

“Energiewende” and citizens’ protest: Local conflicts, actors and dynamics

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The German “Energiewende” is considered a role model for transforming the energy landscape in Europe and the world. Meanwhile, over 30 percent of the electricity generation is done by renewable energy. The effects of this transformation are, literally, visible all over the country: Wind farms on- and offshore, new overhead power cables across the country, photovoltaic systems on roofs and fields as well as biogas plants. While the “Energiewende” is a national and moreover global topic, the actual conflicts are taking place at the local level. It is here where people protest against the construction of overhead power cables, the installation of huge wind power plants and the use of Hydraulic Fracturing. Most recent studies have exclusively focused on the participants of protest movements. In our project, we expanded the focus and analyzed all actors involved in these conflicts, such as local politicians and authorities, companies, protest groups, as well as those citizens who decided not to join the protests. Our data material is gathered from four case studies on conflicts over large infrastructure projects in the context of the German “Energiewende”. All conflicts took place in small administrative entities (Landkreis). We conducted about 40 guided interviews with all actors involved and, moreover, organized six focus groups with citizens that did not participate in the protests. Based on this broad empirical base we can describe the specific point of view of all players on the conflicts and their perceptions of the opposing side. We analyze the dynamics taking place in contact between the different actors. How do companies deal with local protest? What is the relationship between local politicians and protest activists? What’s the impact of local media? Are protests an expression of declining levels of trust in a society in which large infrastructure projects are more and more unlikely to realize? Or are they a starting point of democratic innovation?