

Reorganising city neighbourhood energy systems in socially just ways

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Policy Fellow Team Members

During the Fellowship, Joyca was accompanied by three of her colleagues in meetings: Roeland Keersmakers (Transition Manager), Mieke Maerten (Communication Officer on Energy), and Simon Berlo (Communication Officer on Energy).



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

Joyca Leplae works for the municipality of Ghent, Belgium. She is a team coach for policy officers working on different topics related to the energy transition, ranging from building renovations to renewable energy and behavioural change. Her work involves meeting the challenges of identifying and applying effective participatory methods to engage people in implementing new low-carbon technologies and energy infrastructure.

Ghent has an elaborate support system for energy efficient renovations by citizens, based in a 'one-stop-shop'. This service provides expert advice on energy efficient renovation of individual households as well as financial assistance in the form of subsidies and loans. However, this support system mainly results in investments in energy measures by middle-class households. While there is specific support and there are financial measures for low-income households, energy poverty remains difficult to tackle. Currently, Ghent is combining all actions and measures already taken to monitor what does and does not work to address energy poverty.

In 2020, Joyca's team will start a transition plan for two neighbourhoods in Ghent to become fossil-fuel-free. One of the areas will likely be connected to the harbour, and will be using heat exchange technology, while the other is a more residential area where a local heating grid could be established. She hopes that these two cases will accelerate the transition process of the whole city.

Joyca's policy challenge is to engage all citizens in the city's new climate plan and to address energy poverty, to make sure no one is left behind in the energy transition.

“ We aim for local approval for our energy transition and climate plan. For our context and the topics of fossil free future and energy poverty, I am very excited to have access to recent academic insights from the Social Sciences and Humanities (SHH), and to discover how they can help us to accelerate solutions to these challenging transition issues”¹

Joyca Leplae

Policy challenges

Within the policy context outlined above, Joyca had a large number of SSH-related questions she was interested in exploring. To facilitate discussion she therefore prepared the following list, presented to Policy Associates prior to meetings. These fell broadly across two areas:

Developing a local, action-based transition for fossil fuel-free neighbourhoods:

- What can be learned from, and how can we collaborate with, bottom up movements and networks where citizens lead the transition?
- How to get an integrated approach in which different departments and organisations work together effectively?
- How do you organize effective participation processes: start a campaign, or speak to citizens one at the time?
- How do we deal with certain thresholds such as high financial investments and mental barriers? How to change the negative mentality towards certain alternative technologies, such as heat pumps?

Exploring the means to reach out to target groups vulnerable for energy poverty:

- How to tackle and prevent energy poverty, making sure strategies reach out to lower-income households and tenants in precarious situations?

¹ This quote has been shortened and edited.

- What methods benefit lower income households? What policy instruments are effective in which situation? How to do this in a way that considers the needs of citizens, the existing built environment and geographical aspects of the areas?



Matched Policy Associates

Given the policy challenges addressed by Joyca, the Energy-SHIFTS team looked for academic expertise in the fields of Psychology, Anthropology, Transition Studies, Urban Transformation and Stakeholder Management. The five Associates matched with Joyca were:

Elisabeth Dütschke – Senior Scientist, Fraunhofer Institute for Systems and Innovation Research ISI, Karlsruhe, Germany. Elisabeth's work focuses on the human perspective on a changing energy system. Elisabeth was invited as an Associate due to her background in Environmental Psychology, Behavioural Science and Organizational Psychology.

Matthijs Hisschemöller – Senior Researcher, Dutch Research Institute for Transitions, Erasmus University - Rotterdam, the Netherlands. Matthijs' disciplinary expertise span Transition Studies, Energy Economics, International Relations and Public Administration. Matthijs' was invited due to his experience with political decision making processes and public participation in various energy transition projects in the Netherlands.

Anke van Hal – Professor of Sustainable Building, Center for Entrepreneurship, Governance & Stewardship, Nyenrode Business University, Breukelen, the Netherlands. Anke was invited due to her knowledge of energy friendly renovation processes and the sustainable transformation of existing dwellings and neighbourhoods. Her background lies in Economics, Architecture and Governance of Urban Transformation

Sophia Küpers – PhD Researcher, Center for Social Research and Intervention, University Institute of Lisbon, Portugal. Sophia's research focuses on the historical dimension of social acceptance of renewable energy projects. She was invited due to her work on how collective memory of past energy infrastructure and decision-making processes may shape how people think of nearby renewable energy projects. Her background lies in Environmental Social Science, Social Anthropology and Psychology.

Pedram Soltani – PhD Researcher, Department of Management in the Built Environment, Faculty of Architecture, Technical University Delft, the Netherlands. Pedram was invited due to his research experience in stakeholder engagement in controversial community renewable energy projects. He specializes in public-private partnerships and inter-organizational governance in relation to the grand challenges of the construction industry. His disciplinary background spans Innovation Management and Policy Analysis.

Discussion points and SSH insights

Joyca and her colleagues had a bilateral call with each of her matched Policy Associates. She also participated in an online workshop with other Fellows and Associates working on policy challenges under the same thematic category. In this section we share the experiences and insights Joyca and her Policy Associates shared with us in their reflections.

Participation processes in the past can affect current plans

In one conversation, discussion included on how collective memories that people share across generations shape their attitudes, beliefs, and everyday practices towards new energy projects, and thus strongly affect their current responses to these projects. Joyca recognised that indeed the responses to the energy transition plan for the two designated neighbourhoods in Ghent might be affected by former projects undertaken in these areas and people's responses to them. Therefore, she decided it would be important to document participatory processes that took place there in the past, to understand if authorities adequately addressed citizens' queries at that time, as well as deliberately engaging different generations of citizens in the project. In addition, Associates emphasised the importance of paying attention to the local identity of the two designated neighbourhoods in Ghent and to identify existing social structures in these areas (e.g. neighbourhood groups, sport clubs, social centres, etc.). These two elements could form a basis for building relationships with the local communities in the Ghent neighbourhoods.

Using 'negotiated knowledge' to overcome social conflicts around energy issues

The meetings enabled Joyca to look at social conflict from a new perspective. Associates suggested that instead of perceiving public resistance and social conflicts as a barrier and as something that must be solved, rather they can be viewed as a means to understand perspectives of different actors on energy projects. One Associate noted that conflicts lead to knowledge production and information overflows and, therefore, can help to identify divergent perspectives that stakeholders have regarding energy transition projects and that might be overlooked in official assessment and participatory procedures. In order to solve social conflicts, a recommendation was to use 'negotiated knowledge': where stakeholders identify solutions to energy controversies and determine the 'right' information through interaction with each other. The source and status of knowledge and research, which supports the participation process, is thus also negotiated and agreed on. Joyca found this concept, which was new to her, particularly useful, as it allows greater understanding of what is going on behind protests and to find effective means to resolve conflicts.

Achieving energy transitions through 'fusion of interests'

Joyca has found in her work that in order to achieve energy transitions, it is necessary to take small steps that might not seem directly related to energy issues. One of the Associates, referred to work in Toronto where the energy transformation of low-income areas started by solving minor issues such as heating problems. Instead of targeting the energy efficiency of neighbourhoods right away, the city authorities collected residents' opinions and tackled the actual problems they experienced. At the same time, the authorities combined these solutions with their plans for energy renovation of residential areas. This way, it was easier to achieve the balance of interests, as citizens had a chance to comment on energy transformations and identify issues that should be solved first. Joyca's experience is that people's attitudes towards energy transitions might not always be influenced by financial arguments or seemingly 'rational' argument. Therefore, a key conclusion for her is to look to influence citizens' attitudes towards energy renovation in part by solving small issues in residential areas, building up trust and connection.

Teaming up with contractors to advise citizens on energy refurbishment

In addition, Joyca learned about the ways in which contractors (e.g. PV installers) can significantly affect people's decisions on energy renovations. Associates noted how some people might give up on plans for energy refurbishing or rooftop PV when they are not able to find somebody able to support them. In one meeting, a key discussion was around initiatives to work with and train contractors to be able to communicate clearly about renewable technologies to customers, and advise people well on future proof investments and technology. In addition, Joyca noted that in Ghent contractors tend to operate solo, and that the networks between similar companies are often absent. In response to this, one Associate suggested that organising one-stop-shops to connect contractors with each other, and with customers, might be a suitable solution for this problem. In turn, Joyca developed plans to encourage peer-to-peer networks so that people can share with each other information about their investments, contractors, and technology.

Developing innovative financial models to lower the burden

Finally, Joyca discussed various financial instruments for low-carbon transitions and possibilities in building. A relevant insight was that creating sustainable heating grids starts with choosing the right source. Participation should be thought about at an early stage, so that citizens are involved in understanding and ideally welcoming certain technologies. Joyca believes that one of the most promising instruments is the 'no more than gas price' measure. With this measure, the price of renewable energy is not higher than the price of gas. However, in Belgium the necessary tax shift from electricity to gas has not been made yet.

Translation to policy impacts

Joyca and her team will be using the insights from her Fellowship to further develop the transition plan towards fossil free heating for the selected two neighbourhoods in Ghent that they are working on. This plan will now include specific steps related to working with citizens, as well as an exploration of a number of specific initiatives:

1. **Researching documentation on participatory processes that took place in the past.** This will help Joyca and her team to understand how authorities addressed citizens' queries in previous instances. Indeed, Joyca feels strongly about considering the historical context of areas that are undergoing energy transformations. This may be achieved through, for example, analysis of municipality records.
2. **Using negotiated knowledge for the research that underlies action plans.** Specifically, Joyca will review the research that was recently done as part of their transition plan. Before the Fellowship programme, the conclusions of this research were accepted as by the project team as 'undisputed facts'. Now, the team recognises the risks related to research that is produced without input of the residents. Conclusions, methodology and even research questions of the research might be questioned by the residents when the results (or an action plan based on the research) are presented by the municipality.
3. **Working with local groups and including wider refurbishment challenges.** A clear conclusion from the Fellowship was that it makes more sense to facilitate meaningful participation of citizens in the transition plan (which may include participation of key community groups), rather than simply running an overall marketing campaign on fossil fuel free neighbourhoods. Such meaningful participation may include questions on how citizens see the future energy transition in their districts, but also building relationships through listening to wider refurbishment challenges that are currently being faced.
4. **More explicit inclusion of contractors in the services of Ghent's 'one-stop-shop'.** The 'one-stop-shop' service is run by City of Ghent under the name 'Energiecentrale'. Joyca and her colleagues aim to start a conversation about how contractors' needs could be addressed, for example through inviting them to contractor meetings organised by the one-stop-shop to explore in depth the goals of Ghent's climate policy, and the strategy in renovation towards a fossil free future.

Reflections from Associates

Associates were asked what they learnt about on-the-ground energy policy challenges from their virtual meeting with Joyca. Here we share some of their reflections, which included contrast in terms of relevant activities already being considered, but also subject to the constraints of a policy context (such as time pressure).

*"I was amazed **how many of the ideas** that we are discussing in research projects **are already part of the activities** of the city team."*

*"The virtual meeting showed me that the **time frames in which certain projects are planned and implemented may lead to limited opportunities for project managers to get to know the field** they are operating in."*

*"The most important lesson learned is that **academic insights regarding energy policy can challenge the dominant frame of practitioners and lead to creative and novel [insights]**".*