



Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau

Summary

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Visions on the division of responsibility:
onshore renewable energy production



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original title

Regie nemen, ruimte geven – Roep om een rechtvaardige verdeling

Visies op verantwoordelijkheidsverdeling: duurzame energieopwekking op land

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Summary

General framework and objective

Multiple social challenges – including the sustainability transition, livelihood security, healthcare and the labour market – require urgent attention. Citizens and government may have different visions on how responsibilities should be divided between players when addressing these challenges. If their visions vary significantly, this could affect the confidence of citizens in the government and also the effectiveness of policy. This study examines visions and differences in vision on the basis of a case study, the policy dossier on onshore renewable energy production, and reconstructs central government's visions on the division of responsibility. These visions are then contrasted with the insights obtained into citizens' visions from previous research.

Policy is the subject of considerable attention, but the visions on which policy is based are seldom the subject of academic research. To achieve a proper insight into the nature and extent of differences between policy visions and citizens' visions, it is essential to have an accurate picture of policy. A reconstruction of shifts in the general government vision on the division of responsibility (Blijleven and Kooiker 2022) shows that a more nuanced picture emerges from the systematic study of policy documents. Hence why both policy visions (this study) and citizens' visions (previous research: De Kluizenaar et al. 2022; Wagemans and Peters 2023) have been studied systematically for the purpose of this publication. This makes it possible to accurately compare visions and contributes to a better understanding of how, where and why visions differ. These insights provide a basis for policy recommendations. A parallel study has followed a similar approach for the Lifelong Learning policy dossier (Blijleven et al. 2024). Together, these studies form part of the *Verschuivende verantwoordelijkheden* ('shifting responsibilities') research series by the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP). The research series in question studies how government and citizens view the division of roles between government, citizens, companies and social organisations regarding a number of social challenges.

Relevance of insight into differences in vision

It is important to gain an insight into the visions of citizens and government and the differences between them because, if differences are major (or excessive), this may affect the confidence that citizens have in government, the democratic quality of policy and, as such, the legitimacy of policy too. Citizens will only accept policy and be willing to comply with it in the interests of society as a whole if they believe in the legitimacy of the policy in question. Differences in vision also pose a risk to the feasibility of policy objectives.

Relevance of the case study

The production of onshore renewable energy is a particularly interesting case study when studying differences in visions. Firstly, because of actual shifts in the division of responsibility in the field of energy production and supply. For example, responsibility for energy production shifted from government to the market during the privatisation wave of the 1980s and 1990s. Given the major changes ensuing from efforts to make the energy supply more sustainable, shifts are now happening again and attention is turning to the question of citizen involvement. The choices made when dividing responsibilities will determine which parties gain control and ownership, which could have major social consequences. Secondly, the production of onshore renewable energy is an interesting case study because of the big expectations that government has of other players, like market parties and citizens. The possibility of greater citizen involvement, both in the early stages of the process and in the implementation phase, is evident from the 50% local ownership target in the Climate Agreement (Klimaatberaad (Climate Consultations) 2019: 219), amongst other things. This raises the following four questions: how appropriate do citizens feel this division of responsibility is and under which conditions? Which responsibilities are citizens *willing* and *able* to accept and – again – under which conditions? Thirdly, this case study is interesting because of its relevance to current developments. The challenge for the Netherlands is to

have a climate-neutral energy system in place by 2050. Choices about the division of responsibility when realising this system are giving rise to dilemmas as regards the need to achieve a fair transition. These go beyond the division of benefits and burdens.

Findings

1 Policy visions

The analysis of policy documents shows the strong control that central government wants to exert over the implementation of climate and energy transition policy. Policy documents also express the ambition of a regulatory role for government where the achievement of climate goals is concerned. However, the role that central government is to play in the energy transition will largely be of a collaborative nature. Added to the above, central government is incentivising green investment among market parties, by offering them subsidies amongst other things.

Central government is opting for a decentralised approach to onshore renewable energy production. Besides playing a regulatory role (in the form of guidelines and consideration principles to help facilitate spatial choices and distance rules for onshore wind, for example) and a deregulatory role (in which obstacles to the achievement of the objectives of the Regional Energy Strategy (RES) are removed, for example), central government's primary role will be to stimulate and facilitate. National government policy envisages just a modest role for central government in the implementation of policy, for which it places primary responsibility with the market and a guiding role with local and regional authorities. Central government does see an implementation role for itself in the form of information provision and communication.

2 Differences and similarities between policy visions and citizens' visions

Previous studies in this research series show that the visions of recent cabinets (Blijleven and Kooiker 2022) correspond reasonably well with citizens' visions (Wagemans and Peters 2023) across the domains. Both of the publications above show that today's major social challenges require the commitment of government, citizens, companies and social organisations. In government, there is renewed attention for citizen involvement, in the field of both policy implementation and policy development. However, citizens would like to see more responsibility being taken by national government in particular (Wagemans and Peters 2023).

What do these visions on the division of responsibility entail in respect of climate and energy policy in general and the case study on onshore renewable energy production in particular? Also, how do the visions reflected in government policy differ from the visions of citizens? The present study reveals clear differences in vision, although some consensus is evident between policy visions and citizens' visions in climate and energy transition policy. For example, the present study shows the strong emphasis that government is placing on collaboration between parties, whereas past SCP research on citizens' visions show that a majority of citizens feel that government and big business should take the bulk of responsibility for combating climate change (De Kluzenaar and Flore 2021). At the same time, citizens estimate the willingness of big business to do their share as low. A majority of citizens also believe that large companies in particular are still not doing enough (but also believe the same about the government and to a lesser extent also about private households). At the same time, they believe that big business and government are best placed to contribute to the combating of climate change (De Kluzenaar and Flore 2021). Citizens would particularly like to see national government taking responsibility for improving the sustainability of Dutch energy use, followed by companies and municipal authorities. Citizens envisage a smaller role for themselves. Incidentally, this does not mean that citizens want to shift all responsibility elsewhere: they believe that citizens need to accept a reasonably high to high level of responsibility as well (Wagemans and Peters 2023).

The study covered in this report shows that differences in policy visions and citizens' visions are expressed most strongly in policy at the more concrete level of onshore renewable energy production. For example, differences of opinion exist about what national government ought to do, how citizens themselves ought to contribute and what it would be appropriate to leave to the market - focusing in particular on the nature and scope of the commitment envisaged from various parties. To summarise, there are basically two differences between policy visions and citizens' visions:

- 1 Government policy envisages just a modest role for national government in the implementation of policy. It places primary responsibility for this with the market and a guiding role with local and regional authorities. However, citizens would actually like to see national government playing a bigger role given the need to safeguard public interests and the interests of citizens (De Kluzenaar et al. 2022; Wagemans and Peters 2023). Some citizens are critical about the advisability of a major role for the market (big business) in local energy production, prompted by the fear that the market will prioritise commercial interests over the interests of the local community and the broader public interests (De Kluzenaar et al. 2022).
- 2 Government hopes that more citizens will want to become the co-owners of energy cooperatives and, by doing this, achieve the goal of 50% local ownership. Government also hopes that citizens will take the financial risk this will require, develop knowledge and skills and make the time investment necessary. However, just a small percentage of citizens feel that citizens ought to take on a high level of responsibility for onshore renewable energy production (Wagemans and Peters 2023). Citizens question the feasibility and advisability of the broad application of a model that relies heavily on the active involvement of citizens, based on the concern that not all citizens will be able or willing to take part, which could potentially stand in the way of a just transition (the weighing up of interests and the division of benefits and burdens, for example) and equality.

More control for government and citizen involvement

Thus, the analysis of policy documents in this study shows that government envisages just a relatively modest role for itself in the implementation of policy and places more responsibility for implementation with the market. However, previous empirical research shows that many citizens believe that national government should be doing more to combat climate change and also improve the sustainability of energy use and the local generation of renewable energy (De Kluzenaar and Flore 2021; Wagemans and Peters 2023). Although citizens believe in the competency of companies and, as such, in the important role they can play, they are also concerned about the companies' intentions. They worry that companies will ultimately prioritise commercial interests over collective interests and that citizens will have (too) little say. Therefore, the wish of citizens for government to take more responsibility is prompted by the belief that government is best placed to safeguard public interests – the combating of social inequality, for example (De Kluzenaar et al. 2022). This is an important sign, not least of all because differences between the visions of citizens and government on what it should be possible to expect from a government could affect confidence in government (Van Noije et al. 2023; Wagemans and Peters 2023).

Dilemmas

The choice to give national government a bigger role on the one hand and greater citizen involvement on the other hand both give rise to dilemmas and questions:

- 1 Which potential advantages and disadvantages would there be if government were to take (back) control of onshore renewable energy production?
- 2 What can government do to meet the need for greater citizen involvement and also minimise the risk of too much being asked of citizens?

The shift in responsibilities will have advantages and disadvantages. The question is how realistic and feasible it would be for national government to play a bigger role in the production of renewable energy, at which price this would be achievable and how advisable this is. No clear answer is possible to this question. It depends very much on the specifics of policy implementation, which involves choices that are ultimately political. However, previous exploratory research by focus groups in this research series do give an impression of the type of conditions that citizens would expect to be met before accepting various variants of the division of responsibility (citizens take action; companies take action; municipal authorities take action) and under which conditions they would be willing to play a bigger role (De Kluzenaar et al. 2022).

Where government feels it is appropriate to leave certain actions to the market or citizens, it is advisable to ascertain how it would be possible to reduce the concerns that citizens have about these responsibility-distribution models. It will also be important to be transparent about the considerations that contributed to this choice by government and to communicate clearly about what government will do to ensure that public interests and the interests of citizens (local residents, for example) are safeguarded sufficiently. In a broader sense, many citizens feel that it is important for companies to be required to contribute to social goals – a clean living environment, for example (Wagemans and Peters 2023).

A policy vision based on an active role by citizens in the realisation of onshore energy projects places great expectations on the self-reliance and autonomous ability of citizens and has pioneers in mind. It raises the question of how realistic a big role for citizens in the broader sense – beyond pioneers – actually is. Government and citizens both recognise the collective interests involved. However, the individual interest for citizens is uncertain (the risk is high and difficult to estimate), policy implementation is too complex for many of them and there are major differences between the ability of individual citizens to participate.

It is vital to ascertain what government can do to safeguard the fair division of benefits and burdens, whereby pioneers - in this case, citizens that play an active role in energy cooperatives – are given sufficient scope and are encouraged, facilitated and supported, where necessary. At the same time, all citizens must be given sufficient opportunity to have a say and benefit from renewable energy production in the Netherlands, even if they find it more difficult to share their thoughts and ideas and participate in discussions and the action to be taken.

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