

# The expected performance of local energy visions in Europe: a governance perspective

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## Abstract

This paper offers insights into the expected performance of Sustainable Energy Action Plans (SEAPs) as a policy instrument, a local energy vision initiated by the EU and used by municipalities across Europe. How are SEAPs aiming to contribute to the process of local energy transition and how can their performance be improved? The text of thirty SEAPs have been studied. Three vision theories have been used to create a conceptual framework. Besides the focus on the content, the substantive objectives create a dot on the horizon and can shape development, visions such as a SEAP also have to address four governance challenges that are key to successful implementation: multi-level coordination, contextualization, stakeholder engagement and realization. These challenges are to be seen as necessary ingredients for a process to create and implement visions. Our analysis shows that governance challenges remain implicit and not actively dealt with in the majority of the SEAPs studied. We describe the main patterns and underlying assumptions we encountered and reflect on the consequences for the performativity of SEAPs.

## 1. Introduction

The municipal level is perhaps the most crucial of all government levels when dealing with climate change (Barber, 2013). Most of a country's energy use is used in cities, for example, about 25% of final energy use is used for the heating, cooling and operation of buildings (Itard, 2012), and if defined very widely, figures of 80% of final energy consumption are related to cities (CoM, 2015). Local authorities therefore play a crucial role in the achievement of EU-energy targets. To emphasize the leading role of local authorities, the European Commission launched the Covenant of Mayors after the adoption of the EU Climate and Energy Package in 2008. The Covenant of Mayors is a European movement that takes the European policy objective of 20% CO<sub>2</sub> reduction by 2020 as a minimum ambition level. Accordingly, regions and municipalities have been invited to join. Upon joining, they need to formulate a Sustainable Energy Action Plan (SEAP) in which the municipality or region commits to reducing CO<sub>2</sub> by at least 20% by 2020. This obligation might explain the plenitude of local energy visions, focused on climate change, sustainability and energy transition, which appears to be a booming international phenomenon at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

According to the guidebook for drawing up SEAPs (EU 2010), SEAPs are considered the key document for a local or regional government to show how to realize the ambition to produce less CO<sub>2</sub> including a long term vision for 2020 and concrete measures for the next three to five years. The guidebook defines a local ambition and formulates a vision with as much concrete measures and actions as possible for both the public and the private sector. The guidebook further instructs that SEAPs should be approved by the local council. Participation of civil society is considered essential. Financing, monitoring and reporting should be anticipated for. There is also an instruction to update the SEAP. All SEAPs and their developments can be found on the related EU website.<sup>1</sup> Considering the

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.covenantofmayors.eu/actions/sustainable-energy-action-plans\\_en.html](http://www.covenantofmayors.eu/actions/sustainable-energy-action-plans_en.html). On June 15, 2015, 4579 SEAPs were available on this website.

guidebook's remarks on the participatory process and the call for monitoring and updating the plan, a SEAP as such is considered an open and lively document structuring the process of change towards producing less CO<sub>2</sub>. This implies that the SEAPs have shaping and formative capacities. Such power that lies embedded in the vision and is linked to the call for action, is called performativity (Van Lente, 1993, Bakker & Budde, 2012, Dignum, 2013). This paper focuses on the performativity of these SEAPs. By analysing the SEAPs itself, as texts, this paper aims to bring insight in SEAPs as a policy instrument.

In particular, this paper aims to answer the questions: How are SEAPs contributing to the process of local energy transition and how can their performance be improved? What kind of governance challenges are faced by local governments in a SEAP? How to overcome these challenges? By answering these questions, we aim to contribute to the insights in local governance processes of energy transition and climate change mitigation (Hoppe & Van Bueren, 2015) and contributing to a social science perspective on energy research (Sovacool et al., 2015). Energy visions as such have not been studied extensively, even though the phenomenon is spreading and they are a key instrument in achieving climate ambitions. When studied, they are studied as part of the local policy toolbox (Bulkeley & Betsill, 2013), or they form the context of other policy processes, such as community initiatives (Van der Schoor & Scholtens, 2015; Hoppe et al., 2015) and energy controversies (Devine-Wright, 2014). There are a few exceptions. Staden and Musco (2010), for example, conclude after comparing fourteen cases in Europe that 'a vision and strategy to move towards a particular aim, such as becoming a carbon zero community, provides a valuable framework within which actions can take place.' Can we be more specific, after studying these SEAPS, about what makes or breaks this added value of having a local energy vision as suggested? Sperlinga, Hvelplunda, and Mathiesen (2011) conclude that "there is a strong need for better coordination of municipal energy planning activities at the central level." emphasizing the need for coordinated multi-level governance to strategic planning. It is suggested that the role of municipalities as energy planning authorities needs to be outlined more clearly in, e.g., strategic energy planning which integrates savings, efficiency and renewable energy in all (energy) sectors

We have qualitatively analysed the text of thirty SEAPs across Europe at the municipal level. In our analysis, we structure and interpret the encountered variety. By means of scientific insights on vision performativity, we came to focus on four governance challenges that local governments might face and try to deal with in this SEAP. Each of these challenges relate to (different aspects) of the performativity of the visions. The first governance challenge is multi-level coordination. This focuses on the elements of connecting policy ambitions between different institutional realms. Local governments may try to link themselves to policy frameworks formulated on a regional, national and/or international level. The second governance challenge is the adequate contextualisation of the problems and solutions for climate change, fit for a specific municipality. Third, local governments may try to engage stakeholders. The fourth and final governance challenge is to actually realize measures and to anticipate the implementation gap.

After discussing a conceptual framework and describing our research method, we use these four challenges (i.e. multi-level coordination, contextualization, stakeholders, realization) to report on our empirical findings. In a discussion section, we reflect on the main empirical patterns encountered and their implications for the performativity of energy visions. In conclusion we formulate a research agenda and a more concrete institutional design agenda to assist local governments in their mission.

## 2. Conceptual Framework

This paper centralizes the governance challenges related to the performativity of local energy visions such as SEAPs. For the conceptual framework, this research builds on the vision theories of the sociology of expectations, the Leitbild perspective, and utopian studies. Each of these theories discuss the performativity of visions (Van Lente, 1993; Brown et al., 2000; Brown, 2003; Achterhuis, 1998). The three theories each have a different origin.

The Leitbild perspective and the sociology of expectations are formed through a synthesis of insights in a variety of social science research (Dierkes et al., 1996; Van Lente, 1993). The sociology of expectations is an analytical body of literature focusing on dynamics, use, functions and shaping capabilities of technological expectations. It identifies three nested levels of expectations: micro, meso, and macro; e.g. technological specific expectation on the micro level are placed in a meso-level context of the development of a field (Van Lente, 1993). The macro level is most generic and is often seen as culture, or societal trends. The Leitbild is more action oriented. It focuses on collective envisioning and approaches this process as a deliberate means to shape development. This perspective narrows visions down based on achievability (Dierkes et al., 1992; Dierkes et al., 1996). These two bodies recognize the shaping capabilities of the macro level, or large visions. There is only limited attention for this level because this level is seen as diffuse (Van Lente, 1993), or possible unachievable (Dierkes et al., 1996). Utopian studies focuses specifically on large visions. This body of literature has roots in political philosophy, political theory, philosophy of technology, architecture, economics, literature, and environmental science. This body of literature does not focus on the feasibility of visions (some strands explicitly exclude feasibility), but it does recognize the potential to work towards the of a large vision, while also warning for possible negative (side)effects along this path. Each of these bodies of literature recognize the shaping capabilities of (large) visions.

*Visions* are seen as reflections on a possible, often desirable, future as well as reflections on the current situation (Hedrén, 2009; Berkhout, 2006). Visions problematize the current and provide an outlook to a better future. In other words, they have problem defining and problem solving characteristics (Dignum, 2013). Visions are a means of communication that provide a point of orientation. They are tangible enough to actively pursue, while also embedding a degree of interpretive flexibility. This interpretive flexibility is the issue of multi interpretability, i.e. the vision means something different to different actors (Konrad, 2006; Berkhout, 2006; Eames et al., 2006). These different interpretations share the support of the vision and can create congruence to work towards a future that was outside the scope of possibilities before the envisioning process started.

The concept of *performativity* relates to the shaping capabilities of visions. It focuses on the ways in which a vision impacts developments. Three aspects of performativity can be identified: framing, sharing, and guiding (Dignum 2013, Mambrey and Tepper 2000). Performativity already starts in the process of creating, or framing, a vision, especially when this is a shared effort between different actors. In this process, fixed thinking patterns become opened and possibility space is created for new developments (Smith *et al.* 2005, Berkhout 2006, De Geus 1996). When the vision materializes the different thoughts merge and thinking patterns close down again. In this process the actors involved in this process can become more aligned. This process can develop further as people outside the group become familiar with the vision. This sharing process is the second element of performativity. The aspect of guiding action relates to resources (e.g. time, money, efforts) that are dedicated to working towards the vision.

The three vision theories further provide insights in governance challenges that are relevant for the performativity of visions. The vision theories show that governance of the process of defining and implementing a vision is crucial to the success of these visions, i.e. for visions to have impact. We distinguish four general governance challenges that have to be addressed in visions if they are to be performative.

### *Multi-level governance*

Due to the scope of large visions, they often surpass different spheres and other levels of structuration (Späth and Rohracher, 2010). When visions are used as a policy instrument this also means the alignment between different policy levels and institutes. The CoM mentions the SEAP as a means of creating this alignment. Multi-level governance is a broad scientific framework. It can include formal, institutionalized, alignment, or a less-institutionalized, problem-focused dynamic context (Smith 2007; Marks and Hooghe, 2004). For this research the the alignment of vertical and horizontal government institutions are equally important. Vertical alignment is especially needed to coordinate policies and targets defined and policy actions needed to achieve them. Horizontal alignment is especially needed to coordinate the investment decisions of the many local actors involved, involving choices for technologies and types of renewables which need to be attuned to avoid sub-optimized use of resources, infrastructure and investment capacity and malfunctioning of the energy system. Well aligned government institutions and policy instruments can facilitate efficiency and effectiveness (Di Martino, 2015). The Covenant of Mayors explicitly mentions SEAPs as means for achieving multi-level governance. For the realisation of SEAPs, such multi-level governance must be fairly stable as it surpasses multiple election periods. This long-term nature is inherent to climate change policy (Di Martino 2015).

### *Contextualisation*

The second governance challenge is the adequate and efficient contextualisation of the ambition to reduce CO<sub>2</sub>-production, matching the local situation with a unique configuration of geo-physical, urban, institutional and cultural characteristics. Contextualized visions focus on local circumstances, problems and opportunities (Grin et al., 2000). These visions are more fine-tuned, have more capabilities to align local actors and materialize in (local) action relatively easy. Adequate contextualisation helps in prioritizing what needs to be done in a specific situation, while still maintaining the overarching objectives. Based on the nested level of visions, contextualized visions travel across spheres, influencing the visions on other levels (Späth and Rohracher, 2010; Borup et al., 2006) This implies that insights from this contextualisation can also make visions and the underlying frames at this overarching level more robust (Grin et al. 2000; Dignum 2013).

### *Stakeholder interaction*

Stakeholder involvement is important to align actors (Healey, 1996; De Bruijn and Ten Heuvelhof, 2012; Walker et al., 2011). The process of envisioning can help in aligning actors since this process opens up thinking patterns and it also serves to establish a shared frame of mind. The envisioning process is therefore of equal importance as the vision itself (Loorbach, 2007; Rotmans et al., 2001).

Stakeholder interaction also surpasses the envisioning phase. When the vision is formulated, the vision is often presented to a wider audience and can gain wider support. A vision can become a reference point that can align actors, determine priorities, set agenda's and mobilize resources (Dierkes et al., 1996; Smith et al., 2005). Stakeholder interaction is essential to establish the developments that lead towards realising the vision.. Especially the local support is important, since resistance often originates from the local level (Correljé et al., 2015; Taebi et al., 2014). The formation of a network amongst and/or between stakeholders is also important, since it facilitates substantive and social learning amongst the stakeholders (Albert, Zimmermann, Knieling, & von Haaren, 2012) and it makes the vision more resilient over time (Dignum, 2013).

### *Realisation*

A vision should be concrete enough to be able to work actively towards its realisation. Whether or not this requires full feasibility, is a matter of debate (Dierkes *et al.* 1996). At the same time, a vision needs to inspire and allow some freedom of how to achieve or work towards that dot on the horizon. After all, there are more ways to Rome, and stakeholders have range of actions available to get there. . The vision, but also the actions formulated to implement the vision, are ambiguous and feasibility is a fluid concept. Even when requirements are incorporated in a vision and made smart

and tangible, they only have the potential to become a reality if the investments are made and in many cases, the investment decisions are made by a multitude of actors (Van Lente, 1993). The amount of investments determines what is realizable (Dignum, 2013). The process of envisioning thus needs to allow for ambiguity while making smart action plans with tangible steps can be made towards realizing the vision, irrespective from the fact whether or not the full vision can be realized. Throughout this development attention needs to be paid to possible negative (side)effects for pursuing this policy.

Table 1 presents the four governance challenges of visions and the main issues that they are concerned with. The conceptual framework to be used for analysing the texts of the selected SEAPs.

*Table 1: Conceptual framework of challenges and issues affecting the performativity of visions*

| <b>Governance challenges</b> | <b>Issues</b>  |
|------------------------------|--|
| Multi-level Governance       | Formal/informal<br>Vertical / Horizontal coordination<br>Long term stability   |
| Contextualisation            | Relation to overarching vision<br>Translation of overarching vision in local context<br>Usage of local insights to enrich overarching vision |
| Stakeholders                 | Involvement of relevant actors in envisioning<br>Involvement of relevant actors in implementation<br>Network formation between actors        |
| Realisation                  | Feasibility of realisation<br>Possibility to take concrete action  |

### 3. Method

This paper aims to gain insight in some aspects of the performance of SEAPs. This performance is operationalized as the performativity of these SEAPs in relation to governance. Section 2 outlined the four government challenges in relation to this performativity. In this section we first explain why we focus on SEAPs and how the analysis took place, then we will operationalize the governance challenges as were introduced in section 2.

#### *Focusing on SEAPs*

A growing number of municipalities commit to CoM by formulating a SEAP. Between 2008 and 2014 on average more than 800 SEAPs per year were submitted. In May 2015, 6325 SEAPs were signed. The large majority of these SEAPs originate from Europe. Italy (with 3504 SEAPs), followed by Spain (1436 SEAPs), submitted by far the largest number of SEAPs (CoM 2015 [1]).

SEAPs are based on a specific format. The SEAP guidelines (2010) identify four subsequent stages: initiation, planning, implementation and monitoring. The end product of the planning phase is the SEAP. The implementation and the monitoring phases should each coincide with reports. However, since the availability of these implementation and monitoring reports are scarce, the analysis focuses on the SEAPs, including the initiation of the process, as described in the SEAP.

In the initiation phase community building occurs. SEAP development should be multi-stakeholder process, including the involvement of citizens and academia (CoM 2013). This allows the creation of a local-level community for achieving the CO<sub>2</sub> ambitions. In this phase also administrative municipal structures are to become aligned to facilitate CO<sub>2</sub> reduction (EU 2010).

The planning phase, the EU policy objectives are contextualized to the current local situation. After an analysis of the situation, a vision is developed and concrete measures and priorities are formulated on how to realize the vision. The end of this phase is the submission of the SEAP.

### *Operationalizing governance challenges*

To gain insight in the governance challenges related to the performativity of SEAPs. We focus on the governance challenges that we encountered in the SEAP document. The aim was to optimize the insight in the variation of governance challenges and in the performativity of the SEAP. To realise this aim, a selection of SEAPs was made to represent diversity. This included a broad selection of SEAPs on the municipal level from different countries and different years. In this selection only European SEAPs were included. The intensive presence of Italy and Spain was reflected in a substantial presence of SEAPs from these countries in the selection.

To gain insight in the content of this large number of SEAPs, we analysed a selection of thirty European SEAPs before reaching a saturation point of novel insights on the four governance challenges of section 2. These thirty SEAPs were close read and analysed in light of the given operationalisation of governance challenges (table 1). If necessary, we used Google Translate to read the texts. This research only focuses on these written documents.

The challenge of *multi-level governance* is clearly present in the founding principles of the Covenant of Mayors. SEAPs are visions that have a local origin and commitment and yet adhere to the EU policy objectives (CoM 2015). The Covenant of Mayors uses visions as a policy instrument for shaping development. SEAPs are visions that have a local origin and commitment and yet adhere to the EU policy objectives (CoM 2015 [2]). Since we focus solely on the SEAPs themselves, if the multi-level coordination is indeed included in the SEAPs already involves it includes, at least, some form of structuration. It is then interesting see how this structuration materialised in horizontal and/or vertical embedding of SEAPs in relation to multi-level governance.

The second governance challenge is the *contextualization*. If, indeed, the European policy forms the ambition of the SEAP, than an adequate translation of the policy aimed at local circumstances is required. The origin of the SEAP was analysed, indicating whether it departs from EU policy and to which extent this policy is translated to the contextual factors of the municipality. Attention was also paid to whether this contextualization occurred qualitatively or quantitatively. We paid attention to the way municipalities contextualized their SEAP and whether or not a reflection towards the method is included. Attention was paid to the sequence of contextualization and de-contextualization that can create more robust visions. This was based on the degree to which the SEAP reflects upon its contribution to the EU policy goals.

The third governance challenge is stakeholder interaction. The SEAPs are analysed based on the variety of stakeholders that was involved in the envisioning procedure that preceded the founding of the SEAP. Attention is also paid to the actors, and the variety of actors, mentioned in the SEAP to involve in the implementation? Are the actors involved as a form of a coalition? In other words, is there network formation? The writing style of the document is also relevant. Who is the (problem) owner and audience of the SEAP?

The fourth challenge is the realisation of the SEAP. To assess the possibilities for realisation and to assess the feasibility of SEAPs, attention is paid to the arrangement of finances and other resources. Also the level of current and ongoing developments is assessed.

The analysis of the SEAPs based on this operationalisation of governance challenges (table 1) created insight in how the SEAPs handle the challenges. Some secondary literature is used in the discussion section to validate our insights.

## **4. Findings**

Studying the performativity of thirty SEAPs as texts, we came across patterns as well as variety. SEAPs happen to take many different forms. They can be rather formal or informal. Some are less than thirty pages, others more than three hundred. They can be written as policy documents,

technical studies or promotional brochures – to mention three extremes. They can be outcomes of a process with stakeholders or conclude with invitations for stakeholders to start a process.

Table 2a provides a general overview of how SEAPs pay attention to the four governance challenges. Table 2b explains how we scored each case. We first indicated for each SEAP whether a certain governance challenge has been mentioned or not. And second, if mentioned, whether it is actively dealt with or not. When a governance challenge is mentioned, we presume this should at least require problematizing of the vision’s performativity in terms of barriers, risks and pitfalls or, from a positive perspective, helpful elements and necessities. When a challenge is actively dealt with, thus more than mentioned, we presume that the SEAP explains some possible action perspectives in response to a certain challenge.

After the tables below, we will report on the patterns and variety for each governance challenge individually from an empirical point of view, including the use of the theoretical framework (table 1) to further make sense of these findings. Following this section, we will discuss the patterns across all four governance challenges.

*Table 2a: Overview of the thirty SEAPs in this study*

| <b>City</b>         | <b>Country</b>        | <b>Multi-level</b> | <b>Context</b> | <b>Stakeholders</b> | <b>Realization</b> |
|---------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|----------------|---------------------|--------------------|
| Newcastle           | <i>UK</i>             | 1                  | 2              | 2                   | 2                  |
| Mechelen            | <i>Belgium</i>        | 2                  | 3              | 1                   | 3                  |
| Hlinska             | <i>Czech Republic</i> | 2                  | 3              | 2                   | 3                  |
| Lahden              | <i>Finland</i>        | 1                  | 3              | 2                   | 2                  |
| Riga                | <i>Latvia</i>         | 1                  | 3              | 2                   | 3                  |
| Milan               | <i>Italy</i>          | 1                  | 2              | 2                   | 3                  |
| Felinoca            | <i>Italy</i>          | 2                  | 3              | 2                   | 3                  |
| Gradika             | <i>Bosnia</i>         | 1                  | 2              | 2                   | 2                  |
| Amsterdam           | <i>Netherlands</i>    | 3                  | 3              | 2                   | 3                  |
| Dijon               | <i>France</i>         | 2                  | 3              | 3                   | 3                  |
| München             | <i>Germany</i>        | 1                  | 3              | 3                   | 3                  |
| Bristol             | <i>UK</i>             | 2                  | 3              | 3                   | 3                  |
| Madrid              | <i>Spain</i>          | 1                  | 2              | 1                   | 2                  |
| Warschau            | <i>Poland</i>         | 1                  | 3              | 2                   | 2                  |
| Dublin              | <i>Ireland</i>        | 3                  | 3              | 3                   | 3                  |
| Vilkaviskis         | <i>Lithuania</i>      | 1                  | 2              | 1                   | 3                  |
| Almada              | <i>Portugal</i>       | 1                  | 2              | 2                   | 1                  |
| Civitate al Piano   | <i>Italy</i>          | 1                  | 1              | 2                   | 1                  |
| Sefton              | <i>UK</i>             | 3                  | 3              | 3                   | 3                  |
| Rotterdam           | <i>Netherlands</i>    | 3                  | 3              | 3                   | 3                  |
| Sint-Jans-Molenbeek | <i>Belgium</i>        | 3                  | 1              | 2                   | 1                  |
| Swieqi              | <i>Malta</i>          | 1                  | 3              | 3                   | 2                  |
| Ringkobing-Skjern   | <i>Danmark</i>        | 2                  | 1              | 2                   | 1                  |
| Bath & NE Somerset  | <i>UK</i>             | 1                  | 2              | 3                   | 3                  |
| Offenbach am Main   | <i>Germany</i>        | 1                  | 3              | 3                   | 3                  |
| Laktasi             | <i>Bosnia</i>         | 2                  | 1              | 1                   | 3                  |
| Skelleftea          | <i>Sweden</i>         | 2                  | 2              | 2                   | 1                  |
| Urząd Gminy Tryńcza | <i>Poland</i>         | 1                  | 2              | 2                   | 2                  |
| Haidari             | <i>Greece</i>         | 2                  | 1              | 1                   | 2                  |

Table 2b: Legend

|          | Multi-level                             | Contextualization                       | Stakeholders                           | Realization                               |
|----------|---|---|--|---|
| <b>1</b> | Not mentioned                           | Not mentioned                           | Not mentioned                          | Not mentioned                             |
| <b>2</b> | Mentioned                               | Mentioned                               | Mentioned                              | Mentioned                                 |
| <b>3</b> | Actively dealt with<br>(e.g. discussed) | Actively dealt with<br>(e.g. explained) | Actively dealt with<br>(e.g. involved) | Actively dealt with<br>(e.g. anticipated) |

### *The multi-level governance challenge*

The dominant pattern for SEAPs is to mention the EU and/or the Covenant of Mayors in the introduction. In most cases, the national and regional levels are not mentioned at all. When the national and regional levels do get mentioned, they tend to be considered more important than the European level, as is often the case in the UK-based SEAPs.

The EU level is generally mentioned in three ways. First, as a reason why this SEAP document is drawn up. On one occasion it is literally stated that ‘because we became signatory of the Covenant of Mayors, this document had to be made’ (Gemeente Sint-Jans-Molenbeek). Second, the CoM is seen as a network to be part of. For example, Dublin mentions: “As a signatory to the Covenant of Mayors, Dublin City has joined over 2,000 cities and towns in a commitment to the principles of best energy policy” (SEAP Dublin). Third, the EU level is also considered as a potential source of (additional) funding. This third reason can be seen as a dependency between multiple levels, and thus as a multi-level governance challenge. Besides mentioning the possibility of financial support from higher levels, multi-level governance is generally neither mentioned as relevant nor discussed further.

There are five exceptions in our data set. Five SEAPs do elaborate on multi-level governance challenges. From the perspective of *vertical coordination*, these documents either further specify what kind of support the municipality needs from other levels, or what kind of developments at other levels to take into account. Furthermore, some SEAPs discuss institutional arrangements for cooperating between levels, for example by means of existing or new platforms. In a few cases, *horizontal coordination* takes the form of a bench marking forum with related cities. Such cooperation takes different forms. In some occasions it is geographic, e.g. cooperation between several UK cities. In other occasions it is related to a theme, e.g. cooperation between cities that aim to become “smarter and more sustainable” (Riga together with Glasgow, Riga, Gothenburg & Ghent). Generally, cities cooperate with cities with similar features, for example, capitals compare themselves to capitals, etc. The importance of *stability on the long term* is not directly discussed in our data set, but it is implicitly addressed as SEAPs explicitly link themselves to policy documents within the municipality and at other levels.

### *The contextualization challenge*

The dominant pattern is to directly provide specific, quantitative information on the aspired CO<sub>2</sub> reduction and the potential CO<sub>2</sub> reduction per sector and per potential measure. In many instances, the document also includes a same amount of qualitative information on more general items like the history, the socio-economic situation, the local climate or, as in one case, even the geographic coordinates of the municipality. This information is not considered directly functional for the contextualization of the EU ambition.

Overall, the contextualization challenge is dealt with in most cases, i.e. the EU ambition is translated in *quantitative* terms for the local context, although qualitative descriptions also occur. Sometimes, there is a reflection on the activities in the municipalities and whether the format of the SEAP includes all relevant aspects for the municipality. For example, the municipality of Mechelen reflects upon the required baseline measure of SEAP, excluding industry that are covered by ETS (Emission Trading System), aviation, shipping, agriculture, and nature. They conclude that these



aspects may be interesting for cities to include in the baseline measure. Consequently, they decided to include the relevant aspects for Mechelen (agriculture and nature). A similar reflection and reasoning can be found in the SEAP of Riga. In these cases, the contextualisation also leads to a *priorization*. In the case of Mechelen, it showed that agriculture was very relevant for the CO2 emission of the municipality. However, such prioritization is scarce and occurs only in a minority of cases. If prioritization is included, it is generally on a very general level, e.g. mentioning the most promising category of measures, like 'wind energy' for example.

Furthermore, a small minority of SEAPs includes a section to describe, explain and discuss *methods* used. In the majority of cases, the provided information cannot be traced back, reproduced and, therefore, does not allow a systematic check. The methodological choices made in terms of operationalization, scale and scope are by rule not made explicit, let alone argued for.

From the SEAPs there does not appear to be an active attempt to establish a feedback loop to enrich the EU level with contextualized insights. However, SEAPs do express an far higher ambition than the EU ambition, which may, indirectly feed into the overarching objectives.

### *The stakeholder engagement challenge*

The dominant pattern is that a number of stakeholders gets mentioned. The municipality generally shows an intention to involve and inform them when realizing the measures. Informing and involving civil society, for example, is regularly mentioned as an 'objective' in SEAPs. Or the actors are even positioned as users of the end product (Lahden).

In nine cases, almost a third of all SEAPs in our dataset, stakeholders have been involved substantially before the date of publication. In five cases, stakeholders are not mentioned. Instead, the municipality interacted with technical specialists and experts in the process of making a SEAP.

Stakeholders, if mentioned, are in most cases considered to be the actors directly involved with implementing the measures, besides the municipality itself. In one case, the municipality is also considered one of the stakeholders and not the principal problem owner and author of the SEAP. In a minority of cases, the SEAP limits itself to only mentioning public stakeholders such as schools, hospitals and other public sector organizations.

A minority of the SEAPs is clearly written for a broad audience, with an inviting lay out full of attractive photos and an engaging style of writing. Remarkably, these 'attractive' SEAPs are generally not written in the mother language but in English, thus presumably not primarily focused on a local but on an international audience. The majority of SEAPs are formal policy documents and no easy reads, because of long sentences, jargon and abbreviations. Most of them generally follow the suggested structure of the CoM, this structure remain unexplained for the readers not familiar with the idea behind the structure of the CoM. Most reports do not even have a conclusion paragraph but, instead, quite suddenly stop or end with a to do list.

SEAPs that actively involve stakeholders display various strategies. Some municipalities used existing partnerships and existing policies to involve many stakeholders in the process of writing. Other municipalities created new platforms and groups to interact with stakeholders. One municipality has made stakeholders the authors of the SEAP. Hardly any municipality elaborately specified a process for the immediate future in the SEAP for stakeholders to further join in.

Thus, *involvement in envisioning SEAPs* is done in a minority of cases. *Involvement in implementing SEAPs* is promised in a majority of cases, but is worked out in a minority of cases. When this is worked out, it generally takes the form of *network formation*. The *variety of stakeholders* can be quite different per SEAP, apparently not only because of local circumstances but even more so because of more fundamental reasons, e.g. different ideas of the scope of a SEAP outside the public sector. *Ownership and audience* are also quite different per SEAP. Again, this appears to be so not only because of local circumstances but because of more fundamental reasons, e.g. different ideas of the function of SEAPs.

### *The realisation challenge*

The dominant pattern is that measures are suggested and valued in terms of costs and results. In most cases, the SEAPs specify the required financing but not the financiers. SEAPs specify measures for millions up to hundreds of millions in euros. In many instances it does not become clear from the text to what extent the financing has already been taken care of, and if not by means of what kind of process this will be taken care of. In most cases, opportunities are sketched by mentioning a potential type of financier per measure. A reasoning like: considering the planned activities, the fund acquisition is required is not uncommon (e.g. Działania Gminy Tryncza).

The SEAPs with an advanced perspective on the governance challenge of implementation show various strategies. Some are specifying concrete measures for specific sectors aimed to facilitate concrete opportunities for stakeholders to join in. In just a few cases, a more elaborate strategy is described how to institutionalize interaction about the follow-up of the SEAP, for example in terms of a monitoring program, work groups, platforms and some generic process-oriented targets in the near future.

Thus, the *concreteness of plans* is generally quite advanced in terms of location and scope. By contrast, *discussion and arrangement of resources in terms of finance and time* is hardly done on a deeper level than a few catchwords and a price tag. The number of *realised and ongoing activities* are generally speaking limited. Often, the SEAPs portrait an expected lift-off of renewable energy from the submission of the SEAP onwards without specifying how this is to be achieved.

An exception to this general pattern is formed by several municipalities that had already implemented much sustainability measures. For example, Riga stated already to have accomplished the CoM objectives used an updated SEAP for setting out a new ambition.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

In the past years a large number of municipalities submitted SEAPs. Analysing the texts with our conceptual framework has shed a light on the extent to which the SEAPs pay attention to the governance challenges that are crucial for the performativity of these visionary plans. Although there is a general format for writing SEAPs there is a great versatility in how SEAPs are written. A dominant pattern is that SEAPs are very much content focused without much attention for the required process. The governance challenge are only explicitly addressed in about one third of the cases. In this section we outline the most interesting observation for each of the governance challenges after which a conclusion follows.

The multilevel coordination is important within the CoM. While this aspect is frequently mentioned in the SEAPs, operationalisation and actually dealing with this issue is scarce. There is MLG coordination in requests for funding schemes, and there is horizontal coordination between some cities. More specific details are hardly ever mentioned. However, there is also MLG coordination ongoing by the existence of CoM itself. Over three thousand municipalities are currently participating in this initiative. This means that through CoM municipalities become an (increasing) actor on the EU level, and are possibly able to cooperate more effectively vertically. Additionally, by its size the CoM itself can become a partner in negotiations and the platform may become a network. Such a large development may convince other municipalities to join as well (although this does not guarantee that these municipalities will actually initiate CO2 reduction measures), and it may increase a voice towards other actors such as national or EU policy, and even business actors, indicating a need for change. Whether or not these effects actually occur is a topic for further research.

While most SEAPs do include contextual elements, the introduction is generally quite loose. Often a large amount of information is provided that does not immediately seem to link up. Some appear more holiday brochures than an actual attempt to translate a European vision into a local one. Some municipalities reflected on the local elements and the SEAP requirements by analysing whether the SEAP requirements included relevant local elements. There was also little attention to

choosing the method of analysing to translate EU policy to local visions and concrete measures and what these measures were expected to contribute to the EU objectives. More attention to methods and how local insights can help the CoM would be beneficial for the CoM. It would allow to distinguish best practices.

The involvement of stakeholders is mentioned in each of the SEAPs. However, in a number of cases, this involvement occurs only after the SEAP has been published. Or it is addressed in general terms such as sentences like 'it is important to cooperate' or 'it is important to involve stakeholders' . Some SEAPs indeed saw the founding of a SEAP as a shared process amongst all relevant actors, and as a step towards long-term involvement. Other SEAPs had a specific actor as problem owner (often the municipality). Generally, these SEAPs did mention other stakeholders, but only for the implementation phase.

The issue of realisation is mentioned in all SEAPs. Less frequent this is coupled to concrete measures. In the cases that it concrete measures are mentioned, the funding is often not arranged. In these cases, the SEAP itself forms a platform for community building and visibility that is intended to help in creating funding. Often, the SEAP is positioned as a turning point in the municipality to become more sustainable, while not explicitly addressing how this should be done. The danger is that the SEAP remains a paper tiger, without much action being taken. However, there appear two exceptions. One category of municipalities already took a lot of actions. The SEAP may then be written to become part of a larger community of municipalities. The network value of the CoM may play a role. This can also help as a point of orientation of municipalities that are still struggling with the aspect of realisation.

Generally, it remains structurally unexplained how important and how easy or difficult it is to cooperate with higher levels, to translate an EU-related ambition for a global problem like CO<sub>2</sub> reduction to a local context, to involve stakeholders and to get financing.

Does it matter that governance challenges are often not explicitly dealt with in the SEAP? Not necessarily so, as these explanations and problematizing may come in a later phase or remain undocumented without affecting the performativity. Also, network formation and best practices may increase the performativity of the platform as a whole. At the same time, this lack of explicit problematization of the governance challenges is not without risk. When SEAPs do neither create nor articulate a *sense of urgency* to deal with these governance challenges, they risk to kick-start a highly instable or eventually inert process (De Bruijn *et al.* 2013).

To elaborate on this, a municipality may see stakeholder support for an ambitious SEAP over time change and even fade away, because neighbouring or similar municipalities, in later stage, formulate much lower or much higher ambitions, significantly change their previous ambitions or reduce much more CO<sub>2</sub> with much less costs. Even the municipality itself may eventually wish to have aspired something else. It may also be the case that ambitions formulated on a regional, national or European level will appear fluid half way the life span of the SEAP. Currently, most SEAPs take their municipal ambitions as well as the related higher level ambitions as a given and presume stability, instead of problematizing stability. Given this scenario of changed circumstances, changing the ambitions currently fixed in a SEAP might potentially enhance the legitimacy and create more support. There is no process to anticipate or deal with these dynamics. This is not only potentially fragile for realizing the SEAPs ambition, but may also disable municipalities to profit from future, unexpected opportunities. This issue concerns all four governance challenges.

This content-oriented pattern has potential drawbacks in relation to performativity of the visions. First, the Covenant of Mayors initiative centralizes the performativity of these visions based on quite straightforward reasoning of sequential steps: initiation, planning, implementation and monitoring. The performativity of these visions is seen as a linear procedure. However, from the vision literature and from the governance challenges, it becomes clear that performativity has more of a cyclic, iterative character. Performativity already starts with the early involvement of stakeholders. When stakeholders are only included in the implementation phase, the performativity aspects of envisioning and the sharing of the vision in a small group are missed.

Second, the importance of the process of formulating and achieving visions and accompanying targets, also when it concerns ‘the governance of things’ seems to be underestimated. Explicit inclusion of the governance challenges would create more attention for the process side of developing energy visions. It would also allow more learning amongst the participating municipalities (Albert et al., 2012).

The third and perhaps most critical drawback is related to the fact that content and process are not unrelated. The SEAP now generally kick-starts a process with a considerably fixed point of departure, often reflecting local ambitions that reach beyond the EU2020 ones. The unaddressed question is whether this fixed point of departure, even if highly ambitious, is a right start for the process to come after publication, not giving stakeholders key to implement the vision any ‘ownership’ of the vision. We refer to this as an implicit process design choice (De Bruijn & Ten Heuvelhof, 2013). Other examples of implicit process design choices are which actors to consider as relevant and how to address the trade-off between feasibility and ambition. The third drawback is that by means of a dominant focus on content, SEAPs often implicitly take a position in how to deal with complex governance challenges, mostly without mentioning and possibly without seeing the dilemmas of doing so (see also, Van Bueren and Steenhuisen 2013). This may harm the performativity of SEAPs.

An important question that remains unanswered is how municipalities assess for themselves the risk of neglecting governance challenges and whether they have the tools and the expertise to deal with them.

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