

Public Perceptions of CCS

With more and more CO₂ capture and storage (CCS) projects reaching the mainstream media and being reported in the news, public perception is an important aspect of a project. With access to information becoming ever simpler via the internet, it is very important for project operators to be open and honest, but above all proactive in their communications to the public.

Who are the public?

In this instance, the public can be considered anyone who is interested in the project for a variety of reasons. They may be scientifically trained and well aware of the processes involved, or they could be relatively uninformed, but equally interested with or without scientific background and training. This is why public perception is so vital – getting the right information to the people who want it and engaging with local populations from the earliest possible stage.

What do the public want to know?

Why, what, who, where, how; five simple questions that define what needs to be communicated from the operators to the public.

Why – they need to understand the basics and background of climate change, and what unabated climate change will mean.

What – they need an introduction to CCS – how it works, and what is involved.

Who – they need to understand who the companies are, why they are involved, and what their experience and expertise is; essentially why they are suitable operators for the project.

Where – they need to know where the project will operate, to understand if it will impact on their local environment and economy.

How – they will want to know the project details in terms of the specific elements involved, and what the risks, impacts and benefits to them will be from the project.

This demonstrates why it is important to treat public engagement as a new task for every project, because every local population will have specific concerns and worries which need to be addressed on a case-by-case basis.

Misconceptions

There will always be some misconceptions about CCS and CO₂ that will need to be addressed. Many people who haven't had a background in science may mistake CO₂ (carbon dioxide) for CO (carbon monoxide) – CO₂ is relatively safe, and is used in carbonated drinks, the food industry, and in fire extinguishers, CO is very dangerous, can kill and is why we have CO detectors in our homes to ensure that our household boilers aren't leaking. If CO₂ is mistaken for CO, then the resultant objections to a project may prove completely unfounded, but very hard to overcome.

Trust

Following on from effective communications and addressing of misconceptions, trust is an integral part of gaining public engagement and acceptance for a project. If the site operators are seen to be engaging with the local population, hearing their concerns and providing solutions and information, they are much more likely to gain trust and a project is therefore more likely to succeed. If operators are uncommunicative and do not engage the local populace, then the project will be looked at with more caution and concern, and will have a harder time gaining acceptance.

Benefits

It is worth considering that CCS projects will likely bring economic benefits to an area, creating jobs, both directly and indirectly, boosting the services trades in the area, and possibly bringing more people to an area, boosting house building, sales, rentals and associated businesses. CCS can be a change for good in a community, and this is often overlooked in public engagement practices.

Summary

Engagement with local communities should be actively pursued from an early stage, involving people at every stage of a project, and highlighting the potential benefits to all involved, both directly and indirectly. If public engagement is carried out openly and innovatively, then the chance of project success is much higher. Engage early, engage openly, and engage innovatively.