Energy
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Project

Exploring ways towards societal consensus

How to involve the population in the shaping of energy policy

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A successful environmental policy requires the acceptance of society. Researchers have now investigated how the population can be better involved in the energy-policy process.

If people were really to join in the discussion, energy policy could also be made more efficient. *Source:* Shutterstock

At a glance

- People are both consumers and citizens. Depending on which role they assume, they assess and appraise energy policy differently.
- In order to involve people in the political process, they should be addressed and taken seriously in both roles.
- This is achieved more successfully if the discussion about energy policy is linked to issues such as quality of life and justice instead of solely focussing on environmental consequences.

The worlds of politics and science can only tinker with new solutions for so long – in a democracy such as Switzerland, the acceptance of the population is essential. Neither an environmental act nor other measures are of any use if they are rejected at the ballot box or are not implemented in everyday life.

For this reason, researchers from the University of Basel have looked at the question of how social acceptance can be gained for energy-policy measures.

Assessment from various perspectives

One important finding from the study is that people do not always assess energy-policy measures the same. This is because they assume a dual role in society, performing the roles of both consumers and citizens.

Those who view energy-policy measures from the perspective of a consumer take account of their own experience: they consider how these measures will impact various areas of their lives, how they will influence their own quality of life and what the effect will be as regards the resources available to them. Looking at things from a citizen's viewpoint, in contrast, an individual's thoughts are dominated by how energy-policy measures will adversely impact the wellbeing of others, whether the measures are fair and how effectively the surrounding nature will be protected in this context. As citizens, people thus do not primarily think about themselves.

This was the conclusion drawn by the researchers after 48 interviews. In order to form an understanding of the consumer perspective, the interviewees created a so-called futures wheel in connection with an energy-policy measure. This is a kind of mind map for determining direct and indirect consequences of future decisions and measures.

In the second part of the interview, the citizen perspective was explored. To this end, those questioned participated in a fictitious ballot on the measure for which they had previously created a futures wheel. For example, they were asked whether they would agree to a CHF 0.05 increase per litre in the price of petrol. They then had to justify their decision.

A marked increase in petrol prices is one of three energy-policy measures that were selected for the study on the basis of two group discussions with experts. The others were a significant expansion of public transport and the comprehensive management of parking spaces.

Earlier involvement of the population

The study concludes that the futures wheel is a suitable mechanism for addressing various aspects of energy policy in depth from the perspective of consumers. Initially, most of those interviewed only considered the direct effects of a measure. Only in a subsequent step did they also become aware of possible indirect effects. Other affected areas of life also came to mind. The futures wheel thus helped them to better understand the possible impact of a political decision on their own lives.

This method could play a role in the development of new energy-policy measures: during the designing of measures, for example, the concerns of consumers could thus be incorporated at an early stage and in a structured manner.

To allow for the method to be integrated in the process of policy formation, the study's authors opine that two conditions must be met: instead of limiting the use of the method to individual interviews, it should also be utilised in group situations for joint reflection. The method is well suited to this end. And it must be accepted by those individuals who play a key role in the planning and implementation of the processes involved in policy formation. The experiences gathered by the researchers suggest this to be the case.

Focus on quality of life and not on the environment

A further finding of the study has caused people to sit up and take notice: the people of Switzerland do not necessarily have the feeling that they are part of a social decision-making process. They also do not feel invited to participate in energy-policy debates in their role as citizens. This shows that it is not enough to be regularly allowed to vote and to know how the political system works.

In order to change this, the researchers propose measures aimed at promoting civic competence and the discursive participation of adults. Even short discussions can be structured in such a way that they have an effect. Such activities are well received and are attractive when they are aimed at facilitating individual and mutual learning as well as exchanges and objective discussions.

Which contents should focus be placed on here? The answer is provided by the results with respect to citizen and consumer perspectives: these have revealed, in particular, that issues relating to quality of life and justice are highly weighted in the case of both viewpoints.

The research team therefore suggests that emphasis is placed on matters connected to quality of life. This stands in contrast to the widely held assumption that the provision of information about natural resources and consequences for the environment are primarily required in order to increase levels of social acceptance.

With a focus on quality of life, people and their special expertise are taken seriously – without them forgetting nature. The research results revealed that the environment also played a key role even when quality of life was placed at the heart of the discussion about energy-policy measures.

Produkte aus diesem Projekt

- “These Grandmas Drove Me Mad. It Was Brilliant!”—Promising Starting Points to Support Citizen Competence for Sustainable Consumption in Adults
  Date of publication: 01.01.18
- Nachgefragt bei Patricia Holm, Rico Defila und Antonietta Di Giulio “Akzeptanz geht aus gesellschaftlicher Diskussion hervor”
  Date of publication: 01.01.18
- Exploring ways towards societal consensus
  Date of publication: 01.01.18
- Wege zu einem gesellschaftlichen Konsens: Wahrnehmung und Bewertung energiepolitischer Massnahmen
  Date of publication: 01.01.18
- Futures Wheel – Methode zur Zukunfts-Exploration Eine Einführung
  Date of publication: 01.01.18
- Konsument/in oder Bürger/in: Energiepolitik mit wem und für wen?
  Date of publication: 01.01.18
- Futures Wheel – Methode zur Zukunftsexploration. Einführung, Präsentation und Erfahrungsberichte.
  Date of publication: 01.01.18
- Two souls are dwelling in my breast: uncovering how individuals in their dual role as consumer-citizen perceive future energy policies
  Date of publication: 19.06.19

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