

Methods presentation February 2013

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Stakeholders behavior in the Dutch energy transition arena: and what about the researcher's behavior?

Abstract:

Problem statement: *There is an ongoing transition developing in the Electricity sector. Research focuses primarily on innovations and new entrants but little is known about the strategic behavior of incumbent electricity producers that, to a certain extent, influence the ambition, direction and pace of the transition.*

Aim of the study: *In order to address the research problem as stated above, this study aims to gain insight into the role of incumbent electricity producers in the energy transition policy process and how they try to influence energy transition policies that direct the transition in the electricity sector.*

Research question:

What strategies do incumbent electricity producers develop in order to influence energy transition policies (ambition, direction and pace) for the production side of the electricity sector and consequently the ongoing energy transition process in the electricity sector in the Netherlands and Germany?

I will work with the actor oriented approach that focuses on the (contested) realities of actors within a political arena where they try to expand their room to maneuver. It is based on an interpretative approach to social sciences. The aim of this approach is to explore the realities of actors (electricity producers) and try to understand as they experience the world. But what actors say and what they do is not necessarily the same and therefore words and actions will be compared.

Important notions of the interpretative approach are: 'thick description' (placing actors' words and action in context), 'reflexivity' (reflecting on my own role and involvement) and 'triangulation' (using several tools to collect data; participative observation, interviews (snowball sampling and twitter) and document review (including traditional media, social media and websites).

Case study: corporate strategic behavior regarding the EU's 20-20-20 targets in both the Netherlands and Germany. The time frame is the 23rd of April 2009 (the date of acceptance of the renewable energy directive by the Council) and onwards.

The starting point of this research was literature and twitter in order to get to know the energy transition arena (stakeholders, developments, issues). Also 10 interviews were held with stakeholder from several domains. One of the interviews led to an opportunity for participative research in the office of the association of electricity companies (both retail and producers) in the Netherlands; Energie-Nederland. The next step will be a 3 month research period at Fraunhofer Institute in Germany where I will study the German case but in broad strokes (including 2 weeks in Berlin for interviews). The time in Germany will be followed by a continuation of the case study in the Netherlands: participative research at the office of a sustainable energy association in order to look from their perspective at strategic behavior from the power companies.

Research problems

- How do you know what I don't know (how to get behind the 'propaganda' talk of stakeholders)?
- when do you decide it is enough and to round-up the case study?
- How to handle my personal bias? I have a tendency to choose sides.

- role of the researcher concerning the researched topic: involved vs. distant?
- What to do when research time is limited and the case study takes way longer than expected (in order to get more in-depth knowledge)?
- How to compare a short case study (Germany) with the in-depth case study in the Netherlands?
- What to do at times when you don't have a clue what you are doing?