

Tilting at Windmills? The Attitude-Behaviour Gap in Renewable Energy Conflicts

John Benson and Claire Haggett, Landscape Research Group, University of Newcastle

Second Progress Report

The aim of the project is to bring together a range of disciplines to draw out, understand and start to develop approaches that address the apparent gap between human attitudes and behaviours in renewable energy conflicts. The project is progressing well, and has already developed a number of fascinating insights and indications for further research.

A comprehensive literature review has been carried out (and continues) on the factors that may influence conflicts around renewable energy siting. This was focused on whether such opposition is best understood in terms of deficiencies in the regulatory and planning system, or in terms of unfavourable public attitudes. In terms of the public, a number of theories of attitudes and behaviour have been considered, most notably that of 'nimbyism', which is surprisingly widely used still. However, evidence from several empirical studies has cast doubt on this as a simplistic explanation for opposition, and cross national comparisons can be used to highlight the complexity of the issues and the necessary focus on the interaction between people and planning; this may be in terms of such things as communication, involvement, and ownership. The database is available to project participants on the project website which has been set up to facilitate communication.

Two workshops for members of the project have been held. The first of these set the scene, brought all members up to speed with the relevant aspects of the UK planning system, the development of windfarms and the wider energy context. It was also an opportunity for members to begin to highlight areas of theory and concepts from their disciplines that are relevant to the research questions.

The second workshop consisted of presentations by participants of working papers on their initial approach to the questions that have been posed. These papers were circulated amongst group members and after presentations they formed the basis for some very fruitful discussions, with a number of commonalities and potential areas for overlap, synergy and collaboration being identified. The proceedings of each workshop have been recorded and transcribed and may offer an opportunity for a modest "discourse analysis" of the project itself. The papers are at different stages of development, but will in due course contribute to the outputs of the project and may lead to more formal publication.

One of the first areas in which there has been some interesting discussion has been the consideration and definition of the very nature of the 'gap' itself. Does it exist? At what level? Is this a societal or an individual concern? Is it representative of a time lag between changes in attitudes and behaviour? Furthermore, a number of links between the seemingly diverse disciplines in the project are starting to emerge. These are on both a theoretical and a methodological level. In terms of theory, these include links between politics and planning on the emphasis in communicative planning theory on active collaboration between experts, officials and the public to achieve certain goals; and between geography and sociology on the social construction of knowledge, its development and transmission. There are also links to be made in terms of methodology; for example, sociology can give insights into which variables should be tested in an economics model; or a discursive approach in social psychology may illuminate some of the factors, such as communication between key stakeholders, that are critical in environmental management.

Plans for the next stages of the project

In December the project will meet again for a 'witness session', where representatives who have been key participants and stakeholders in wind energy debates and controversies will be invited to present their perspectives, and participants will have the opportunity to ask questions to further inform their understanding. A visit to a local windfarm is also planned, to allow some of the discussions to be put into context; one of the issues that has emerged in the project is the perceptual differences between wind energy in theory and wind turbines in their physical form. A fourth workshop is then planned early in 2004 to develop further the interdisciplinary approaches, and a final workshop will conclude the project and finalise plans for dissemination of the findings.

A number of inter-disciplinary papers for refereed journals are already being planned and/or written, including the possibility of an edited book, and this material will be available for posting on the website as soon as it reaches a suitable degree of resolution.

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