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## Modes of governing and policy of decentralized governments supporting local low-carbon energy initiatives; exploring the cases of the Dutch regions of Overijssel and Fryslân<sup>2</sup>

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**Background.** This manuscript is part of the first author's PhD project. His PhD project looks into the key mechanisms that explain variation in success and failure of LLCEIs and seeks to find out how LLCEIs can be updated, accelerated or advanced and how governments can support LLCEIs. The PhD project (and thus this manuscript) is part of a research program financed by the Province of Fryslân, the Netherlands (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Map of the Netherlands, provinces of Fryslân and Overijssel highlighted

**Context.** In recent years, local low-carbon energy initiatives (LLCEIs) have proliferated across Europe and have the propensity to play a notable role in low carbon city governance. The Netherlands is no exception. This paper explores two Dutch regions; Fryslân and Overijssel (Figure 1). We define LLCEIs as a project or series of projects managed by citizens that involve the generation of low-carbon energy and/or applying energy efficiency measures on a local scale. We refer to 'local' as low carbon energy technology being either at pico, micro, or meso level [1] Additionally, local refers to the 'situatedness' of the actors [2]. The majority of LLCEIs organize themselves in energy cooperatives; an organizational model that allows for profit distribution among its members and democratic decision-making via general meetings. An example of an LLCEI is the Westeinde Energy Cooperative (WEC). This cooperative has the ambition to make a 4500 inhabitants urban district<sup>3</sup> energy neutral and starts its endeavor by developing a 3.6 acre solar farm. However, taking account of our definition of LLCEIs, it needs to be stressed that the majority of LLCEIs throughout the Netherlands have not yet started to produce low-carbon energy. This has to do with their relatively young age<sup>4</sup>. It takes

<sup>2</sup> This work is part of the research program which is financed by the Province of Fryslân, the Netherlands.

<sup>3</sup> Whereas WEC involves an LLCEI in an urban area, Fryslân is a rural province with many small villages. Most villages have their own LLCEI.

<sup>4</sup> Whereas Fryslân, for instance, knows a history of wind energy associations that started in the 1990s, the 'movement' that forms the locus of our research started around 2013.

a considerable amount of time to derive at the stage at which a low-carbon energy installation is actually constructed (because of planning and permit procedures, but also project viability). Most projects of LLCEIs are either still in the pipeline or lack a profitable business case. Typically because of these hurdles and processes (planning procedures, regulations, financing, lack of expertise) LLCEIs resort to local or regional government for support. However, LLCEIs challenge existing governments' hierarchical modes of thinking, policy-making processes, relationships of power, and traditional instruments and practices. This requires innovative ways of governing in which decentralized governments have a prominent role [3]. Two case studies were selected for comparison and analysis: the Dutch regions of Fryslân and Overijssel. Data collection involved a set of semi-structured interviews, which were bolstered with secondary data (i.e. policy documents). Data analysis concerns an analytical reflection using the theoretical notions discussed in the following section (in particular those mentioned in Table 1 and Figure 2) in an interpretative way on the two cases. Since the nature of this paper is explorative, we will predominantly look into the extent in which policy innovations and institutional adaptations co-evolve with the emergence of LLCEIs, the possible barriers, and how this relates to the two patterns of governing as outlined in the section below.

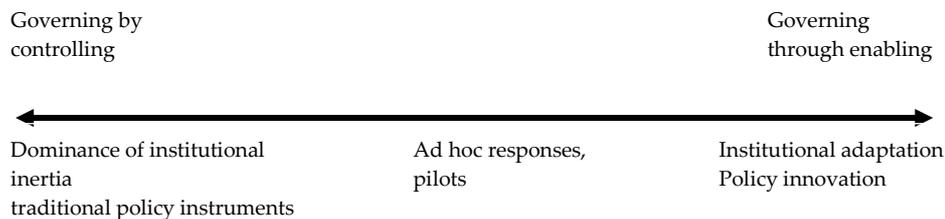
**Approach.** Several studies examined to what extent LLCEIs augment the socio-technical transition towards a more sustainable energy system and low-carbon economy [e.g. 4-6]. Both practitioners and researchers regard LLCEIs as unequivocally positive in light of climate change mitigation and trends of democratic disenchantment and political disengagement. This point of departure neglects a critical note which we seek to address in this short paper. While several studies have discerned the pivotal role of decentralized governments in supporting LLCEIs [7-10] less is known (or reported) about the way governments respond to the emergence of LLCEIs [11]. That being said; do LLCEIs bring about innovations in governing or do traditional practices prevail?

Bulkeley and Kern's [12] 'governing through enabling', which refers to "the role of local government in facilitating, coordinating and encouraging action through partnership with private- and voluntary-sector agencies, and to various forms of community engagement" [12] (p. 2242), provides a relevant point of reference as an approach for governments to coordinate actions and engage with LLCEIs. Whereas an enabling mode of governing may provide local government with a means to surpass the formal boundaries of their authority [13-15], Bulkeley & Kern recognize that the shift to this form of governing has resulted in a reduced capacity of local governments to undertake action in climate protection [12] (p. 2255). In this sense, the authors emphasize the importance of enabling an authoritative mode of governing as well in order for local governments to play a significant role in climate mitigation [12,15]. Here, the scenario is that governments stick to more conventional governing methods involving inter alia the use of regulations, planning requirements and economic instruments. However, Bulkeley and Kern's argument for employing a controlling mode of governing – to reinvigorate governing capacities of local government for effective action on climate change – offers but one explanation. In particular in relation to LLCEIs, governments may resort to such modes of governing to retain their influence or because of institutional constraints and therefore may respond in a rather ad hoc and incremental fashion to LLCEIs. In this paper, we focus on two capacities that local governments may draw on to innovate and enhance their governing capacity vis-à-vis LLCEIs: i) institutional adaptation [16-19] and ii) policy innovation [20-22]. We mirror these mechanisms with more traditional ways of enacting governing capacities. In Table 1 an overview is presented of the expected institutional and policy dynamics when juxtaposed with the coinciding patterns of governing.

**Table 1.** Overview of modes of governing and policy and institutional dynamics

		<b>Patterns of governing</b>	
		<i>Governing by controlling</i>	<i>Governing through enabling</i>
<b>Institutional dynamics</b>		<i>Institutional inertia</i> by means of restrictive administrative and legislative processes, traditional civil servants acting as ‘wounded lions’ involving at best ad hoc, incremental and episodic responses, traditional hierarchical relationship	<i>Institutional adaptation</i> by means of bricolage/conversion or patching up/layering
<b>Policy dynamics</b>		<i>Traditional policy instruments</i> involving inter alia inducements and conditional funding, typically oriented towards short-term, tangible outcomes	<i>Policy innovation</i> involving inter alia capacity building, partnerships, oriented towards effectuating more distant outcomes without necessarily occasioning benefits on the short-term, shaping policy goals and delivery of infrastructure and services in partnership with other actors

Evidently, these modes of governing (and their respective mechanisms) are ideal types. In practice, it is also (or even more) likely that hybrid governing arrangements emerge. This principle is visualized in Figure 2. Ad hoc responses and pilots are considered to be ‘hybrid’ responses. To determine the extent to which such responses (and other mechanisms for that matter) resonate with a controlling mode of governing and/or enabling mode of governing, however, would be an empirical matter.



**Figure 2.** Continuum of modes of governing juxtaposed with analytical touchstones

**Research questions and findings.** This paper sets out with the research question *what modes of governing do decentralized governments use in response to the emergence of LLCEIs?*

We found that the majority of the provincial support for LLCEIs is organized at government ‘arm’s length’, entailing that the ‘enabling’ is performed by external, semi-independent, non-public organizations or platforms. Whereas this allows for an enhanced degree of flexibility, existing policies, institutions, political preferences for spatial quality, as well as civil servants and informal practices that have a role in traditional policy implementation restrict this flexibility. Interactions that challenge the existing institutions struggled to gain ground when old-school civil servants with traditional (‘silo’) modes of thinking [23], which Taylor [24] dubs ‘wounded lions’, saw their autonomy or power threatened.

Both the provincial governments of Fryslân and Overijssel implemented policy innovations that predominantly took shape as subsidies – without strict reporting and performance requirements – in order to build capacity of LLCEIs. However, this flexibility only comes with subsidies where a relative small amount of money is involved. When it comes to large lump-sum investments, we generally do not observe this flexibility.

On the local level, municipalities incline towards impromptu and opportunistic responses, some of them having lasting effects by patching up existing institutional settings, others

having more of an episodic character and targeted at individual LLCEIs. These often ad hoc and pilot-based responses and policies (which were found on the provincial level as well) typically remain outside of routinized governing processes, which has implications for the propensity of these responses to have transformative effects. The cases show that local and provincial governments predominantly interact with individual initiators and local governments chose to support LLCEIs on the basis of trust, gut feeling, and public support (how 'public support' was defined differed per interviewee; one said; the involvement of the Village Council and local associations, another mentioned a list of signatures, another mentioned a number of members). This way of interacting is prone to selective and clientelistic support of LLCEIs, favoring arbitrariness and a one-to-one dialogue instead of legitimacy and collective action.

In view of this, governments employ both controlling and enabling modes of governing; traditional practices and policy elements are combined with innovative instruments, policies and adaptations. In these hybrid governing arrangements, traditional mechanisms can be used innovatively and enabling practices may come with rather traditional elements. Frictions arise in this dynamic field as innovative instances of governing challenge conventional modes of governing. The hitherto intangible nature of the LLCEI policy outcomes and the absence of profound policy evaluation perhaps therefore rather co-evolve than coincidentally emerge. Governments still search for ways to account for public budget that is spent without immediate results against the backdrop of complex, intertwined, and 'policy silo transcending' societal problems. The combination of experimental and conventional elements is therefore a reasonable response that is indicative of a multiplicity of solution paths that can be advanced. To some extent this resembles with transition management studies, in which the combination of experimental and conventional elements is present as well.

## Contributions

The *Thousand Flowers* transition pathway in which LLCEIs take a leading role in the energy system necessitates innovations in energy governance [25,26]. In this sense, this short paper provides insights into the hybrid nature of the governing arrangements that emerge when governments and bottom-up civil society action directed at low-carbon energy production intersect. As such, subnational governments to a great extent condition this pathway by configuring the institutional space for LLCEIs [see 27]. The importance of agency and capacity in responses of governments to LLCEIs, the way governments interact with LLCEIs ("collective action" underpinned by an individual-government relationship), and the role of subsidies animates issues of spatial equity [26], social justice [28] and legitimacy. Aiken [29] suggests that if LLCEIs grow in number, they may become a prominent method of environmental governance in Western cities. However, it is crucial to determine the ground rules of such governance methods in order to 'fill up' the institutional 'void' [30].

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