

## Co-developing approaches to strengthen the democratic legitimacy of community energy initiatives

Department: Sustainable Development  
Research group: Environmental Governance  
Supervisors: dr. Heleen Mees & Ninya Jochemsen  
E-mail address: [h.l.p.mees@uu.nl](mailto:h.l.p.mees@uu.nl); [n.w.r.jochemsen@uu.nl](mailto:n.w.r.jochemsen@uu.nl)

### Project description

The project is a follow-up of preliminary research conducted for the interdisciplinary special interest group Citizen Engagement and Urban Sustainability ([CITEUS](#)). The assistantship will focus on conducting individual interviews, on co-organising co-creation workshops, and on co-authoring a scientific report.

Many challenges that community energy initiatives face in their interactions with local stakeholders are related to issues of democratic legitimacy: democratic values and their role in creating legitimacy. For instance, they fail to reach, include and represent a diverse group of citizens, and the complex and technical nature of energy production limits the possibilities for broad and direct participation. Community energy initiatives also experience challenges in the cooperation with the municipality. Common legitimacy issues found in the interaction between energy initiatives and the municipality are: internal and external accountability issues; distrust and tendency to control; and a mismatch in goals and expectations. The proposed research project aims to 1) deepen our understanding of the tensions in the cooperation and interaction between energy initiatives in Utrecht and the Utrecht municipality, specifically around issues of democratic legitimacy; and to 2) co-develop innovative approaches to strengthen the democratic legitimacy of energy initiatives that can further improve the collaborative governance of municipalities and energy initiatives. In our search for democratic approaches, we will focus on issues of participation, representation, transparency, accountability and responsive decision-making.

### Methodology

Together with local stakeholders (initiators and participants of energy initiatives, non-participating citizens, local NGOs, local government officials, researchers) we will engage in a community-up process of transdisciplinary research to identify and prioritize the key issues, to discuss the desired situation and to jointly find solutions in terms of concrete actions to enhance democratic legitimacy. We will act as facilitators of this transdisciplinary research process by organizing focus groups and workshops to create mutual understanding and trust among the stakeholders. To get the individual perspectives of each stakeholder separately (and to insulate them from group dynamics), we will also conduct a series of in-depth interviews with relevant stakeholders, in which we will explore their perspectives for potential hybrid democratic approaches (e.g. citizen juries, participatory policymaking and e-participation) to address the prioritized legitimacy issues and to see how they can be suited for energy initiatives. Then, we will run co-creation workshops in which we will discuss such innovative approaches, their strengths and weaknesses, and challenges to their implementation. Ultimately, we aim to co-create approaches to more legitimate forms of citizen initiatives-city government interactions.

## Project proposal Bright Minds Assistantship September 2022

### Job requirements

The assistant should demonstrate a keen interest in research, with the ability to conduct interviews. The assistant should have good writing and communication skills and preferably a background in sustainable development and environmental governance. Although the supervisors are heavily involved, the assistant should be able to work relatively independently. Dutch language is preferred (in light of the interviews).