



Your Assumptions about the Public are Probably Wrong

Discrepancies between the Public and Practitioners: Acceptability, Value-related Consequences and Public Participation in Local Energy Projects, a study by Thomas Giøe Brusendorff Nielsen

Good news! People care more about the environment and about each other than we assume. Bad news: Decision-makers of renewable energy projects (or practitioners) may not be aware of this. And moreover, they may want the public to participate less in projects than what the public prefer themselves. What can we do about this?

⊕ The background

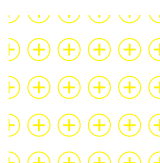
In order to develop successful projects, practitioners have to consider the priorities of the public and how they want to be involved in projects. Past experience shows that these factors can decide the fate of local renewable energy. Despite of this, practitioners often rely on their assumptions about the public's priorities instead of asking the public what they actually find important. **It is commonly assumed that the public will accept renewable energy in their local area as long as it benefits their personal finances, that people mostly care about their own money and comfort, and that a people are sufficiently included in a local project if they are informed about set-in-stone plans.** These assumptions were addressed in this study.

⊕ The research

To investigate the above assumptions, we sent out questionnaires to two different groups. The first group consisted of practitioners from the GZI Next project in Emmen, the Netherlands, where three types of renewable energy projects are being developed: A **solar field**, a **green gas installation**, and a **hydrogen electrolyzer**.

The group of practitioners was asked about:

1. How acceptable they assumed members of the public would find the three types of renewable energy projects if they were developed in their neighbourhood.
2. What aspects they assumed members of the public would find important to consider when developing the projects.
3. To what extent they prefer to involve members of the public in the decision-making process.



The second group consisted of members of the public from the provinces of Groningen, Drenthe, and Friesland in the Netherlands. The public group was asked about:

1. How acceptable they themselves would find the three types of renewable energy projects if they were developed in their neighbourhood.
2. What aspects they found important to consider when developing the local renewable energy projects.
3. The extent they would prefer to be involved in the planning of local renewable energy.

⊕ The findings

The research showed some interesting findings on the assumptions stated above:

- *Is it true that people will only accept local energy projects when it benefits their own finances?*

We found that people consider both their finances, the environment and the well-being of other people when evaluating local energy projects. **People are, therefore, likely to find a project more acceptable when they perceive it beneficial for the environment and the well-being of other people, as well as beneficial for their own finances.**

- *Do practitioners assume that people only find their own finances and comfort important when considering energy projects being developed in their neighbourhood?*

We found that practitioners overestimate how important the finances, status, and personal comfort is to the public when considering local energy projects. **People find their money, status, and personal comfort less important than what decision-makers assume.** This does not mean that people do not find financial, status-, and comfort-related aspects important! It just means that it is less important than what practitioners assume.

Practitioners also underestimate how important the public perceive a local energy project's impact on the environment and the well-being of other people. **People think that nature, the environment, and other people's well-being is more important than what practitioners assume.**

- *Is it sufficient to only inform the public about energy projects in their neighbourhoods and not include them in the decision-making process?*

We found that the public prefer to be involved in higher levels of participation than what practitioners prefer. Thus, **the public want to be more involved in the decision-making process than practitioners prefer involving the public.** Informing people about a local project is an important thing, but the public may also prefer to be involved in some major decisions.

⊕ The advice

So what are these findings good for? Well, if practitioners and decision-makers follow the advice below, people may be more accepting and less resistant towards renewable energy in their local area:

- **Renewable energy projects may become more acceptable to the public when people see their environmental, pro-social, AND financial benefits.**
- **People may find environmental and pro-social aspects of local renewable energy more important than practitioners expect. Do not neglect to include these aspects in the planning and communication about local energy projects.**
- **When planning public participation processes, attempt to match the level of public participation with the public's preference hereof. Consider giving the public more influence in major decisions if they express an interest in practicing such influence.**

