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Some Digressions on the Life Cycle Analysis of a Nuclear Power Plant in France

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Abstract:

Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) evaluates the potential environmental, social and economic impacts of a system (product, service, process, value chain). It is based on an inventory of material and energy flows for the different phases of a product's life cycle, from the extraction of raw materials to waste management. LCA, which is governed by ISO standards, makes it possible to account for pollution transfers between different stages of a process ("cradle to grave") and between pollutants (multi-criteria approach). Our study aims to identify the challenges of applying LCA to a nuclear power plant, using system dynamics tools (Causal Loop Diagrams, Stock and Flow Diagrams via STELLA software) and the latest developments in Life Cycle Analysis (OpenLCA software).

Keywords: EROI, LCA, Nuclear Plant, Stocks and Flows Diagrams, System Dynamics

Introduction

Given the urgent need to limit the global temperature rise to 2°C by the end of the century, it is imperative to reconsider the various forms of energy production, mainly fossil fuels, and to adapt technologies accordingly (IPPC, 2014). In this context, all low-carbon production technologies are currently being encouraged by heavy investment in infrastructure, as demonstrated by the Green Pact for Europe launched by the European Commission in 2023. Moreover, until recently, Europe's electricity mix was based entirely on renewable energies (solar photovoltaic, onshore and offshore wind power, hydropower), with constant, controllable production from gas-fired or coal-fired power plants in countries such as Germany and Spain. The stated aim is to compensate for intermittence and, consequently, insecurity of supply when there is no wind or sun. With its historic investment in thermonuclear power at the turn of the 1970s, France opted for a degree of independence from fossil fuels for its electricity supply. Nowadays, with the declared desire and obligation to move away from fossil fuels to guarantee a sustainable future in terms of climate, nuclear power is back in the spotlight. Indeed, initiated by President Macron's 2022 Belfort announcements, France launched a major program to build new-generation reactors, with commissioning expected by 2035. These announcements reopen the debate on the place of nuclear power in the global energy mix, and raise pertinent questions about its overall life cycle (EDF, 2022). Consequently, this is an opportunity to compare the greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, Co2, of each means of electricity generation currently deployed, and to draw conclusions as to whether or not installed French nuclear power is "low-carbon", in a context of climate change as recently established by ADEME (2022) or EDF (2022).

This article addresses the following question: What is the carbon impact of one kWh of electricity produced by a French nuclear power plant? To answer this question, the following study will first develop the Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) method, its principles and implementation. We will then develop the notion of energy rate of return. The various stages in the life cycle of a nuclear power plant will then be detailed, drawing on existing literature, in order to understand its actual environmental impact as measured by various stakeholders. Next, we will detail the impact study approach undertaken for this assessment, its assumptions and limitations, in order to determine, based on existing data, the accuracy or otherwise of the life cycle analysis results through dedicated simulation work using OpenLCA software.

2. Material and Methods for life cycle assessment in the nuclear cycle

2.1 Foundations of Life Cycle Assessment (LCA)

2.1.1 History, definition and objectives of LCA

First, in the mid-1970s, because of economic growth, governments and industrialists in Western countries sought to assess their energy dependence on oil, which was then in crisis, due to the oil shocks of 1973 and 1979. At the same time, the aim was to reduce energy consumption, particularly by energy-intensive industries. To achieve this, various methods were developed to assess energy and resource consumption. Thus, after several developments and the establishment of calculation standards and a precise study framework, at the turn of the 1990s, the Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) tool was born (Hunt, Franklin, 1997; Klöpffer, 1997)). The aim was to make the method unique, to have a common basis on which to properly exploit the results obtained and compare different products (Lecouls, 1999). Most of the problems involved in setting up a homogeneous data system and defining a method specific to this objective. Numerous studies have therefore been carried out, especially in Europe, to improve LCA.

Life cycle assessment (LCA) is an environmental evaluation method that aims to examine the ecological impacts of a product, process or service throughout its existence, from the extraction of raw materials to its final disposal, including the production, use and recycling stages (Norris, 2001). This systematic approach focuses on various environmental aspects, such as energy consumption, greenhouse gas emissions, water and air pollution, depletion of natural resources and many other factors (Pehnt, 2006). To summarize, the different objectives of LCA can be classified in the following order (Fava & al., 1991):

- Identifying and quantifying environmental impacts: One of the fundamental aims of LCA is to identify and quantify the environmental impacts of a product or service at every stage of its life cycle, from raw material extraction through manufacture, use and recycling to end-of-life. This enables us to understand where and how interventions can be most effective in reducing the ecological footprint.

- Decision-making support: LCA provides crucial information to corporate decision-makers, engineers, policy-makers and consumers, helping them to make informed choices. Whether for the development of more sustainable products, the selection of low-impact materials or the elaboration of environmental policies, LCA is a decision-making tool.

- Process optimization: By highlighting the most impactful phases of a product's life cycle, LCA enables companies to optimize their production, distribution and waste management processes. This can result in energy savings, reduced greenhouse gas emissions, better resource management and lower costs.

- Communication and marketing: The results of an LCA can be used in communication with stakeholders, including consumers, to demonstrate a company's commitment to sustainability. This can strengthen the brand and offer a competitive advantage in an increasingly environmentally conscious market.

- Development of standards and regulations: LCA helps establish industry standards and environmental regulations by providing a scientific basis for assessing environmental impacts. This creates a level playground where sustainable practices are encouraged and valued.

- Innovation and sustainable design: By providing detailed insights into environmental impacts throughout the life cycle, LCA encourages innovation and sustainable product design. This can lead to the development of new products or processes that are both efficient and environmentally friendly. The objectives of LCA

are to achieve the right trade-offs between environmental impact and industrial need. These objectives are then used to inform the various parties involved: manufacturers, scientists, consumers and, finally, political decision-makers and public authorities.

Figure 1: Diagram of the life cycle of a product or service

2.1.2 LCA Methodology: standards, scope definition, life cycle inventory, impact assessment and interpretation of results

To achieve these objectives, LCA is based on standards that provide common criteria and guidelines for carrying out consistent and, above all, comparable analyses. Standardization defines the methodology and procedures to be followed in order to carry out an analysis and obtain a coherent assessment of environmental impacts¹ (Caseau, 2021, Diemer, 2023).

In addition to enabling results to be compared, these standards guarantee the reliability of these analyses. As LCA is based on the use of databases and scientific methods, standards aim to guarantee the quality and reliability of these data and of the scientific methods used, thus reinforcing the credibility of the analysis. LCA must be transparent in the way it has been carried out. Thanks to LCA standards, details such as how the analysis was carried out, data collection, assumptions, study limitations and data sources are known and enable the evaluation process to be understood (ISO 14040, 14020, 14021, 14025, 14040).

Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) is governed by a series of international standards, mainly issued by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO). These standards define the principles, framework, methodology and applications of LCA (ISO, 2006, 2016, 2022). The following is a summary of the main ISO standards relating to LCA:

 \Box ISO 14040: 2006 - Principles and framework

Defines the principles and framework for conducting an LCA.

Includes definitions of terms, purpose and scope of LCA, basic principles, and phases of LCA.

 \Box ISO 14044 :2006 - Requirements and guidelines:

Provides detailed requirements and guidelines for conducting an LCA.

Covers methodological aspects such as inventory analysis, impact assessment, interpretation of results, critical studies and reporting.

 \Box ISO 14045 :2012 - Eco-efficiency of product systems

Describes how to conduct an eco-efficiency assessment, which combines environmental assessment and product performance.

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¹ Analyse du cycle de vie (ACV). Techniques de l'Ingénieur Available at : https ://wwwtechniques-ingenieur-fr. ezproxy. uca.fr/base-documentaire/procedes-chimie-bio-agro-th2/ chi mieverte-principes-reglementations-et-outils-d-evaluation-4 2490210/analyse-du-cycle-de-vie-acvg5500/

Enables both environmental aspects and product performance to be assessed from a sustainability perspective.

 \Box ISO 14046: 2014 - Water footprint

Specifies principles, requirements and guidelines for assessing water footprint.

Enables a quantitative assessment of the potential water impacts associated with a product, considering regional water use.

 \Box ISO 14071 :2014 - Additional information to complement ISO 14044 on sensitivity analysis

Provides additional information on how to perform a sensitivity analysis as part of an LCA.

 \Box ISO 14072 :2014 - Additional LCA for organizations

Extends LCA principles and requirements to

organizations, in addition to products.

 \Box ISO/TS 14067 :2013 - Carbon footprint of products

Contains principles, requirements and guidelines for quantifying and communicating the carbon footprint of products, including greenhouse gases emitted throughout their life cycle.

□ ISO/TR 14049: 2012 - Illustrative examples for understanding ISO 14044

Provides practical examples and case studies to help understand and apply ISO 14044.

The above-mentioned standards set out a four-step process for carrying out a strict life cycle assessment. These steps are summarized in the figure 2:

Figure 2: The four steps of Life Cycle Assessment *Source: Whitehead & al. (2015)*

1) Defining the goal and scope of the study

This first step involves clearly defining the objectives of the LCA study and delimiting its scope. It involves specifying details such as the product system to be studied, the system boundaries (what is included or excluded in the study), the product function, the functional unit (which serves as a measure of comparison), and the assumptions and limitations of the study. The functional unit is particularly important as it provides a reference for all measured inputs and outputs, enabling fair comparison between different systems (Bjorn & al., 2018a).

A new concept is added, that of the elementary process. The product analyzed during the LCA is generally made up of several parts/components. An elementary process corresponds to the smallest part of a product for which data is collected. The aim is to divide the product studied into different components that can be easily studied in subsequent stages (Diemer, 2023). Each of these elementary processes will capture and emit flows which are called elementary flows. It is important to carry out this step, without which the rest of the study cannot be carried out. In fact, this stage enables us to set out the objectives, assumptions, boundaries of the study, etc., on which the rest of the LCA will be based. Once this information has been correctly defined, the second stage, the life cycle inventory, can be carried out (Bjorn & al., 2018b).

2) Life Cycle Inventory

This stage involves collecting data and calculating the inputs and outputs for each process in the product's life cycle (Pinto, Sverdrup, Diemer, 2019). Inputs include raw materials and energy, while outputs include emissions to air, water and soil, as well as other environmental impacts (Klöpffer, 1997). The aim is to draw up a complete inventory of incoming and outgoing flows associated with the production, use and

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disposal of the product. For each elementary process in the study, the analysis will consider five phases. The 5 phases analyze the impact of

the product during each stage of its life, from raw material extraction to product recycling.

Source: Authors

3) Life Cycle Impact Assessment

During this phase, the data collected during the inventory analysis are used to assess their potential environmental impacts. This involves assigning the various inventory flows to specific impact categories, such as climate change, which refers to the ability of a greenhouse gas to trap infrared radiation in the atmosphere.

In this case, the unit will be kg of CO2 equivalent. Our subsequent study will focus on this particular category (EDF, 2022). Ozone depletion, toxicity, resource use, acidification, eutrophication, etc. are also included. Impact assessment methods are applied to quantify the extent of these impacts, enabling us to understand the overall impact of the product or service. Details of all impact categories are given in figure 4.

Figure 4: few categories of impacts Source: The Authors

The LCA inventory must then be classified into these categories. A result can be classified in one or more categories. It is necessary to ensure that there is no redundancy of the same result in the categories, even if certain results may influence another category (serial effect). For example, the

climate change indicator used by EDF (2022) in its kWh LCA includes results that also concern the "ozone depletion" category. These results then have an impact on another indicator (parallel effect).

Mines Combustible Traitement CU Déchets	Production	
1. Changement climatique		
2. Appauvrissement Ozone		

Figure 5: Composition of results for EDF indicators 1 and 2 Source: EDF (2022)

4) Interpretation of results

Key issues are identified based on data collected during the life cycle inventory and environmental impact assessment phase. Specialized software is available to facilitate the identification and assessment of these environmental issues during this phase. Verification, which involves many checks, aims to ensure that the results of the study are in line with the predefined objectives and scope. Three types of checks are essential: completeness checks ensure that all the information required for interpretation is present. The sensitivity check assesses the reliability of the results, considering information from previous phases of the LCA, expert assessments and assumptions linked to the objectives and scope of the study. This check may require an in-depth analysis if the results are inconclusive. The consistency check verifies that the methods and assumptions used are consistent with the objectives and scope of the study, thus helping to assess the quality of the data and the consistency of the study (EDF, 2022). Finally, the conclusion, limitation and recommendation phase of the study synthesizes all the information from the previous phases. Writing this section involves highlighting the major issues identified, analyzing the results in the light of the various checks carried out, and drawing preliminary conclusions by examining the relevance of the results to the objectives set. This step is crucial for putting the study's findings into perspective, highlighting potential limitations and proposing recommendations based on the analyses carried out (Caseau, 2021)

2.1.3 LCA in the energy sector: Issues and applications

To quantify their impact on the environment, energy producers need to carry out impact studies using life cycle analysis (Gibon, Menacho, Guiton, 2021). There are many issues at stake, but one stands out: the carbon intensity of the various means of electricity production, in our case. Indeed, depending on the resources used, whether fossil (coal, gas, fuel oil, uranium fission) or renewable, carbon intensity varies greatly. According to ADEME GhG Balance, a "seasonalized by use" method whose main conclusions for each energy source are presented in figure 6, fossil resources emit the most CO2eq/kWh of electricity produced, with 1kgCO2eq/kWh for coal, making it currently the most CO2-emitting resource in the global energy mix. In addition, nuclear fuel emits an average of 6 gCO2eq/kWh, which, according to these analyses, is a very low-emission resource, ahead of renewable resources such as wind power (9 g CO2eq/kWh) and hydroelectricity (10 g CO2eq/ kWh).

*La moyenne monde se situe à 6 gCO2e/kWh

Figure 6: Energy emissions for electricity generation in CO2 equivalent, in grams per kilowatt-hour of final energy. Source: ADEME (2022)

In addition, LCA via the "climate change" indicator mentioned above also provides comparable results for assessing the CO2eq/kWh emissions of each means of electricity generation. In France, EDF has applied this indicator to its nuclear plants to establish, in its own words, that nuclear power is "low-carbon". Indeed, via the

impact study carried out using 2019 data, EDF applied a life-cycle analysis to the 58 nuclear reactors then in service, establishing a value of 3.7 gCO2eq/kWh electricity produced for the "climate change" indicator by assessing the entire nuclear fuel cycle, construction, operation, dismantling and recycling of the nuclear installation (EDF, 2022).

2.2 Energy Return on Investment or EROI

EROI, or Energy Return on Investment, is a key indicator for assessing the viability and efficiency of different energy sources (Dumas & al., 2022). This ratio measures the amount of energy obtained from an energy source in relation to the amount of energy expended to obtain that energy. In other words, it calculates how many units of energy are produced for each unit of energy invested in producing and supplying that energy (Wei Bach. & al., 2013). EROI is generally expressed by the formula: $EROI = Energy$ produced (kWh) / Energy invested (kWh). For example, if producing a barrel of oil requires the energy equivalent of 1/10 of a barrel, then the EROI of oil would be 10:1.

The EROI is important for assessing the efficiency of an energy conversion (Inman, 2013). Indeed, a high EROI indicates that an energy source is efficient in terms of the energy produced compared to the energy required to produce it (Dierickx, Diemer, 2020). Conversely, a low EROI means that the amount of energy required to produce the energy is relatively high, which may call into question the long-term viability of this energy source (Kubiszewski & al., 2010).

The EROI is a tool for comparing energy sources to determine which power generation technologies are the most sustainable and least harmful to the environment, such as nuclear, photovoltaic, onshore or offshore wind power (Dumas &. al. 2022). This calculation is influenced by a range of factors, depending on the technology used, process efficiency, location, quality of the energy resource, and extraction or production methods (SFEN, 2022).

A high EROI score is often associated with greater sustainability, as it indicates greater energy efficiency and less impact on the resources required for energy production (Dupont, Germain and Jeanmart, 2020).

source	centrale	CC gaz		nucléaire		éolien		hydro fil solaire PV
Weisbach & al.2013	charbon	fossile biogaz		$\left(1\right)$	(2)	terrestre	de l'eau	ferme
construction	0,30%	0,07%		0,22%		6,0%	1,91%	25%
maintenance	1,06%	0,03%		0,30%		0,14%	0,08%	0,00%
combustible	2,08%	3,45%	27%	0,81%	0,42%	0%	0%	0%
intensité TOTALE	3,44%	3,55%	27%	1,33%	0,94%	6,1%	1,99%	25%
EROI (1/intensité)	29:1	28:1	3,7:1	75:1	106:1	16:1	50:1	4,0:1
avec back-up (stockage) pour l'intermittence					4:1	35:1	2,3:1	

Intensités partielles et totales (Energie amont / Electricité produite) et EROI

nucléaire, technique d'enrichissement : (1) en moy.dans le monde avant 2013, (2) 100% centrifugation gazeuse

Figure 7: EROI of different electricity generation methods

Nuclear power generation in France has the highest EROI, at around 100 :1, followed by hydroelectric power, fossil-fired power plants (gas, coal) with an EROI 4 times lower, and renewable energies (solar PV, onshore wind) with a very low EROI of around 4 :1 (Tremblay, 2013). This is due to the intermittent nature of production, subject to the vagaries of the weather and general sunshine in the case of solar PV. On the other hand, nuclear power generation appears to be very energy-dense, due to the availability of its output, which is sometimes affected by maintenance operations and outages for safety reasons. What's more, the competitiveness of nuclear power seems to be confirmed in terms of the reduction in GHG emissions linked to plant construction. According to the IPCC, the full life cycle assessment (LCA) gives 12gCO2eq/kWh. A lifecycle analysis study published in 2022 by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe concluded that nuclear power was the least carbon-intensive, with an average value of between 4.9gCO2eq/kWh and 6.3gCO2eq/kWh for Europe (shown in grey in Figure 7). The data considered are for 2020. For comparison, this

> š 912 ÷

without CCS

800

600

200

홍

difficut CCS

470

÷ š

SC, with CCS

GCC, with CCS

8 $\frac{1}{85}$

 $\overline{92}$

NGCC, with CCS

۸ ł

VGCC, without CCS PC, with CCS

without CCS

represents a global warming impact 30 times lower than a natural gas power plant equipped with a carbon capture and sequestration system (CCS).

 7.7

ground-mounted roof-mounted

CIGS.

roof-mounted

Coffe,

ground-mounted

Coffe.

 9.5 7.8 13 12

CIOS.

onshore

 $C\Delta2$

· CHA

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 $-$ IND

· LAM

 \bullet MEA

 \bullet NEU \bullet OAS

 \bullet REF

 \bullet USA

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 14 $\overline{27}$ 23 23

tower

trough ground-mounted poly-Si, roof-mounted

poly-Si,

 4.9

average

 6.1

660 MW 380 MW 5

Finally, EDF's life cycle analysis study, published in 2022 and based on 2019 production data, puts total emissions at 3.7 gCO2eq/kWh. Figure 9 shows the various results obtained by national and international energy players. The order of magnitude of emissions is very similar, with estimates ranging from 4gCO2eq/kWh (EDF) to 12gCO2eq/kWh, according to the IPCC (2012, 2015).

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Like the national results, the IPCC study contained in its 2014 report paints a picture of emissions by means of generation in CO2eq/kWh (Figure 10). The report considers the calculated minimum, median and maximum values of emissions per means of generation over the plant's life cycle. The minimum value for nuclear power is 3.7 gCO2eq/kWh, like the result presented by EDF (2022) LCA study for the French plant fleet. The median value of 12 gCO2eq/kWh is of the same order of magnitude as the ADEME result. The maximum value of 110 gCO2eq/kWh is a value for which the process assumptions are probably not like EDF's assumptions, particularly about recycling of the various wastes and a lack of technological progress and efficiency (old reactor).

Options	Direct emissions	Infrastructure & supply chain emissions	Biogenic CO₂ emissions and albedo effect	Methane emissions	Lifecycle emissions (incl. albedo effect)	
	Min/Median/Max		Min/Median/Max			
Currently Commercially Available Technologies						
Coal—PC	670/760/870	9.6	$\boldsymbol{0}$	47	740/820/910	
Gas-Combined Cycle	350/370/490	1.6	$\boldsymbol{0}$	91	410/490/650	
Biomass-cofiring	$n.a.$ [*]	$\overline{}$	$\qquad \qquad$	\overline{a}	620/740/890	
Biomass-dedicated	$n.a.$ [*]	210	27	0	130/230/420 [*]	
Geothermal	$\bf{0}$	45	$\boldsymbol{0}$	$\boldsymbol{0}$	6.0/38/79	
Hydropower	$\bf{0}$	19	0	88	1.0/24/2200	
Nuclear	$\mathbf{0}$	18	$\boldsymbol{0}$	Ω	3.7/12/110	
Concentrated Solar Power	$\bf{0}$	29	0	0	8.8/27/63	
Solar PV-rooftop	$\bf{0}$	42	$\boldsymbol{0}$	θ	26/41/60	
Solar PV-utility	$\bf{0}$	66	0	0	18/48/180	
Wind onshore	$\bf{0}$	15	$\boldsymbol{0}$	$\boldsymbol{0}$	7.0/11/56	
Wind offshore	$\bf{0}$	17	0	0	8.0/12/35	
Pre-commercial Technologies						
CCS-Coal-Oxyfuel	14/76/110	17	0	67	100/160/200	
CCS -Coal-PC	95/120/140	28	$\boldsymbol{0}$	68	190/220/250	
CCS-Coal-IGCC	100/120/150	9.9	$\boldsymbol{0}$	62	170/200/230	
CCS-Gas-Combined Cycle	30/57/98	8.9	$\boldsymbol{0}$	110	94/170/340	
Ocean	0	17	0	0	5.6/17/28	

Figure 10: GHG emissions from different means of electricity generation Source: IPPC (2014)

The results obtained at national level are very similar. In fact, the calculation method used by EDF was developed jointly with ADEME, the French agency for energy transition. Strictly in line with ISO LCA standards, the data were also extracted from the reference environmental database, EcoInvent (ISO, 2006, 2016, 2022)?

3. Applications, Results and Dissemination

3.1 Uranium Processing

Uranium is a radioactive metal found deep underground. Before it can be used as fuel in nuclear power plant reactors, it must be extracted and processed (Dolzikova, 2024).

Uranium mining

Uranium is a widespread metal in the earth's subsoil. It is contained in ores, which are extracted from open-pit or underground deposits. These deposits are found mainly in Australia, the United States, Canada, South Africa and Russia (Figure

11). In France, there are some in the Vendée and Limousin regions, but they are in the process of being depleted.

→ *Processing*

The ore is reduced to small pieces, finely ground and subjected to chemical operations to extract the uranium. This produces highly concentrated uranium, in the form of a yellow powder known as yellow cake. 1,000 t of ore yield 1.5 to 10 t of yellow cake, containing 75% uranium. The yellow cake is then refined to remove impurities and obtain completely pure uranium.

Enrichment

At this stage, 1 kg of natural uranium is made up of 993 g of uranium 238 and 7 g of uranium 235. Only uranium 235 is fissile, but it is not in sufficient proportion to be used in power plant reactors. Uranium must therefore be enriched in uranium 235, so that it contains between 30 and 50 g.

Figure 11: Geographical Origins of the Uranium Importations for France Source: Comité technique d'Euratom (ESA, 2023)

Fuel fabrication

Once enriched, uranium is transformed into black powder. Compressed and baked in a furnace, it is converted into small cylinders, called pellets, weighing around 7 g and measuring 1 cm in length. Each pellet can release as much energy as 1 t of coal. The pellets are threaded into 4 m-long metal tubes, the ends of which are plugged to form what are known as pencils. These rods are grouped together in batches to form fuel assemblies. These assemblies are placed in the reactor core to power it.

Consumption

The pellets will remain in the reactor for between 4 and 5 years, undergoing nuclear fission reactions. Over time, they will become depleted in uranium 235 and will need to be replaced. This operation is carried out in water, which traps radioactive radiation. The spent fuel then remains in the cooling pool for 3 years, until it gradually

loses some of its radioactivity.

$→$ *Reprocessing*

In most countries, spent fuel is placed in steel containers and transported to a reprocessing plant (ESA, 2023). AREVA's La Hague plant in France is the world's largest reprocessing facility. Reprocessing involves separating the various elements of the fuel by mechanical and chemical treatments, so that they can be reused, and also separating the waste. In this way, uranium is enriched once again to produce nuclear fuel. 96% of spent fuel is reused. The part of the spent fuel that cannot be reused, known as ultimate waste, is cast in molten glass and stored for 30 to 40 years at the La Hague plant.

 Using System Dynamics Modelling with Stella Software, we designed the Uranium Process (figure 12) and stocks and flows impacts (figure 13) to define the scope of LCA's analysis and the impacts of uranium on energy sector

Figure 12: System Dynamics Modelling of Uranium Process Source: The Authors

Figure 13: Stocks and Flows Diagram for Uranium Processing with impacts Source: The Authors

Figures 12 and 13 are useful for understanding both the French uranium import situation, life cycle analysis issues and the energy transition program (with heavy investment in nuclear power) launched by President Emmanuel Macron in 2023. Firstly, France closed its last uranium mine in 2001, making it highly dependent on imports (IRSN, 2024). French power plants consume between 7,000 and 8,000 tons of uranium per year. They have a production capacity of 61 GWh, but an effective output of 40 GWh (the capacity utilization rate is only 65%). Of course, the carbon intensity is relatively low (5 gCO2eq/kwh), enabling the nuclear system to emit just 210 tonnes of CO2 (compared to 990 tonnes emitted by the energy sector). However, the need for water to cool the reactors, the effects of global warming, the constraints on biodiversity when discharging water into rivers and the many corrosion problems (due to the advanced age of the plants) raise the question of the resilience of the French nuclear power plants. In his speech of February 10, 2022, French President Emmanuel Macron proposed the construction of 6 secondgeneration EPRs, and that studies be launched on 8 additional EPR2s. Secondly, natural uranium is essentially composed of two isotopes, uranium-238 and uranium-235, plus traces of uranium-234. Only uranium-235 is fissile, but its natural content is only 0.72%. The majority of nuclear power reactors use fuel enriched to between 3% and 5% uranium-235. The two main isotopes of natural uranium must therefore be physically separated after a series of chemical conversions, to obtain,

on the one hand, enriched uranium from which fuel is manufactured and, on the other, depleted uranium which has very few outlets. Figure 12 raises questions about life-cycle analysis, the calculation of CO2 emissions within the cycle, and the time delays to be taken into account in the modeling process of the uranium cycle. The use of life cycle assessment within a system dynamics model is particularly interesting, even if it raises quantitative challenges. Thirdly, enrichment is a strategic step for the nuclear industry, with only 4 major players: Rosatom in Russia covers 46% of world production; Urenco, with plants in the UK, Germany, the Netherlands and the USA, has a 30% market share; Orano, with a plant in France, 12%; and CNNC in China, 11% (the latter supplies only China, whose market is closed). The Russian market is also closed to Western enrichers, but Rosatom also supplies the West, notably via deposits in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (Greenpeace, 2023). Despite conflicts between Russia and Ukraine (Dolzikova, 2024), and France's determination to sanction Russia, Rosatom continues to play a key role in French uranium imports. In Figure 13, Rosatom plays the role of a control variable (constraint) that is difficult to escape (it should be remembered that uranium imports are not affected by European sanctions). In its latest report, Greenpeace (2023, p. 29) recalls that French uranium imports from Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan represented over 19 billion dollars between 2000 and 2020 (or almost 298,000 tonnes).

Figure 14: Uranium routes via Russia Source: Tenex² (2018)

 \overline{a} ² TENEX (2018), Публичный годовой отчет АО «Техснабэкспорт», Rapport annuel public, p.24-25.

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This map shows the points at which nuclear materials pass through Russia (represented by the central "Rosatom" point), before being shipped abroad. The Lokot station in the south represents the border point with Kazakhstan. The transit route runs from Lokot to St. Petersburg.

3.2 Defining the scope of the study for LCA

3.2.1 Functions and functional units

We have already seen the importance of this step, which will guide the implementation of our LCA. Our study therefore focuses on the electricity production of a nuclear power plant. Our functional unit is defined as follows: Producing one kWh from a Pressurized Water Reactor in France. The study aims to assess the impact of this production via global warming and an EROI (energy rate of return) calculation, to study the efficiency of this energy source.

3.2.2 System boundaries and assumptions

Defining the system boundaries is essential for identifying the stages of the system under study. Below are the different phases in the life cycle of nuclear power generation (Mayer, 2022).

Figure 15: Phases in the life cycle of nuclear power generation Source: EDF (2022)

For our study, we will carry out a "cradle to grave" analysis of the life cycle of nuclear power generation by the reactor. This means that the entire life cycle is taken into account, from ore to waste (Hatch, 2014). Only the fuel processing, recycling and plant dismantling stages are not considered. The analysis begins with the uranium mine and ends with the end-of-life of the fuel and the storage of nuclear waste (Pratiwi & al., 2023). For the remainder of our study, we will make the following assumptions:

- The nuclear power plant consists of a single reactor.

- The impact of fuel processing is therefore neglected, as no data are available on this stage.

- The impact of dismantling the plant is neglected, as no data are available for this stage.

- Fuel cannot be recycled and is completely

transformed into radioactive waste when consumed.

- The means of transport for each resource is not specified, so it is assumed that they are all transported equitably by the various types of transport.

- The transport stage includes all the transports involved in each stage.

- The exact origin of the ores extracted is not known, but is assumed to be included in the transport data.

- The processes of each stage are not clearly specified in the database, so we assume that the impact of transforming all ores into the finished product is included in the input heat losses

- As we have no precise information on the usefulness of each of the ores entering the system, we'll assume that the extraction and processing stages for the various ores form part of a more general stage that groups them all together.

- As the uranium cycle is not clearly defined in our data source, the processing, conversion, enrichment and fuel fabrication stages are assumed to be an integral part of the uranium data, and are therefore included in the general stage mentioned above.

In the absence of sufficiently precise information, we have sometimes arbitrarily assigned a stage to certain input resources.

- 3.3 Life cycle inventory
- 3.3.1 Data quality

The decision to exclude certain stages is based on the database we have been working with. This database, published and available since 2007, does not take recycling and dismantling into account, as was the case in the studies carried out at the time. We use the free NEEDS (New Energy Externalities Developments for Sustainability) LCI (Life Cycle Inventory) database provided on OpenLCA . This database contains industrial life cycle inventory information on:

- future electricity supply systems (advanced fossil fuels, hydrogen, fuel cells, offshore wind, photovoltaics, solar thermal, biomass, advanced nuclear, wave energy),

- future materials supplies, future transportation services.

The section of the nuclear database we are going to use was created by Denis Le-Boulch, an engineer with EDF for 33 years, who has over 20 years' experience in the field of life-cycle analysis. This gives us confidence that the database is reliable and can be relied upon. Of course, we would have preferred to use a more recent database, but unfortunately we were unable to find one. Our results may therefore differ from those of more recent studies. The data in this database, including those relating to nuclear power, are presented in the form of "processes" and can be found in the software in the following format:

Figure 16: Processes available on OpenLCA software for the nuclear sector

There are different processes for different types of reactor - EFR, EPR or PWR - and associated scenarios that can be pessimistic, optimistic or realistic. These scenarios are used to assess the vulnerability of systems to climatic hazards. These scenarios can be extended to 2025 or 2050. In addition, they take into account greenhouse gas (GHG) and CO2 emissions into the atmosphere: we distinguish between a "Business As Usual"

(BAU) scenario, where current activities continue without any effort to reduce emissions; and a 440 ppm scenario, where emissions would be maintained at a concentration of 440 ppm (parts per million), a more optimistic vision. All these different scenarios will have an impact on our analysis and results (Hainsch & al., 2022). The reactor involved in our study is of the N4 series, and corresponds to one of the 1450 MW reactors

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of the largest production plant in France. It comprises 4 reactors, commissioned around 2000 and built between 1984 and 1999. Thus, the data used for the analysis relate this situation .

The data provided by our data source therefore allows us to carry out an analysis on a single reactor only. To begin with, we decided to adopt the most pessimistic scenario possible, in order to obtain the most alarmist estimate of the impact on the environment, for comparison with other scenarios, and to study the consequences of the latter on the study in a second phase. We have therefore chosen the case of "electricity, nuclear, at power plant pressure water reactor (N4-type) | Scenario: 2025, pessimistic, BAU", and we will study the impact of the scenario in a later section. We have chosen a scenario stretching to 2025, i.e. 25 years of operation for the reactors, to get an idea of the current impact of electricity production from a PWR reactor.

3.3.2 Life cycle data

In this section, we will attempt to list each of the resources and emissions associated with the lifecycle stages of reactor electricity production. The appendix contains two lists (inputs and outputs) of the various inputs/outputs involved in this cycle.

1) Extraction and processing of ores, including uranium

The life cycle of a nuclear reactor involves the extraction and processing of a large number of materials, whether for the construction of the power plant or the production of electricity, which requires precise processing of uranium, as well as the transportation of all the necessary materials. All these extractions will have an impact on our study and are considered in our data source. We find bulk data on uranium, coal or gas, but also on the transformations that take place directly on the mining sites and on a very large number of raw ores of all types. Our inputs include data on heat lost and potential and kinetic energy converted, corresponding to the various processing stages included in this stage. As we do not have precise data on the locations of the various mine sites, we assume that this information is included either in the raw ore data or in the mine site processing or transportation data. We also note that our data source includes the crude oil and gas extractions required for transport. The resources associated with this stage, highlighted in green, can be found in the inputs in Appendix 1.

2) Reactor construction

In our case, the data associated with reactor construction involves the transformations carried out on specific sites, as well as site-specific occupancy data during plant construction. In particular, the "Occupation, construction site" data is quite significant, and plays a key role in the impact of plant construction in our study. We also find information on specific sites such as industrial zones, forests or arable land, for example. Similarly, the resources associated with this stage are shown in orange in the APPENDIX.

3) Reactor operation

As far as reactor operation is concerned, only water from different sources is used here. This water is used both for the primary circuit and to cool the system, as specified in the database. It is important that the data that will influence the impact of this step is the reactor operating time and the associated scenario. It should be remembered that for our study, the reactor's operating life is 25 years, and that we are assuming the most pessimistic scenario possible. The resources associated with this stage are highlighted in red in Appendix 1.

4) Transportation

As mentioned in our hypotheses, we assume that the transport data provided to us in the database include all transport requirements, whether for the movement of ores useful for electricity production (uranium), or for the construction of the reactor. It should be noted that our source provides us with traffic occupancy values for both road and rail, again echoing the transport needs of the various stages in the cycle. The resources associated with this stage are highlighted in blue in Appendix 1.

5) Waste emissions and storage

All these resources, once the reactor has produced electricity, will lead to different types of emissions. These include emissions to air, water and soil. The population impacted by these emissions can be specified, or a more precise description of the emission location can be given. We do not go into more specific details about these emissions, and separate only non-radioactive and radioactive emissions. This is because our study is limited to the storage of waste after the reactor has produced electricity. We will therefore distinguish radioactive waste produced by the reactor and associated emissions from other emissions. Appendix 1 and Appendix 2 list and provide data on all these emissions, as well as on the nuclear waste produced, particularly in terms of volume and radioactivity, which are highlighted in yellow.

3.4 Life-cycle impact assessment

The aim of this section is to provide information on how we obtained a result and assessed the environmental impact of the reactor's life cycle by classifying and combining the material, energy and emission flows from the inventory by type of impact, for the system under study, through LCA environmental impact indicators. After various investigations, we determined that to meet our needs, we should use a LCIA (Life Cycle Impact Assessment) method to obtain these indicators. The ReCiPe (2016) method proposed by OpenLCA seemed to be entirely appropriate and used by many users for similar purposes . However, this method proposes two approaches for determining environmental impacts: the Midpoint approach and the Endpoint approach. The use of these two approaches gives a fairly accurate idea of the impact of our system. The literature informs us that the ReCiPe method proposes indicators for both approaches: 18 indicators for Midpoint and 3 for Endpoint.

The Midpoint approach provides a range of information on environmental impact. These include key elements that people might naturally think of, such as greenhouse gas emissions. The Endpoint approach takes the impact assessment a step further, focusing on the impact on people and ecosystems. It is therefore much more suitable for non-scientists, who can better visualize the effects of these impacts. Unlike the Midpoint approach, the Endpoint approach does not use scientific units. We therefore find the notation species.yr, which is a measure of the number of species that disappear per year, and the notation DALY, which represents the number of years of healthy life lost due to premature death or the onset of disability.

The aim of our study is to characterize this impact in terms of global warming, as stated in the context of our study. We have therefore chosen the "Global Warming" indicator, as it enables us to fully address our problem. In terms of approach, there are three different perspectives:

- Individualist (I): short-term optimism that technology can avoid many future problems.

- Hierarchist (H): consensual model, often considered the default model in scientific models.

- Egalitarian (E): long-term, based on the

precautionary principle.

To continue our study and carry out the impact assessments, we will therefore use the consensual, default model used in scientific models: Midpoint (H).

3.4 Results and interpretations

3.4.1 Results

We calculate this indicator from the life-cycle inventory and present the result in the following table.

Name	Category	Invi Chai	Impact assessment result
$\frac{1}{2}$ Fine particulate matter formation	ReCiPe 2016 Midpoint (H)		1.43317E-5 kg PM2.5 eg
Fossil resource scarcity	ReCiPe 2016 Midpoint (H)		0.00183 kg oil eq
E Freshwater ecotoxicity \rightarrow	ReCiPe 2016 Midpoint (H)		0.00012 kg 1,4-DCB
$F =$ Freshwater eutrophication \rightarrow	ReCiPe 2016 Midpoint (H)		1.21950E-7 kg P eq
Global warming \rightarrow	ReCiPe 2016 Midpoint (H)		0.00618 kg CO2 eq
$\frac{1}{2}$ Human carcinogenic toxicity	ReCiPe 2016 Midpoint (H)		0.00074 kg 1,4-DCB
$\frac{1}{2}$ – Human non-carcinogenic toxicity	ReCiPe 2016 Midpoint (H)		0.00265 kg 1,4-DCB
$\frac{1}{2}$ lonizing radiation	ReCiPe 2016 Midpoint (H)		1.18867 kBq Co-60 eq
$I =$ Land use	ReCiPe 2016 Midpoint (H)		0.00029 m2a crop eq
$\frac{1}{2}$ Marine ecotoxicity	ReCiPe 2016 Midpoint (H)		0.00019 kg 1,4-DCB
$\frac{1}{2}$ Marine eutrophication	ReCiPe 2016 Midpoint (H)		2.21437E-6 kg N eg
$\frac{1}{2}$ – Mineral resource scarcity \rightarrow	ReCiPe 2016 Midpoint (H)		0.00092 kg Cu eq
Digital Digital Digital Digital School and School and School and Turking and School and Turking and Turking and Digital Digita \rightarrow	ReCiPe 2016 Midpoint (H)		2.96435E-5 kg NOx eq
Ozone formation, Terrestrial ecosy ReCiPe 2016 Midpoint (H) $\,>\,$			3.03923E-5 kg NOx eq
Stratospheric ozone depletion	ReCiPe 2016 Midpoint (H)		7.61963E-9 kg CFC11 eq
$\frac{1}{2}$ Terrestrial acidification ⋗	ReCiPe 2016 Midpoint (H)		3.45834E-5 kg SO2 eq
$\frac{1}{2}$ Terrestrial ecotoxicity $\,>\,$	ReCiPe 2016 Midpoint (H)		0.03344 kg 1,4-DCB
$\frac{1}{2}$ – Water consumption ⋋	ReCiPe 2016 Midpoint (H)		-1.95980 m3

Figure 18: Indicator results using the Midpoint (H) approach on OpenLCA (highlighted is the global warming indicator) Source: The authors

We can also observe the other indicators, but we will only interpret the one we have selected, i.e. the global warming indicator. The software allows us to obtain this result.

Figure 19: Influence of greenhouse gases on the global warming indicator using OpenLCA Source: The Authors

Also, included in the appendix are the indicators obtained using the Endpoint (H) method, which are not at the heart of our study but are of particular interest (Appendix 3).

3.4.2 Interpretation and analysis

For the purposes of interpretation and analysis, we will present the results obtained for the indicator selected after calculation. For this indicator, we will study the influence of the various greenhouse gases, then we will observe the impact of different scenarios on the indicator and finally, for the same scenario, we will study the differences that can occur for different operating times for similar scenarios. We also wanted to show the impact on the indicator by stage, but the software doesn't give us data on CO2 emissions over the life cycle. So, for the "Global Warming" indicator, we obtain the following result.

Global warming

Figure 20: Climate change indicator for a Pressurized Water Reactor over a 25-year operating life and for a pessimistic scenario with changes in atmospheric CO2 concentration Source: The Authors

After calculating and modeling our results, we obtain a global warming indicator value of 6.18 g eq CO2/kWh for the Pressurized Water Reactor operated for 25 years in a pessimistic scenario. We have presented the influence of each greenhouse gas on the indicator in our results. The percentage share of each of these gases can be estimated and modeled in the following figure.

CO2 dominates the influence on this indicator with 5.58 gCO2eq/kWh, or 91% of the indicator. Next, methane (CH4) accounts for 6% at 0.36 gCO2eq/kWh. Nitrous oxide (N20) accounts for 3% of the indicator, with 0.17 gCO2eq/kWh. The rest of the indicator is shared between greenhouse gases, which have a minority impact. The global warming indicator for different scenarios is also shown in figure 22.

Source: The authors

These scenarios are for operating times of 25 years. The pessimistic scenario is the one we used for the study. The realistic and optimistic scenarios predict an atmospheric CO2 concentration of 440 ppm, but the optimistic scenario has a greater influence on life-cycle processes. Thus, we obtain 5.74gCO2eq/kWh for the realistic scenario and 5.56 gCO2eq/kWh for the optimistic scenario. The scenario slightly modifies the value of the indicator, but does not upset the order of magnitude of the value. As expected, a pessimistic scenario leads to a higher indicator, while an optimistic scenario leads to a lower indicator. Nevertheless, we calculate a maximum drop of 10% between the most extreme scenarios. For each scenario, we observe similar influences of the various greenhouse gases on the global warming indicator. Finally, the influence of reactor operating time on the global warming indicator is shown in the following figure.

Figure 23: Global warming indicator for a realistic scenario with different reactor operating times. Source: The authors

We calculate an 11% drop in the value of the indicator for a longer operating time. This seems logical, since it is not the operating phase that has the greatest influence on this indicator. In other words, 25 more years of operation smoothes out the indicator, and the polluting phases merge with

operation in a global calculation such as this.

We now turn to the calculation of the EROI using the information in the database. Adding up all the energies entering the system gives 0.040104 MJ. To compare with electricity production, which is 1 kWh, we need to convert mega joules. We

therefore obtain 0.01114 KWh of consumption to produce 1 KWh of electrical energy. Applying the formula EROI=Energy produced/Energy invested, we get an EROI of 89.77. This gives a very high EROI of around 90 :1. As we saw earlier, this is the energy source with the highest EROI. This tells us that nuclear power has a very high energy efficiency. We can therefore conclude that it is a sustainable energy source. It also tells us that the system is economically viable, since it produces far more than it consumes.

Our model seems fairly accurate. Indeed, when compared with the values obtained (Figure 9), we obtain values for the global warming indicator close to the values calculated during LCAs carried out on nuclear power plants. This confirms the reliability of our Life Cycle Assessment of the Pressurized Water Reactor. Despite the approximations and assumptions made throughout, we have arrived at values close to those obtained by the various players in the sector (Pratiwi & al., 2023).

4. Conclusion

Life Cycle Assessment is emerging as an essential approach for assessing the environmental impact of products and processes throughout their life cycle. The many benefits of LCA testify to its growing importance in decisions aimed at sustainability and responsible resource management (Diemer, 2023). It provides a comprehensive view of environmental impacts, encompassing the extraction of raw materials, production, distribution, use and even the product's end-of-life (Nakagawa & al., 2022). This global vision makes it possible to identify the critical stages where improvements can be made to minimize negative impacts.

LCA also enables an objective comparison between different options and alternatives (Hartman, Donnet, 2023). Whether choosing between materials for manufacturing a product or determining the best recycling strategy, LCA provides reliable data to inform these decisions.

In the case of a nuclear reactor, LCA reveals that nuclear power is a low-carbon energy source (World Nuclear Association, 2021). It also boasts very high energy efficiency (even if the capacity utilization rate of a nuclear plant is not optimal). This makes it an extremely interesting source of energy, and one that addresses a number of issues, particularly from an environmental and economic point of view.

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Appendix 1: Inputs to the system studied

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Arnaud Diemer *et al.* **Arnaud Diemer** *et al.* **Arnaud Diemer** *et al.*

 $\pmb{\rho}$ $\overline{}$

 \overline{p} $\overline{}$

 $\pmb{\scriptstyle\beta}$

 $\overline{\mu}$

 $\pmb{\scriptstyle\beta}$

 $\pmb{\mathsf{\mu}}$

Appendix 2: Outputs of the system studied

Arnaud Diemer *et al.* **Arnaud Diemer** *et al.* **Arnaud Diemer** *et al.*

ssil ssil ssil Carbonate Carboxylic acids, unspecified Carboxylic acids, unspecified Cerium-141 Cerium-141 Cerium-144 Cesium Cesium Cesium-134

Cesium-134

Arnaud Diemer *et al.* **Arnaud Diemer** *et al.* **Arnaud Diemer** *et al.*

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Fluori

Fluori

Fluori

Forma

Glyph

Heat,

Heat. Heat,

Hexa

Hexa

14 MJ

 \overline{a}

Arnaud Diemer *et al.* **Arnaud Diemer** *et al.* **Arnaud Diemer** *et al.*

1,06557E-09 kg 3,27336E-06 kg 3,84571E-09 kg 1,52091E-08 kg 5,39594E-07 kg 2,64236E-06 kg 2,36971E-07 kg 1,33203E-11 kg

7,35064E-12 kg 2,38658E-08 kg

2,32234E-10 kg

4,84365E-11 kg 7,75483E-10 kg 1,22749E-10 kg 2,6885E-09 kg

1,74569E-14 kg 5,06616E-14 kg

4,77292E-07 kg 3,47333E-06 kg

9,84526E-17 kg 4,22639E-07 kg 1,98434E-07 kg

8,83012E-06 kg

1,70248E-07 kg 1,63921E-07 kg

1,96159E-06 kg 2,08303E-07 kg

8,32639E-08 kg

1,29536E-09 kg 7,33387E-11 kg

1,06557E-09 kg 3,27336E-06 kg 3,84571E-09 kg 1,52091E-08 kg 5,39594E-07 kg 2,64236E-06 kg 2,36971E-07 kg 1,33203E-11 kg

7,35064E-12 kg 2,38658E-08 kg

2,32234E-10 kg 4,84365E-11 kg

7,75483E-10 kg 1,22749E-10 kg 2,6885E-09 kg

1,74569E-14 kg 5,06616E-14 kg

4,77292E-07 kg

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9,84526E-17 kg 4,22639E-07 kg

1,98434E-07 kg

8,83012E-06 kg 1,70248E-07 kg 1,63921E-07 kg

1,96159E-06 kg 2,08303E-07 kg

8,32639E-08 kg 1,29536E-09 kg

7,33387E-11 kg

Arnaud Diemer *et al.* **Arnaud Diemer** *et al.* **Arnaud Diemer** *et al.*

Arnaud Diemer *et al.* **Arnaud Diemer** *et al.* **Arnaud Diemer** *et al.*

Vanadium, ion

Appendix 3: Results obtained using OpenLCA software with the ReCiPe 2016 method and the Endpoint (H) approach

