

Working with neighbourhoods to decide on non-gas heating alternatives in the Netherlands

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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

Marieke van der Enden is a civil servant at the municipality of Westland, in the Netherlands. Together with two colleagues she works on decarbonising the built environment. They are currently developing a local vision and agenda on how to transition towards renewable energy based heating. The final plan for this is due to be finalised by the end of 2021, as required by the Dutch national government. As part of this, they aim to select two neighbourhoods that will be the first to disconnect from the natural gas grid. This process is raising many questions about the renewable energy alternatives that are available, but also about how to develop a citizen engagement process that is effective and just.

Marieke is most concerned about a current lack of public acceptance for the proposed alternatives. In general, the Dutch heating system is a very robust and centralised natural gas-based system. This has created a lock-in situation, which complicates the introduction of emerging decentralised heating alternatives. These alternatives are often different from the status quo in technology and (co-)ownership model, and need to be highly customised to the local context, for instance in terms of heating sources, type of building, as well as needs and financial resources of citizens. As such, it is likely that each district will end up having a system that differs in cost, comfort and governance.

While being cut off from the gas-grid eventually is a given, the municipality has no official authority to dictate which alternatives are chosen by individual citizens. However, the decision for alternative heating sources is not always an individual one, importantly in the case of district heating. Therefore, the municipality wants to engage with citizens to find the most sustainable, just and efficient solution for their whole neighbourhood (see quote). Since citizens are very much used to a centralised provision, some tend to become angry and frustrated when asked to think about alternative heating systems. Marieke's challenge is therefore to find a collective way to govern this local energy transition, particularly given the limited role and authority of local government. It is this that she wanted to focus on in discussion with researchers from across the Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH), during her Energy-SHIFTS Fellowship.

“The municipality has no legal authority to disconnect houses from the gas network, and also does not have any authority regarding the alternative people choose. This means a total dependency on public faith and acceptance of the solutions we offer them. Every house owner will have to pay the costs of the energy transition in the built environment, but the costs for the individual differ.”

Marieke van der Enden

Policy challenges

Based on the policy context above, Marieke prepared the following SSH-related questions to stimulate discussion with her matched Policy Associates; these were sent to Associates prior to conversations.

Main challenge:

- How can we choose the right heating alternatives for the selected neighbourhoods in our municipality?

Sub-questions related to public acceptance and communication:

- How can we effectively foster acceptance and willingness among citizens for changing their heating system?
- How might we clearly communicate and inform citizens about the preferred technological alternatives (e.g. in terms of costs and comfort)?

Sub-questions related to social justice and equal distribution:

- How can we ensure the pros and cons of the alternative heating systems are equally distributed, or, how to make alternative systems and processes socially just?
- How can we facilitate a transition process that is inclusive and effective?

**Matched Policy Associates**

Given the policy challenges addressed by Marieke, the Energy-SHIFTS team looked for academics with knowledge of participatory governance, communication, and public acceptance in the context of transforming the built environment. Her four matched Associates were:

Danielle Butler - Postgraduate Researcher, Sustainable Housing & Urban Studies Unit, Salford University, UK. Danielle focuses on studying the lived experience of energy poverty and poor housing conditions, and how this relates to the issue of acceptance. She has a background in Psychology (Graduate Member of the British Psychological Society) and Social Policy.

Agata Dembek - Assistant Professor, Institute for Public Knowledge, Kozminski University, Warsaw, Poland. Agata was invited to share her knowledge of the cultural and political dimensions of sustainable development, sustainable entrepreneurship, and social innovation in energy. Her expertise lies in Business Studies, Science and Technology Studies, Social Anthropology, and Sociology.

Marc Dijk - Research Fellow, Maastricht Sustainability Institute, Maastricht University, the Netherlands. Marc combines an understanding of stakeholders (perspectives, practices, etc.) with systems analysis on topics such as urban mobility, solar energy and resource efficiency, and the socio-technical transformation of the built environment. His works covers innovation policy, sustainability assessment, and socio-technical systems analysis, and he has a background in Science and Technology Studies (as well as Engineering).

Michael Schreuders - Academic Researcher, Department of Public Administration and Sociology, Erasmus University, Rotterdam, the Netherlands. Michael was invited due to his knowledge on how the conditions and drivers in community renewable energy projects can lead to broader participation. His background lies in Psychology and Global Health.

Discussion points and SSH insights

Each Policy Associate wrote a brief response to Marieke's policy challenges, and Marieke had a bilateral call with each of them over 11-12 May. Marieke also participated in an online workshop with other Fellows and Associates working on policy challenges under the 'Just Transitions' thematic category on 8 June. In this section we share the discussions and key insights that were shared by Marieke and the Associates during these exchanges.

Co-creating a context-sensitive narrative of transition

Marieke's main insights from the Fellowship relate to her own role as a civil servant in facilitating the energy transition. She has concluded from her own work and Fellowship discussions that whether people will experience the energy transition as a just transition, depends largely on the surrounding narrative that is built (including by public bodies), and the extent to which residents are involved successfully. To build a good narrative, you have to have insight in what matters to the key users. Ideally, you would go further by building this narrative together with residents.

In this specific case, where Marieke wants to involve people in the changes in their neighbourhood, one area where the energy transition narrative could relate to earlier positive experiences is with greenhouses and heating networks. Greenhouses are a unique cultural characteristic and asset for the geographical area of Westland (see quote). Marieke's most important take-away therefore is to approach citizen involvement very clearly according to the context of the area and the type of community.

“Develop a narrative based on the positive experiences with greenhouses and heating networks. People in Westland are proud of ‘their’ greenhouses and entrepreneurship. We should use that for a positive framing of energy transition.”

Marieke van der Enden

Differentiated participation, but starting somewhere

Marieke gained insights from Associates into how to practically organise public participation in a transition process, as well as gaining reassurance that involving citizens can start with a few interventions rather than working out a ‘participation master plan’ from the start. One Associate discussed that not every single person has to be involved to the same degree and in the same way: indeed this is not even possible.

As two approaches here, Marieke first considered how in transition processes, it can be effective to build a ‘community of the willing’. This can be done by connecting (on- and off-line) to different already existing groups. Secondly Marieke discussed with Associates practices around interview sampling, for instance speaking to 50 residents about what they think is important with regards to heating will cover a large number of themes of relevance to that community and is an effective way to obtain valuable insights and also to show a broader group of people that you are interested in their needs.

“There is a third way of participation: you don’t have to approach all residents. Small groups can provide valuable insights and also deliver a sense of participation. For instance: interview 50 people on what they think is important in heating their houses.”

Marieke van der Enden

Importantly though, participation of citizens does need to be tailored to local contexts: differentiating your approach between different residential areas and different target groups. For example, Associates raised how only using digital methods may exclude vulnerable, least engaged or already invisible households, which highlights the need for different formats. In order to facilitate a process that is inclusive, one must recognise that not everyone is able to stand up for their own needs, and thus providing a stage for people to express themselves can be essential. One Associate stressed the importance of monitoring and evaluation in such participation projects, to adapt the approach based on the latest insights.

A ‘gold standard’ for heating contractors?

Another issue that was raised during the conversations with Associates concerned the importance of collaboration with contractors such as suppliers and installers of technology. In particular, the need for contractors to build confidence among residents was discussed. Currently, it is difficult for clients to know if contractors deliver good technology and services: the lack of certification around installing and providing heating alternatives hampers people to take action. It is therefore crucial that contractors take the time to ask the right questions when they start developing energy alternatives in a neighbourhood. As a way to encourage this, the municipality could make such considerations part of the tender process or permit conditions. Alternatively, a nation-wide ‘gold standard’ (i.e. certification) could be developed, outlining how energy providers and installation companies can best support participation and discussion in the energy transition.

Considering the challenges to navigate in the role of the civil servant

As highlighted at the start, Marieke found the Fellowship a valuable experience in reflecting on her own role as a civil servant. To act upon all of the above as a civil servant within the political context of a municipality is a challenge. As one example, Marieke discussed the importance of managing public expectations. One Associate noted that from a technological perspective there are of course always a limited set of options based on criteria such as costs, reliability, comfort, etc. Sustainable heating systems cannot be ordered by individual residents to exactly match their existing heating experience. The challenge of *how* to make a decision between the different options often brings up political/ideological questions and interlinks with the participation processes set up.

Positively, Marieke concluded that sometimes the fear civil servants have for residents' potential needs and wants (a point echoed in the Associate reflections at the end of this report) might be unnecessary. After all, people accept there may be differences in access to public transportation (e.g. access to a bus station) across areas, so why not for energy?

Translation to policy impacts

Her conversations with Policy Associates allowed Marieke to reconsider some of her assumptions and ideas about the heating transition in Westland. She plans to follow up with her Associates on emerging questions and insights in the political context of her municipality in the process of contributing to a number of upcoming policy processes.

Specifically, Marieke aims to translate her Fellowship insights to the following three policy documents under development:

1. **'Transitievisie Warmte' (translation: Transition Vision on Heat)**. This municipal vision on the heating transition is being developed using data from a broad range of stakeholders. It outlines and presents optimal scenarios for replacing natural gas, primarily from a technological perspective. Marieke's insights on the importance of locally-rooted narratives, such as regarding the cultural importance of greenhouses, will now feed directly into this document.
2. **'Regionale Energie Strategie - Regio Rotterdam Den Haag' (translation: Regional Energy Strategy - Region Rotterdam The Hague)**. The Regional Energy Strategies are part of a national programme for realising renewable energy in the Netherlands. The programme demands that the thirty regions suggest what sustainable energy sources they will use to replace fossil fuel energy sources in collaboration with grid operators.¹ Marieke will use her insights on methods of collaborating with citizens, and participatory processes, from the Fellowship to contribute to this document.
3. **'Westland Energie Opgave' (translation: Westland Energie Mission)**. This document outlines the overall policy for the energy transition in Westland, and is updated every two years.²

¹ The concept version of the Regionale Energie Strategie is available here: <https://www.resrotterdamdenhaag.nl/context/regionale-energie-strategie/>

² The Westland Energie Opgave is available here: <https://api1.ibabs.eu/publicdownload.aspx?site=Westland&id=f4e99e1a-7a5e-4f54-a923-8507711cd5b5>

Reflections from Associates

Associates were asked what they learnt about on-the-ground energy policy challenges from their virtual meeting with Marieke. Here we share some of their reflections, which include recognition of the day to day challenges facing policyworkers which, without sufficient resource, can impede citizen engagement processes.

*"I was hoping that the policy advisor would feel more comfortable to engage with citizens, yet the conversation made clear that **policy advisors are hesitant, because of the resistance.**"*

*"[I learned] to think more broadly about vulnerability than only in terms of income (where my reading and writing is predominantly situated) and **striking the balance between practical and academic approaches/ solutions.**"*

*"The **requirements for change are set by the central government with surprisingly little implementation guidelines,** and lack of clarity about funding. That is challenging because the municipal policy makers do not have themselves a full set of information that would most likely be expected by the community."*

*"I learned about **the local specificities of the energy transition of the area of the Fellow,** which was interesting".*