

# The soft power concept of German energy foreign policy

21 October 2020



How energy is produced and consumed must change: Governments can promote new energy technologies through targeted investments. Credit: Shutterstock/Ian Dyball

As part of its foreign policy, Germany hopes to promote energy transitions abroad through international energy partnerships. A new study by the Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies (IASS) analyzes these bilateral energy partnerships. Building on its reputation as an energy transition frontrunner, Germany is currently pursuing a soft power strategy aimed at winning over foreign countries to its policy approaches in the energy sector. According to this analysis, Germany's bilateral energy partnerships are the central policy instrument to this end.

International agreements on climate protection require a rapid reduction in [energy](#)-related greenhouse gas emissions. How energy is produced and consumed must change if this is to be achieved. Governments can promote new energy technologies through targeted investments. Government support for renewable energy has seen costs fall sharply over the past two decades, making electricity from wind and solar installations competitive with coal and nuclear-generated energy.

This development has also resulted in a shift in foreign energy [policy](#) in which traditional approaches to securing fossil-based [energy resources](#) have been augmented by efforts to foster the uptake of climate-friendly technologies and solutions. As an international pioneer of renewable energies and an important industrialized country, Germany has emerged as a key player in this new field of foreign energy policy. In a recent article in the journal *Review for International Political Economy*, IASS researchers Rainer Quitzow and Sonja Thielges discuss the German government's international energy transition policy. The authors describe the so-called *Energiewende* as the central foundation or "soft power" resource of this strategy and show how the growing domestic consensus on the German energy transition's reflected in the country's foreign energy policy.

## A German energy transition narrative emerges

The energy transition in Germany unfolded over a period of more than thirty years. Rooted in the experiences of the oil crisis in the 1970s and the anti-nuclear movement, a cross-party consensus in favor of renewable energy generation emerged by 2010. In the wake of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster, the German government made the decision to phase out nuclear power and place the *Energiewende* concept at the center of German energy policy.

## Domestic policy goes global

"This domestic political development is also reflected in Germany's international political agenda and narrative," explains Rainer Quitzow, author of the study and speaker of the IASS Research Area on Energy Systems and Societal Change. In 2002, Germany used the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa as a platform to vigorously advocate for renewable energies. In the same year, Germany supplemented its efforts in the field of development

cooperation with the export promotion program "Renewables—Made in Germany".

The first energy partnerships, focused on renewable energies and energy efficiency, were launched with India and China in 2006. Similar partnerships were established in the following years with Brazil, Morocco, Tunisia and South Africa, among others. In addition to these partnerships led by the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy (BMWi), the Federal Foreign Office (AA) also maintains various partnerships, such as the German-Nigerian Energy Partnership. "Today, these partnerships lie at the heart of Germany's 'soft power' strategy," says author Sonja Thielges, senior research associate at the IASS Research Group on Pathways to Sustainable Energy. The role and function of energy partnerships within Germany's international energy transition policy are analyzed in detail in the article and in an IASS Discussion Paper.

### **The energy transition as an international 'soft power' strategy of the German government**

Sustainable energy, the environment and climate have played an important role in German diplomacy for more than a decade now. The Federal Foreign Office, for example, appointed a special representative for climate and energy policy. Over time, the energy transition emerged as the German government's central narrative for these policy areas. Surveys in 2012, 2015 and 2017 examined international perceptions of the German energy transition. The findings revealed that this policy was viewed with admiration and interest outside of Europe. This was particularly evident in countries with considerable potential for [renewable energy](#) generation, such as Morocco, where perceptions of the German energy transition are overwhelmingly positive.

Positive perceptions of the energy transition serve as a basis—or "soft power resource" as the authors note—for high-level political dialogue within the framework of the energy partnerships. Key features of this soft power strategy is the combination of communication and political dialogue on the one hand and capacity-building and learning on the other.

"The latter bolsters the credibility of political communication and increases the partners' ability to pursue an energy policy based on the German model, which promotes renewables and energy efficiency", says Rainer Quitzow. In addition, the institutional character and duration of partnerships builds trust, which helps to strengthen other activities. In the case of South Africa, for example, the energy [partnership](#) has raised awareness of issues relating to energy transitions among state actors, according to the authors. At the same time, the political dialogue provides a forum for identifying topics that could be addressed in workshops and study visits.

The energy partnerships also have the potential to provide a framework for the inter-ministerial coordination of international energy transition policy within partner countries, write the authors. However, operating under the umbrella of the BMWi and/or AA, the partnerships are not mandated to assume this function. As a result, the federal ministries frequently pursue parallel activities relevant to the [energy sector](#) without active coordination.

**More information:** Rainer Quitzow et al, The German energy transition as soft power, *Review of International Political Economy* (2020). [DOI: 10.1080/09692290.2020.1813190](https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2020.1813190)

Provided by Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies e.V. (IASS)

APA citation: The soft power concept of German energy foreign policy (2020, October 21) retrieved 26 January 2021 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-10-soft-power-concept-german-energy.html>

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