

Enhancing social acceptance of low-carbon energy policy across diverse Polish stakeholders

KEYWORDS Wind power; Carbon intensive industry; Coal heating; Local communities; Heating appliances

TIMEFRAME Fellowship meetings with Associates took place in May 2020

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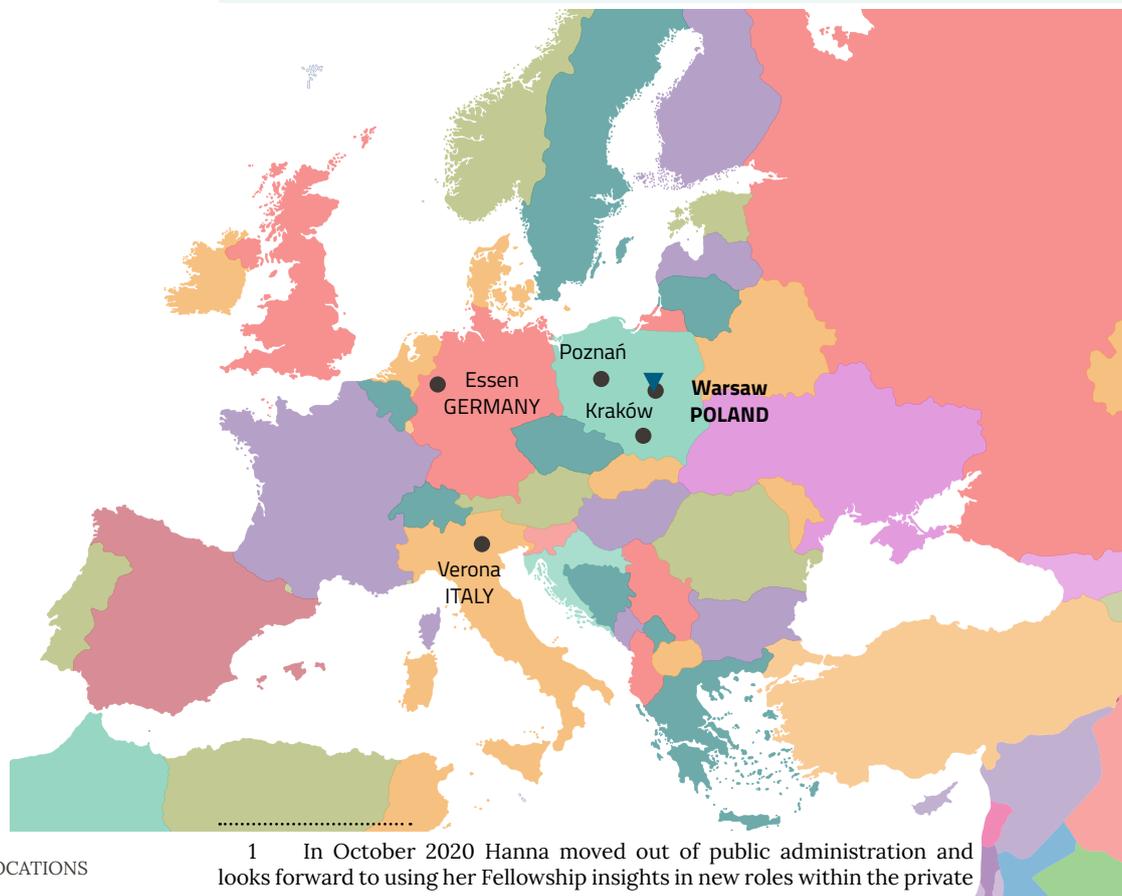
Hanna Uhl

Director of Low Carbon Department¹, Ministry of Development, Warsaw, Poland



Policy Fellow Team Members

During meetings Hanna was joined by other civil servants from the Low Carbon Department: Przemysław Hoffman (Deputy Director) and Barbara Wąsowska, as well as Katarzyna Stadnik (Marshal's Office of the Malopolskie Voivodship, Poland).



▼ FELLOW'S LOCATION

● ASSOCIATES' LOCATIONS

¹ In October 2020 Hanna moved out of public administration and looks forward to using her Fellowship insights in new roles within the private sector.



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

During the Fellowship, Hanna Uhl held the role of Director of the Low Carbon Department at the Ministry of Development in Poland, having held this role since March 2020 (and previously as Deputy Director since May 2019). Poland needs to accelerate its shift to low-carbon energy systems² and in this context Hanna and her department face many important and difficult choices. Some of these involve engaging and building social acceptance amongst crucial actors, such as citizens, business owners and local authorities. As part of her Energy-SHIFTS Policy Fellowship Hanna articulated three specific issues she was facing, related to different topics and stakeholders.

Firstly, in 2016 a new Act on Wind Energy Investments³ introduced strict rules for wind power plants - so-called 10H principle - which establish minimum distances between wind energy installations and protected areas. It is forbidden to build wind turbines at a distance less than 10 times the turbine height. The regulation is perceived as a key obstacle for the wider use of wind energy in the country. Therefore, the government has been considering loosening this regulation. However, it expects strong opposition to any new regulations from stakeholders on a national level and local communities. Hanna and her colleagues - including Przemysław Hoffman who joined her during meetings - face a challenge of finding the right balance between enhancing the growth of the sector and taking into account concerns of local communities.

Secondly, the national Polish government is currently seeking to convince more businesses to participate in a low-emission transformation. They are especially targeting those who otherwise could face challenges due to lower-carbon regulations, e.g. producers of coal heating boilers. Currently the government is offering an opportunity to such businesses to take advantage of innovation subsidies in order to conduct research and development activities and design new products or services. However, there is a general feeling from government that the existing offer is not sufficient. Hanna was accompanied by Barbara Wąsowska from Ministry of Development while discussing the subject with Policy Associates.

Thirdly, new regulations regarding heating appliances have been introduced in the Małopolska Region (South of Poland) in 2017. The region is a pioneer in Poland with regards to transforming their heating systems, largely due to pressure from local citizens and Non-Governmental Organisations. These new regulations, which entail obligation to replace boilers using coal or wood and not meeting any emission standards by the end of 2022, have strong support among many inhabitants of the region. However, it may be difficult to convey messages to certain groups of inhabitants and convince them to also change their appliances. During the meeting with Policy Associates dedicated to this topic Hanna was joined by Katarzyna Stadnik from the Marshal's Office of the Malopolskie Voivodship.

With these clearly defined policy challenges, Hanna came to the Energy-SHIFTS Policy Fellowship keen to engage in dialogue with the latest research from the Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH):

“One of my biggest motivations is to learn different perceptions of the issues I work on in order to find new solutions and improve my work”

Hanna Uhl

Policy challenges

Together with the Energy-SHIFTS team, Hanna developed detailed sets of initial questions related to each of the three policy challenges described above.

1. How to design wind power plants regulations while finding the right balance between enhancing the growth of the sector and taking into account concerns of local communities?
 - What role should regional authorities be obliged to take during the decision-making process regarding new wind power plants?

2 See: Ministry of Energy, 2019, *National Energy and Climate Plan for the years 2021-2030*, Warsaw

3 See: <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=WDU20160000961>

2. How best to convince SMEs to participate in low-emission transformation (changing business models etc)?
 - What kinds of intervention would help producers of coal heating boilers to move into other areas of energy-related production (e.g. heat pumps)?
3. How to communicate changes to convince citizens to replace heating appliances and follow requirements for the quality of used fuels?
 - What kind of arguments will convince citizens? What would motivate people to change their behavior (i.e. replace heating appliances and follow requirements for the quality of used fuels)?
 - What methods are best to make people aware of relevant regulations? How should we get messages to people who are the most difficult to reach (door-to-door, leaflets)?
 - How to convince the 'most difficult groups' to comply with new regulations?



Matched Policy Associates

Following discussion with Hanna, the Energy-SHIFTS team particularly sought SSH expertise in Public Policy, Economics, Sociology and Anthropology as well as inviting a number of Associates with familiarity with the Polish policy context. Thus five Associates participated in Hanna's Fellowship, as follows:

Mark Andor - Senior Researcher (Economist), Environment and Resources Department, RWI - Leibniz Institute for Economic Research, Essen, Germany. Mark's research focuses on Behavioural and Experimental Economics, Applied Econometrics and Energy, Environmental and Resource Economics. He was invited in particular due to his knowledge of the effectiveness of diverse public programmes in the areas of consumer choices.

Aleksandra Lis - Associate Professor, Department of Anthropology, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland. Aleksandra is a sociologist whose research interests include just transitions, energy technologies, expertise, energy security, public perceptions. She was invited for her expertise in the perception of investments in energy sources in Poland.

Katarzyna Lisek - PhD Researcher at the Institute of Sociology and Project Manager at the Center for Evaluation and Analysis of Public Policies, Jagiellonian University, Krakow, Poland. Katarzyna is a sociologist and her research interests include evaluation and public policies designed for enterprises. She was invited to bring her knowledge of innovation schemes which support enterprises, including processes around their creation.

Elena Claire Ricci - Assistant Professor, Department of Business Administration, University of Verona, Italy. Elena specializes in Environmental/Food Economics and Policy. She was invited due to her track record of projects concerning pro-environmental consumer behaviour: evaluation of products by consumers and the way their preferences are formed.

Rafał Trzcíński - Research Fellow, Faculty of Philosophy and Sociology, Warsaw University, Poland. Rafał works across disciplines and is an expert in public funds support for enterprises. He was invited due to his thorough knowledge of the schemes of support for enterprises in Poland, its relevance and factors influencing its effectiveness.

Discussion points and SSH insights

Hanna had three calls with her Policy Associates dedicated to the three topics introduced above between 13 and 27 May 2020, after which she participated in an online workshop with Associates working across the ‘Social Acceptance’ thematic category. In each of the meetings she was accompanied by another public servant who was involved in the given policy challenge.

While the initial questions phrased by Hanna did not change, assumptions hidden in some of them were challenged in interesting ways through the meetings. As an example, one of the Associates challenged the idea that obligations should be put on local authorities in case of wind power plant investments and raised questions about obliging investors instead.

In this section we share three main topics that emerged from the Fellowship conversations.

Taking time to understand on-the-ground challenges facing groups of stakeholders

Whilst interacting with stakeholders, a first stage is to learn about their situation and perspectives and Associates discussed different aspects to this i.e. considering ways of thinking, opinions, interests and emotions involved. Then, keeping in mind policy goals it has to be decided what exactly the aim of further interaction is e.g. roll out of a public program, regulation or communication. When this next stage of interaction has to be designed one may face some elements of stakeholders’ situations or perspective that challenge the policy goals. These may be time consuming, difficult to deal with or not taken into account by the public policy tools which are at hand (and require new ones).

As an example, Hanna discussed with Associates how producers of coal heating boilers are usually small enterprises without much propensity to conduct research & development activities. The existing public program proposed to them – which directly supports research & development activities – could go further in acknowledging this. Alternative schemes i.e. enabling the use of existing effects of research & development activities in the form of ready products or designing a new program with design thinking approaches were discussed during one of the Fellowship meetings. However, they may be more difficult and time consuming to implement, and provide a direct example of the tensions which may exist in real-life policy implementation.

Another example involves wind power plants. Local communities and public opinion in general seem to perceive the plants as more dangerous than other investments in alternative energy sources. Collective fear is thus an important challenge. If there is no scientific evidence that wind power plants are special technologically, should government regulations treat them as a unique case? The answer provided by social scientists highlighted that they can have particular social significance.

As one of the Associates noted *“I can see that the Fellow from central administration assumes that in order to propose some special regulations concerning wind energy, they would have to persuade other involved institutions and stakeholders about the ‘really’ distinct nature of risks and impacts of wind energy. In my view, the outstanding status of wind energy among other types of investments stems from different social perceptions thereof. Social perceptions make a real difference as well but they need to be studied with sociological methods”*. As Hanna note concluded: *“The interactions encouraged us to strengthen the importance of overcoming collective fear of wind farms via an innovative process of public consultations.”*

No one-size-fits-all solution that could be imported from other contexts

It would be great to find ready-made solutions from another context and copy them in Poland. Since there are countries which are more advanced in low-carbon energy transitions, the expectation to find these seems reasonable. Except, unfortunately, this kind of solutions do not exist. Case study and insights from other countries serve as real inspirations – and during the Fellowship Hanna discussed experiences from UK and Germany – however they may be most useful conceptually, not instrumentally.

Therefore, while expert knowledge allows for more in-depth understandings and Hanna found that *“...especially international cases were very insightful”*, conclusions from discussions was that there is always a need for thorough and time consuming design of new interventions for the Polish context. Moreover, they should be pilot-tested and evaluated before implemented on a wider scale. As one of the Associates put it, *“the most important advice would be to explicitly test interventions and policies in a representative sample that closely resembles the target population”*.

Rethinking targets, process over outcome

One of the areas discussed with Associates was a change of perspective in terms of the aims of policy, and in particular letting go of the target of social acceptance as an outcome. Policyworkers perhaps in fact have limited possibilities to secure social acceptance itself. Instead, they should focus on acknowledging the context of their actions and ensuring the high quality of a process that may lead to the desired effect. .

This change of perspective may be insightful in reformulating the questions that should be asked. One of the Associates wrote: *“I would like to propose a change of perspective – from the one focused on convincing, persuading people to comply with new rules to a strategy that aims at relating new rules, regulations, practices and technologies to the ones that already exist. If we pursue this approach in order to address the presented task of inducing boiler transition, we would need to change the perspective and reformulate how we pose questions.*

Instead of asking: What kind of arguments will work? What would motivate people to change their behavior?

Ask: How can we practically relate boiler change to other types of practices that people have built around their heating practices? How to lower the overall cost of change if changing a boiler makes other practices more costly?”

Policyworkers are not able to guarantee they can convince a given local community to accept a new wind power plant. However, they can do much to secure a clear and fair process of public consultation about the investments. As it was indicated by Associate, *“for the acceptance of (and compliance with) policies, the perceived fairness of a policy is often crucial”*. Policyworkers cannot make all citizens to happily change their heating appliances. However, they can make sure that incentives are attractive, easy to understand and accessible. Therefore, they were advised by another Associate to *“focus on: making the benefits clear, reducing main barriers and working on social norms”*.

Translations to policy impacts

Hanna identified a number of direct and immediate impacts on her Department’s conversations, due to the insights she gained from the Fellowship.

1. Conversations on wind farm regulations

Firstly, concerning the policy challenge relating to new wind power regulations an amendment to the **Act on Wind Energy Investments** was to be proposed in September 2020 including a section dedicated to compulsory public consultation. Ideas for this public consultation section included detail on informing citizens about the idea of locating a wind farm by local authorities as well as consultation meetings between the investor, local authorities and local community.

The policy world moves fast and in October 2020, when this Fellowship report was being finalised, the landscape around these regulations changed. Nevertheless, based on the insights from the Fellowship, Hanna identified a number of recommendations she would share with policyworkers facing a similar policy challenge:

“1. Do assume that wind farms are perceived differently than other sources of noise, they raise specific fears and reasons for resistance among local communities.

2. Because of that, locating wind farms requires specific regulations covering reliable public consultancy process.

3. One of the elements of public consultancy should be an initial active information procedure basing on delivering information to citizens (instead of making them search for information by themselves).”

2. Further SSH discussion to dig into some challenges

Insights related to the two other policy challenges were less detailed but included the insights related to on-the-ground challenges facing groups of stakeholders, need for developing and testing new approaches and rethinking targets of public actions. Moreover, the specific idea emerged to design new support for producers of coal heating boilers with the design thinking approach within existing public policy programmes⁴.

Hanna identified that whilst conversations were started, more time would be needed to develop detailed policy plans. In this regard, she hopes to continue communication with some Associates.

⁴ inno_LAB programme, realized by Polish Agency for Enterprise Development under Smart Growth Operational Programme.

Reflections from Associates

Associates were asked what they learnt about on-the-ground energy policy challenges from their virtual meeting Hanna and her colleagues. Here we share some of their reflections which demonstrate how the Fellowship conversations conveyed a real sense of the day-to-day reality of grappling with these policy challenges.

“The meeting brought light on the character of the challenges that department is facing in case of boiler industry.... In my opinion knowledge brokering is one of the most important tasks of policy research centers. Therefore this project has an important function of building platform between experts and policy makers and spreading good practices of this kind. **I hope that the projects that bring practitioners and researchers together to work on important social matters become a golden standard on academia.**”

“I’ve learned that central administration is currently facing a serious **problem of re-establishing wind farm projects as a viable kind of investment** which could gain local acceptance.”

“[I learned that] **making a difference requires a strong commitment at the level of public bodies.**”

“I realised the difficulty in communication and coordination among policy makers at different levels. It was also interesting to know about issues by policy makers in measuring/assessing the status quo. Thus, **it challenged the idea that different policy actors can communicate and coordinate relatively easily** and the fact that policy makers have access to crucial information for defining the target and the success of energy policies.”

“I ... learned more about the Polish energy challenges what I found interesting. I am very regularly in contact with policy makers, so there was not a big surprise about ‘on-the-ground’ energy policy challenges in general. Yet, **I was a bit surprised that they were mostly interested in quite specific ... questions.**”