

# Dissertation Report EPS



## Joint Dissertation Review

Name of the student:	Manon Heerts
Title of the thesis:	Challenges to Effective Energy Poverty Policy in the Netherlands
Reviewer:	Vera Scepanovic

### 1. KNOWLEDGE AND CONNECTION TO THE FIELD

(relevance of the research question, research objective, literature review):

The thesis addresses a highly topical issue of relevance to both policy and academic discussions on multi-level governance. The research question as stated in the introduction is somewhat too loose and sets the thesis up for a very descriptive answer ('How is energy poverty addressed at different governmental levels in the Netherlands, and what are the challenges in addressing energy poverty?'). The second formulation which appears on p.25 ('identify some possible variables that affect the effectiveness of energy poverty policymaking in a multilevel context') is more promising and should have been foregrounded. The concept of 'effectiveness of policymaking' is the operative outcome and could have been better defined. Overall, the thesis offers a clear defence of the research objective, the case selection, and contribution. It is well embedded in the literature on multi-level governance. However, while it makes a clear case for the applicability of this framework to the case of energy poverty policy in the Netherlands, it does not try to leverage the case to qualify or add to the framework.

### 2. ANALYSIS

(methodology, argument, theoretical backing, appropriate work with sources):

The methodology is broadly appropriate to the question, and the amount of work that obviously went into the collection and analysis of data is commendable. The combination of document analysis and interviews is effective, and the justification offered for the selection of interviewees is convincing. The analysis on the whole offers a plausible explanation of the coordination problems that make policy making on energy poverty less effective. The main problem is that the thesis never conceptualizes a benchmark, i.e. it remains unclear what an *effective* policy looks like. It is of course possible to imagine an ideal case where no energy poverty would occur, but for a research project it is preferable to look for a realistic benchmark in existing policies, either in another policy domain or across cases. The thesis mentions, for example, that there are provinces with a 'clear' energy poverty strategy, with 'fragmented' and those without one. Comparisons across these provinces or across individual (comparable) municipalities within these provinces would have perhaps allowed the author to pin-point more precisely the strategies and coordination instruments that lead to better or worse outcome in addressing energy poverty. As it is, the argument remains at a very high level of generality. It identifies 'lack of clarity in role division' and 'insufficient long-term financial planning' as obstacles to effective policy-making, and the importance of non-governmental actors as an element of overcoming these obstacles. However, the thesis offers very few concrete insights into how exactly this works. Examples of successful and less successful cases of programme implementation would have gone a long way in demonstrating and specifying the very general mechanisms identified here. As a final and perhaps marginal point: the thesis very oddly never mentions the war that led to the crisis context and rapid ad-hoc measures to address energy poverty and speed up the energy transition. It's probably a fair point to say that long-term planning is preferable and that the Dutch government should have thought about the climate change earlier, but it is still useful to point out that the instances of MLG discussed here take place in specific circumstances.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

(persuasiveness, link between data and conclusions, achievement of research objectives):

On the whole, the obstacles to effective policymaking are clear and plausible, though more specific arguments built on detailed examples would have been more persuasive (and would have perhaps helped the author to identify additional factors or qualify the mechanisms through which these obstacles can be best mediated). They are also clearly related to the literature, confirming (some of the) predictions of the MLG framework. One factor which I found much less persuasive was the argument about the lack of coordination, which is identified as a problem in itself, as it leads to uneven implementation of policies and (presumably, it was not really demonstrated) different outcomes for the energy poor. The argument made here is normative, not empirical: that the support shouldn't be 'arbitrarily determined based on the municipality [the poor] live in'. This argument however goes against the earlier claims about the advantages of decentralization (energy poor in rural areas won't need the same type of support as the energy poor in urban rental units) and also against the hypotheses offered by different types of governance literatures – for example, the experimentalist governance, which sees advantages in uneven and locally adapted implementation (as long as it has effective feedback mechanisms) especially when it comes to relatively new policies where 'solutions' are not well established yet. Again, more empirical detail on the types of programmes and their outcomes (and the variation in these outcomes) would have strengthened the argument of the thesis.

#### 4. FORMAL ASPECTS AND LANGUAGE

(appropriate language, adherence to academic standards, citation style, layout):

The thesis is clearly and fluently written, professionally referenced, and the methodology and sources are meticulously documented.

#### 5. SUMMARY ASSESSMENT

(strong and weak point of the dissertation, other issues)

This thesis has all the markings of an excellent thesis: a clear question well embedded in the literature and empirical developments, solid engagement with a relevant, if narrow, body of literature, well-conceptualized research strategy and evidence of comprehensive effort in collecting and analyzing data. Less general and more specific discussion of the empirics, engagement with the actual programmes and policy developments would have allowed the author to provide a more original argument and one that perhaps helps to further the theory in addition to merely applying it.

Grade (A-F)	B (Leiden 8/Barcelona 8,5)
Date	Signature
30/07/2023	

