteers from the local communities are active in each partnership
- QUESTION : *Can a final disposal facility in Dessel/Mol be both technically feasible and socially acceptable?*
- 2004: publication STORA-report / 2005: publication MONA-report
  → *ANSWER: Yes, provided a number of conditions are fulfilled*
- 2006: decision Belgian government
  → *Surface disposal to be located in Dessel, with all local conditions formulated by STORA and MONA to be incorporated into the project*





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Evolution of participation

From being informed to having a seat at the table

Citizens moved from listening → questioning → working together → influencing recommendations



A stakeholder cannot meaningfully participate in a complex project if they do not have the opportunity to develop their own knowledge and expertise.

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Timeline 1999 – 2026: Almost three decades of engagement



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The relationship must evolve with the project

The role of MONA and STORA has evolved over time, reflecting the different phases of the project

- 1999-2005: building knowledge, conducting assessments, defining community conditions
- 2006: after government decision: turning conditions into real community projects
- 2006-present: monitoring, oversight, information sharing, representing the local community
- **Today**: moving beyond co-design to monitoring, safeguarding, informing, and keeping the community partnership alive

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Building trust: Independence and collaboration must go hand in hand

Trust did not happen automatically.
Full partners in the planning and decision-making process.



"Trust does not come from always agreeing. Trust comes from having a genuine possibility to agree and disagree."

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Participation in practice

Participation beyond formal consultation

- Working groups
- Site visits
- Educational activities
- Combining expert and local knowledge: local knowledge can identify concerns and opportunities that technical studies may overlook





Site visits and transparency

- Abstract discussions become tangible
- Questions become more concrete
- Dialogue becomes more informed

“Seeing is understanding”





Informing the broader local community

- Magazines
- Public meetings









Participation delivers results

To accept the surface disposal facility for low-level radioactive waste in Dessel, the local partnerships STORA (Dessel) and MONA (Mol) imposed strict, legally **binding conditions** to protect the local community and ensure a long-term social, physical, and financial benefit.

- Safety first
- Health monitoring
- Communication
- Local development
- Knowledge management
- Ongoing dialogue and participation



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Binding conditions set by STORA and MONA

Key Outcomes:

- Local Fund: support for projects in Mol and Dessel
- Tabloo: communication and community engagement centre
- Health Study: long-term health monitoring and research
- Long-Term Governance: continued information sharing, participation and oversight

Local fund

LOKAAL FONDS
Focus op een duurzame toekomst

- An everlasting fund (+/- **120 million euros**)
- By providing financial support for local projects
- Over a period of **300 years** (the same length of time that the waste remains radioactive)
- Flexibility for **future generations**: creating **lasting added value** in Dessel and Mol
- Keeping the **memory** of the disposal facility alive
- Creating lasting **societal support**





STORA

Tabloo

A permanent space for dialogue

- Meeting rooms for local associations
- Theatre
- Temporary exhibition space for rent (Tempoo)

To meet up and relax

- Brasserie Bistroo
- Playground
- Walking and cycling in the landscape park

To get informed and learn

- Expoo on radioactive waste and nuclear science





Stakeholder engagement does not stop after the decision has been made

A common pitfall is to think: “The decision has been made, so the participation process is over.”

MONA and STORA experienced the opposite!

Following the 2006 decision, both partnerships remained actively involved

Today, MONA and STORA continue to:

- Monitor and implement the conditions attached to the project
- Follow the further development of the disposal project
- Keep local residents informed
- Maintain dialogue with stakeholders

Long-term engagement remains a key challenge



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What we learned

- Trust takes time
- Participation improves technical decisions
- Local ownership matters
- Dialogue must be continuous
- Institutions need credibility

“We did not build stakeholder engagement around the project. We built a lasting relationship between the project and the community.”

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MONA's and STORA's experience is that stakeholder engagement only becomes meaningful when stakeholders have knowledge, influence, responsibility and a reason to remain engaged over the long term.

