

# Bringing energy poverty thinking into the Dutch energy transition

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Last week the first white paper on energy poverty was launched in the Netherlands, led by expert Koen Straver from TNO, and co-authored by myself, Lucie Middlemiss (university Leeds), Marlies Hesselman (university Groningen) and Sergio Tirado Herrero (university Barcelona). Energy poverty occurs when people cannot access adequate energy services, and it is a problem which takes different forms in different European nations, according to the climate, and to the support available for households through energy and social policy. Co-authoring this document has been an opportunity for me and my colleagues to feed state of the art research on this persistent problem into a policy proposal for the Netherlands. I have been researching energy poverty since 2017 and I am a member of the ENGAGER Network of European Energy Poverty Researchers. My department CSTM at the University Twente has a long standing track record in energy poverty research, mainly focusing on energy access and sustainable energy for all in the Global South. An unique legacy is the work of my professor Joy Clancy on gender and energy. Together with her, I have co-authored two publications for the FEMM Committee of the European Parliament. Both are the first publications on women, gender and energy transition in the European Union.

To date, the action on energy poverty in the Netherlands has been led by municipalities and regions who discovered this issue about five years ago, and began to set up programmes to address it. Municipalities were motivated by meeting the diverse range of local targets that can be addressed in energy poverty policy, which can impact on health, wellbeing, social relations, household budgeting and climate change. What is currently lacking in the Netherlands is a national response to the issue: there is no Dutch policy on energy poverty, despite the enthusiasm of local stakeholders, and despite the new EU regulation on energy and climate, which requires member nations to report on energy poverty. Our white paper sets out to change that, offering three clear recommendations as to how national policy-makers should proceed.

Given these recommendations are based on state of the art understandings of the problem and management of energy policy, they also have value outside of the Netherlands. I would argue that being a late mover on this topic is an advantage here (the UK was the first mover on 'fuel' poverty): there are opportunities to learn from mistakes made elsewhere.

So what do we recommend?

The first recommendation is to measure energy poverty in the Netherlands, but specifically, to take heed of the multi-faceted nature of the problem (as documented in academic work on this topic) and as a result to **develop a multi-indicator framework to measure energy poverty**. This is intended to capture both the dynamic nature of the problem, as we transition towards a low carbon future, and the fact that people respond to, and experience, energy poverty very differently. Some people do not see themselves as having a problem, despite living in temperatures (hot or cold) that are known to have detrimental health effects. Others will never go without heat, compromising on other critical items (food, travel). A multi-indicator framework has the advantage of capturing this diversity of responses and tracking it over time. Such an approach has been used to positive effect in France: their 'basket of indicators' capturing different types of energy poverty in this way.

The second recommendation is to **develop specific energy poverty policies which complement and intersect with existing measures to promote the energy transition**. These two policy areas must be considered side by side: as an energy transition that has only negative consequences for the energy poor is likely to be ineffective and unpopular. There is currently limited attention on how the energy poor will be affected by the energy transition in the Netherlands, and it is essential that the planned costs of this transition do not fall too heavily on the poorest.

But what does this mean in practical terms: which specific measures will need to be put in place? The two most commonly used policy measures for energy poverty focus on affordability and energy efficiency: lowering energy prices, and helping people to access more energy efficient appliances and buildings. This sounds simple, but when people have different forms of tenure (owning, renting privately, renting social housing), different levels of eligibility for help, and differing needs, it can be difficult to see how best to target policy measures. Further, linking attempts to increase people's access to energy through increased affordability is potentially problematic for meeting carbon targets. It may be that some households will need to consume more energy to avoid energy poverty: finding ways of accommodating this within a national carbon budget is important. There are measures that address both carbon reduction and energy poverty reduction, principally efficiency measures, but these need careful planning and monitoring to ensure that both targets are reached.

The third recommendation is to **take into account energy poverty when planning social, energy and built environment policies**. The multi-faceted nature of energy poverty means that all of these policy areas are closely linked. A change in the benefits system, for instance, can result in many more people suffering from a lack of access to energy services (in the Netherlands this will mean suffering from the cold, for instance). Built environment policy has a longer term impact on energy poverty: if energy efficiency standards are raised, for instance, it can take decades for this to trickle through to an overall increase in thermal comfort.

Such coordination requires close cooperation between the various ministries involved, something that can be challenging in any nation. We can, however, monitor and track the effects of energy transition policy on the energy poor through qualitative research which allows us to see the ways in which diverse policies impact on people experiencing this problem. The Scottish government has used lived experience data to road test new policy ideas, and there is also scope to monitor the ways in which households are affected by policy using such data.

As more nations begin to instigate policies on energy poverty in response to EU regulation, there are important learning opportunities for us in the Netherlands. We may have started on this journey last, but we may implement the state of the art insights on eradicating energy poverty here. It will be interesting to see what comes out of the Dutch response to our White Paper: if our recommendations are followed, and how that impacts on everyday life for families facing this challenging issue in the Netherlands.