

Broader discussion about shale gas needed

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Proponents and opponents of shale gas extraction base their cases on the same values. However, they disagree about how justice should be done to these values. Furthermore, government policy is not in line with the public debate and this increases the polarisation. This is what researchers found after completing a pilot study in the Netherlands carried out within the NWO programme Responsible Innovation.

Analysing primary sources

Anyone who has opened just a single newspaper in the past year or has briefly watched the news on TV cannot have missed the [shale gas](#) debate. The question as to whether shale gas extraction in the Netherlands is desirable or not was a 'hot item' in the media debate. Over the past year a multidisciplinary research group from Delft University of Technology has systematically mapped the arguments and values in the shale gas debate for the NWO programme Responsible Innovation. The group was led by political scientist and economist Aad Correljé but also consisted of ethicists and innovation researchers. They examined, for example, parliamentary papers, policy memoranda, research reports and the websites of organisations involved in shale gas extraction or protesting against this. Sources included Schaliegasvrij Nederland, Milieudefensie, Cuadrilla (a company that wants to extract shale gas in the Netherlands) and various government bodies.

Gasland

Interestingly, shale gas extraction was not initially viewed as a

controversial source of energy. Government bodies and companies regarded the technology as a variant of conventional [natural gas extraction](#), which up until then had been accepted with hardly any problems. The first objections that arose were local and came from residents. The disquiet increased after the American documentary Gasland was shown on Dutch television. This portrayed a clearly negative image of shale gas extraction.

Differences of interpretation

Both proponents and opponents of shale gas extraction base their arguments on the same values, such as environmental friendliness, safety, health, safeguarding supplies and welfare. Nonetheless, the debate still became polarised because these values were interpreted differently. For example, everybody considers the safeguarding of supplies and the environment to be important but opinions differ as to whether these values are threatened by shale gas extraction. Opponents say that the extraction of shale gas would require enormous quantities of clean water, which is becoming increasingly scarce anyway. Proponents counter this argument by pointing out that the use of water is not that great compared to the total industrial water consumption. The researchers advise that further polarisation can be prevented by entering into a dialogue with all of the parties involved to find possibilities for uniting the different interpretations in a single design. One possibility could be to find a method for shale gas extraction that does not require the use of chemicals or large quantities of [clean water](#). Equally the outcome of the dialogue might be that shale gas extraction cannot go ahead because it is not possible to make sufficient concessions to all interpretations of the values.

Procedures underestimated

The research also revealed that the procedural aspects of decision-making process by policy makers are underestimated. For example, stakeholders believed that the costs and benefits are not fairly distributed: companies and the treasury were thought to benefit from the shale [gas extraction](#), whereas nearby residents bore the brunt of the nuisance. Those involved also questioned how impartial the consultancy firms contracted by the government are. They think that these firms are not objective. Such procedural aspects were initially not considered in the [government policy](#). Instead the government focused on affordability, safeguarding supply and sustainability. Consequently a mismatch arose between the public discussion and the policy implemented, as a result of which different groups felt ignored. That fed the growing public opposition and polarisation, which is ultimately so difficult to break through. In a polarised debate the viewpoints are clear but there is no longer any movement and people do not listen to each other. That is exactly what has happened over the past year in the case of shale gas.

Local involvement

The vehemence of the shale gas debate decreased when the Minister of Economic Affairs, Henk Kamp, announced a Structuurvisie Schaliegas [Structured Vision Document on Shale Gas] in November 2013. This will be preceded by a broad investigation that will also consider the local situation, the consequences for people and the environment, and the decision-making process with respect to the finding and extraction of shale gas. This is a step in the right direction, according to the researchers. However, the fact that local interested parties do not have a formal role in the research is a missed opportunity, especially as local involvement is crucial for creating the necessary support.

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