

Increasing public engagement in Israeli energy policy

KEYWORDS Social acceptance; Citizen engagement in energy efficiency; Willingness to pay; Trust in government

TIMEFRAME Fellowship meetings with Associates were held in May and June 2020

ENERGY-SHIFTS RAPPORTEUR Mel Rohse



Energy-SHIFTS Policy Fellow

Gideon Friedmann

Acting Chief Scientist, Israel Ministry of Energy,
Jerusalem, Israel



This Energy-SHIFTS Policy Fellowship report is part of a wider collection published in November 2020 describing dialogue between 21 energy policyworkers and [86] social scientists and humanities scholars, available via energy-shifts.eu.

Policy context

Gideon leads a team of around 15 people at the Ministry of Energy, with a budget the equivalent of €15m. The team oversees and interacts with R&D projects across academia, start-ups and demonstrators and is also involved in multiple international collaborations. There is some involvement of the Social Sciences (mainly Economic Sciences) in the Ministry's work at the moment.

A central question of this Policy Fellowship, working with Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) scholars, was if and how the Israeli Energy Ministry can become more of a bridge between government and the public with regards to energy policy rollout. A particularly 'live' issue for the Ministry is related to public trust in energy policy, given recent controversies over gas field connection, and renewable rollout. The overall challenge therefore was related to the Ministry's engagement with the public on complex energy policy decisions.

As a starting point, Gideon was particularly interested in communication (and countering disinformation) given the various trade-offs that may need to be made in committing to certain policy paths. A specific example would be how to communicate about the trade-offs when making a policy decision on rooftop solar vs. large field solar or wind farms. There was also scope to develop this to think about wider public participation mechanisms to increase public involvement in sustainable energy pathways.

A secondary challenge concerned the achievement of energy efficiency improvements and in particular those which depend on the engagement of the consumers in steps to reduce energy consumption. As a result, Gideon was interested to find out more on people's motivations relating to energy saving. There was thus interest in Behavioural Economics approaches, but also building familiarity with alternatives to behavioural approaches.

“Implementation of policy is often strongly dependent on social aspects, which are often ignored. So, I am hoping to better be able to take those into account following the work in this program. In particular the issue of the loss of trust of the public in the government, and how to convey complex information as is often the case in the energy arena, when there is conflicting information from other sources.”

Gideon Friedmann

Policy challenges

Given the policy context above, Gideon prepared the following SSH-related questions to stimulate discussion with his matched Policy Associates; these were sent to Associates prior to conversations.

- How can the Ministry of Energy better engage the public in energy policy decisions, particularly with regards to complex energy issues where there may be trade-offs to be made?
- How can the Ministry motivate people to save energy, when the cost of energy is not high?
- How can the Ministry encourage people to take up renewables when return on investment may be long and the cost of oil is declining rapidly?



Matched Policy Associates

Given the policy challenges raised by Gideon, the Energy-SHIFTS team looked for academics with knowledge of consumer and behavioural Psychology, social practice theory (as an alternative to behavioural approaches), energy communities and public participation. The six Associates with which Gideon was matched were therefore as follows:

Victoria Taranu – Postdoctoral Researcher, Faculty of Architecture and Arts, Hasselt University, Belgium. Disciplinary expertise and research interests: Behavioural Economics, Energy efficiency, Sustainable buildings, Energy renovation. Victoria's expertise was behaviourally-informed and evidence based policies, applied psychology insights and different approaches to decision-making, including how message framing impacts on people's willingness to implement energy efficiency measures.

Audley Genus – Professor and Director of the Small Business Research Centre, Kingston Business School, Kingston University London, UK. Research interests: Innovation and renewable energy, Sustainable consumption practices, Sustainable and social entrepreneurship. Audley was invited to take part for his expertise on a range of social science approaches, in particular on social practice theories, and his insights from the ENERGISE project on good practice and innovation for sustainable energy.

Thomas Bauwens – Senior Researcher and Lecturer, Copernicus Institute of Sustainable Development, Utrecht University, the Netherlands. Disciplinary expertise and research interests: Environmental and Ecological Economics, Institutional Economics, Sociology, Sustainable business models and innovations, Community energy governance, Energy transition, Circular economy, Collective action for sustainability. Thomas was invited to take part due to his work and expertise on citizen participation, including marginalised voices, and renewable energy communities.

Carly McLachlan – Professor of Climate and Energy Policy and Director of Tyndall Manchester, Department of Mechanical Aerospace and Civil Engineering, University of Manchester, UK. Disciplinary expertise and research interests: Renewable Energy Socio-Economics, City level climate action, Renewable energy siting processes, Local energy, stakeholder engagement with energy. Carly's expertise was sought on community energy, and stakeholder engagement, including how the public engages with climate change, energy and sustainability issues.

Heike Brugger – Senior Researcher, Competence Center Energy Policy and Energy Markets, Fraunhofer Institute for Systems and Innovation Research ISI, Karlsruhe Germany. Disciplinary expertise and research interests: Political Science, as well as Mathematics and Physics, Energy efficiency, Digitalization, Sufficiency, Energy demand, Energy policies. Heike's experience and insights from the SONNET projects were sought, in particular her work on policy network analysis and on local energy transition and policy-making.

Eva Richter – Researcher and Lecturer, Department of Sociology, Faculty of Arts, Charles University, Czech Republic. Disciplinary expertise and research interests: Social Sciences, Environmental Sociology, Social research methodology, Risk perception, Policy attitudes, Social construction of nature, Environmentally-significant behaviour. Eva's expertise was sought on public responses to environmental policy-making, including on attitudes to climate change mitigation policies and their measurements.

Discussion points and SSH insights

Gideon had a bilateral call with each of his Policy Associates over 27 May to 18 June 2020, after which he participated in an online workshop on 23 June with other Fellows and Associates working on policy challenges under the ‘Citizen Engagement’ thematic category. In this section we highlight discussion points and insights that were shared by Gideon and the Associates after these exchanges. Quotes from Associates (as well as from references they gave) are given in italics in the text.

Individuals’ motivations for adopting energy efficiency behaviours are complex and extend beyond economic motivations.

Gideon had conversations on energy efficiency and attitudes with several of the Associates, and across those conversations there was a consensus that information and economic incentives are not enough to encourage individual action. Rather, individuals have a range of motivations in how they engage with energy efficiency. Importantly, those motivations depend on space and time, and can vary across groups, across regions of a country, and across countries.

Beyond money savings, motivations can include *“energy independence, frugality, reliability”* and *“comfort, healthy indoor conditions, negative impact on health from emissions from fossil fuels, and social status”* which are all culturally sensitive. Gideon was also introduced to the idea of social practices¹, where *“practices comprise the material and the socially shared meanings of (e.g. keeping warm at home) combined with the knowledge that people employ in everyday energy use.”*

When it comes to policy design, one way to account for behavioural and social factors would be to use laboratory experimental research². Other techniques were discussed, such as randomised control trials to reveal individual preferences, although their limitations in energy and environment contexts were noted. Other considerations on policy design were mentioned, such as the importance of including justice aspects in terms of environmental and social costs and benefits within the policy design and policy communication.

In addition to motivations, *“policy-makers may want to consider energy literacy in the adoption of energy efficient appliances. Questions such as the extent to which people know and understand simple and more complex issues concerning their own energy consumption matter, such as how much energy they need in their home, or whether it is more efficient to use a kettle or a stove to heat water.”*³ In addition, Gideon was warned against a tendency amongst experts to view the public as misunderstanding the issues at hand, where in reality, the public have a lot of expertise, for example from *“their own lived experience of previous government and energy initiatives and their understanding of their own homes and transport needs. This needs to be valued and captured.”*

“It is worthwhile to check the effects of policy experimentally, where possible. In most cases simple social experiments can give a good headway in the right direction.”

Gideon Friedmann

Public engagement with energy issues needs to be planned ahead of policy-making and needs to include public participation.

‘Public engagement’ is a term that can be used in many different ways, and Gideon’s attention was drawn to the different meanings and processes behind different terms such as ‘communication’ with the public, as well as engagement, participation and involvement. In this respect, Gideon was introduced to some examples of participatory processes that have been tried out in Germany at various levels, such as with citizens at the city level or with

¹ A key reference flagged on social practices was: Shove, E. and Walker, G. (2014) What is energy for? Social practice and energy demand. *Theory, culture and society*. 31(5): pp.41-58.

² An example of laboratory experimental research was given in: Taranu, V., Verbeek, G., and Nuyts, E. (2019) Upgrading the energy label for dwellings in Flanders: an example of a behaviourally informed policy too. *Building research and innovation*, 48(1), pp. 18-33

³ See for example the work of the CHEETAH project, <https://www.briskee-cheetah.eu/>

experts and lobbyist of renewable energy at the national level. For example, there is currently a Roadmap process in place for an energy efficiency roadmap for 2050 for the German Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy. Another example was that of citizen assemblies that have been recently run in the UK on climate change, although it was stressed that it is paramount that these activities have real impact as an outcome, as trust in policymakers can hang in the balance and future engagement would be harder if promises are made but not kept. For example in Greater Manchester (UK), a series of over 40 listening events were held to help shape the 5-year Environment plan. The report⁴ this was based on set out the views of the public regarding key topics related to the plan.

This is not to say that ‘communication’ should be dismissed, and there are a range of factors that impact on the success of communication around renewable energy technologies. For example, the quality, not the quantity of information is paramount. *“Psychological research suggests that what matters most is not the amount of information made available, but the way it is communicated⁵. In particular, information is more likely to induce behavioural changes when it is specific, vivid, personalised and direct. The source of information and, more precisely, its trustworthiness, can also greatly affect its effectiveness.”*

One take-away message for Gideon was on the importance of conducting social science research ahead of policymaking, or to have a social scientist within the policymaking team as this can support with public communication, which will always be specific to a particular topic and case.

Associates also proposed that members of the public should be engaged very early on in the process and in a meaningful manner, for example, with *“deciding what problems need to be tackled, finding the ways to tackle them, choosing the best one, planning its implementation etc.”* This would contribute to building trust between the different stakeholders. *“For years, environmental policy and energy infrastructure has been planned and implemented using the top-down approach. However, such “decide-announce-defend” approaches can contribute to social conflict and loss of trust⁶. Such top-down approaches usually seek to improve acceptance or acceptability of energy projects or environmental policies in general, or raise support, try to lower the opposition. But regarding public responses in such a limited way can hinder any meaningful debate and engagement. The public can respond in many ways, including lack of interest, tolerance and many others⁷.”*

Gideon was alerted to the shortcomings of the ‘NIMBY’ (Not In My Back Yard) concept, due in part to its simplicity and failure to take into account issues of trust (in technology developers), fairness (of siting processes and distributions of impacts and benefits), and place attachment (the emotional bond people have with a place).

“ I really liked the idea of going beyond behavioural economics to social sciences understanding of behaviour. Potentially with the right experts, better engagement can be built into the decision-making process. ”

Gideon Friedmann

Translations to policy impacts

Following his Fellowship, Gideon aims to translate his policy insights into the following policy processes and documents:

1. Use learnings to feed into the **process of addressing the lack of public support for renewable energy** and increase the uptake of electric vehicles in Israel;
2. **Increase the use of public participatory mechanisms** for the development of energy policy within the Ministry of Energy. For example, the Ministry is examining its Rooftop PV policy right now in a (long) public participation process.

⁴ Greater Manchester Combined Authority (2018) *Greater Manchester’s Springboard to a Green City Region*. <https://www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/media/1317/springboard-report.pdf> [Last accessed 14 October 2020]

⁵ A relevant reference was flagged as: Stern, P.C. (1992) What psychology knows about energy conservation. *American Psychologist*, 47(10), pp. 1224-1232.

⁶ A relevant reference was flagged as: Devine-Wright, P. (ed) (2011) *Renewable Energy and the Public: From NIMBY to Participation*.

⁷ A relevant reference was flagged as: Kyselá, E., Ščasný, M. and Zvěřinová, I. (2019) Attitudes toward climate change mitigation policies: a review of measures and a construct of policy attitudes, *Climate Policy*, 19(7), pp. 878-892.

3. Contributing to work on the **national plan for energy efficiency**, including with work on improving energy labels.

In terms of working practices, Gideon would like to encourage colleagues who face a similar policy challenge to carefully plan their interaction with the public and to engage early, bearing in mind that engagement needs to be meaningful and is not simply a question of conveying information. He would like to alert colleagues to the many factors that impact on public behaviour, beyond NIMBYism. He would also recommend the wider use of tools from the Social Sciences.

Gideon has already followed up with some of his Associates, and hopes to do so again, in particular on the topic of energy labelling and on how to motivate people to save energy, drawing on research beyond Behavioural Economics.

Reflections from Associates

Associates were asked what they learnt about on-the-ground energy policy challenges from their virtual meeting with Gideon. Here we share some of their reflections which reflect the diversity of challenges Gideon brought to the Fellowship.

*“[I learned about] the **difficulty of engaging the public and generating trust** around new developments of offshore gas infrastructures and renewable energies.”*

*“The aforementioned problem poses a great challenge and requires **not only behavioural economics or psychology, but social science**. There is [across government departments] a lack of knowledge about the possibilities offered by social science, which should be remedied.”*

*“It was **very interesting to learn from the administration perspective which challenges they face**. Particularly in designing evidence-based policy and at the same time reaching acceptability on the ground.”*

*“[I learned about] specific detail of technologies and **siting controversy** around gas pipelines.”*