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Policy Lab workshop methodology for deep tech energy transition

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D 4.1: Stakeholder Dialogue Framework

1. Foreword

Adaptive policymaking is crucial in navigating complex transitions, such as the energy transition, where rapid technological advancements and evolving global challenges demand a more responsive approach. Traditional, top-down methods are insufficient for understanding and addressing these dynamic shifts. Policymakers must be agile, open to co-creation, and work closely with diverse stakeholders to create relevant, effective solutions. Remaining isolated in "ivory towers" makes it impossible to fully grasp the complexity of change. Involving those directly impacted ensures that policies are informed by real-world insights, driving progress and innovation in sectors where adaptability is key to success.

The Policy Lab methodology offers a unique and adaptive approach to tackling complex areas like the energy transition, where traditional policymaking often lags behind technological advancements and evolving global challenges. In this rapidly changing sector, outdated frameworks and slow regulatory processes hinder the integration of innovative solutions. This is why the Policy Lab is needed—to provide a more agile, collaborative way to develop policies that reflect the latest deep-tech advancements. The Policy Lab creates a space where stakeholders can come together to shape policies that will enable these technologies to drive meaningful change.

The methodology's flexibility is particularly suited to experimental areas like energy transition because it encourages continuous learning and adaptation. Rather than relying on static regulations, the Policy Lab follows a learning-by-doing model, where policies can be tested, refined, and adjusted as new technologies and information emerge. This dynamic approach enables faster responses to unforeseen challenges and the integration of cutting-edge innovations into policy development.

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2. Policy Lab Methodology

2.1.1. How Policy Lab process works?

In today's rapidly changing world, we face not only global crises such as political instability and climate change but also a critical transition towards more sustainable and adaptive systems. This transition is particularly relevant in policy sectors such as energy, health, and data where complex challenges require adaptive solutions. Unfortunately, traditional policy-making processes can be slow and inflexible, making it difficult to meet these demands. Common obstacles include policies based on outdated systems, unequal stakeholder influence, and lengthy regulation development timelines. Common barriers that these complex sectors face:

- Policies are often designed with the current system in mind instead of creating rules and regulations for a new system.
- Traditional stakeholders are usually more effective in lobbying and influencing new regulations preventing real change. This can create an imbalance of power and impede the inclusion of new perspectives, leading to the underrepresentation of end-users, for instance.

The Policy Lab focuses on generating actionable outcomes through structured discussions that produce joint action plans, defining roles, responsibilities, timelines, and accountability mechanisms. This approach ensures measurable progress, driving advancements in areas like the energy transition.

By integrating insights from innovative players and fostering collaboration among diverse stakeholders, the Policy Lab provides a flexible and agile framework for policy development. It encourages shared responsibility beyond policy-makers, enabling a division of actions and faster implementation—particularly when challenges stem from perceptions or habits rather than regulatory barriers. This collaborative approach supports a more inclusive and effective policy cycle. (see image).

Traditional policy-making is often slow and rigid, facing obstacles such as outdated frameworks, imbalanced stakeholder influence, and lengthy regulatory processes. To address these complex transitions, an agile approach is essential. This involves:

1. **Direction and Goals**: Establishing a clear vision with interconnected short- and long-term goals.

2. **Identifying Barriers**: Recognizing challenges and engaging key stakeholders for collaboration.

3. **Stakeholder Roles**: Acknowledging each stakeholder's contributions and promoting shared responsibility.

4. **Diverse Input**: Involving a wide range of stakeholders for comprehensive perspectives.

5. **Experimentation and Adaptation**: Embracing agile policy-making that supports learning and experimentation.

6. **Inclusive Policy Making**: Shifting from top-down approaches to collaborative decision-making that fosters a shared sense of purpose.

1 AGENDA SETTING
Based on feedback, experience, existing barriers to alleviate.

2 POLICY DRAFTING
Upgrade the texts of regulation, funding programmes, and subsidies.

3 DECISION-MAKING
Contributing to the evidence supporting arguments in the democratic debates.

4 AGENDA SETTING
Based on feedback, experience, existing barriers to alleviate.

5 AGENDA SETTING
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A typical Policy Lab is a series (min. 3-4) of user-oriented roundtable discussions based on policy complexity. These sessions allow participants to share knowledge and allocate actions to stakeholder groups while identifying tools and methods that can enhance policymaking. Participants should be carefully curated and limited in number to ensure meaningful discussion and collaboration.

2.1.2. What is needed for successful policy labs?

Exploratory phase by understanding the most pressing problems and root causes of them.

Consensus on Change: A shared commitment to adopting a flexible or agile policy system and a common understanding of the overarching purpose is essential for a Policy Lab.

Gathering Information: The organizer should gather relevant information, including existing policy recommendations, regulatory barriers, stakeholder biases, and stakeholder insights, such as the prejudices they may be facing. This will create the understanding, transparency and openness necessary to foster trust starting at the invitation process among potential participants

What differentiates a Policy Lab from a classic stakeholder meeting?

A Policy Lab goes beyond consultation. It emphasizes consensus-building and active engagement, requiring participants to contribute during meetings and take responsibility for agreed-upon actions, ultimately fostering accountability and ownership.

One-on-One Engagement: Conducting preparatory meetings with stakeholders can help gather valuable input, and lay the groundwork for productive collaboration during the Policy Lab.

Familiarity with Input: To facilitate productive discussions, effective collaboration and high involvement, the input presented at Policy Lab meetings should be familiar to participants.

2.1.3. How to select and engage stakeholders?

One of the most compelling aspects of the Policy Lab is its capacity to bring together a diverse range of stakeholders—policymakers, industry leaders, researchers, and civil society—in a structured yet inclusive environment. This collaborative approach fosters the exchange of ideas and knowledge, allowing participants to co-create solutions that directly address regulatory barriers, outdated frameworks, and the pressing need for experimentation in deep-tech fields. By involving stakeholders from different sectors, the Policy Lab ensures that the outcomes are grounded in practical insights, which makes the proposed actions both realistic and impactful.

Ecosystem mapping

Activities to engage stakeholders:

- preliminary interviews
- action planning
- offering cooperation possibility in the action plan

Participants in a Policy Lab should be a carefully curated group, personally invited based on their roles (ideally quadruple helix actors), expertise, and positions within the quadruple helix. However, limit the number of participants to ensure enough time for everyone to discuss and collaborate.

Key stakeholders should include decision-makers and actors from various sectors:

1. Public policymakers at local, regional, or national levels
2. Scientific experts with practical insights and experience in conducting pilots
3. Market stakeholders responsible for implementation
4. Civil society, NGO's facilitating change and end users

2.1.4. To do list for Policy Lab

Follow these steps to create an effective Policy Lab:

1. **Identify and define the topic**: Determine the policy area that requires improvement and innovation (e.g., digitalization in the energy sector)

2. **Define a concept purpose**: Establish a clear goal and purpose for the Policy Lab (e.g., emphasizing the importance of digitalization and fostering innovation from new players)

3. **Invite key stakeholders**: Engage relevant actors through interviews, research, and meetings to gather input on the purpose (e.g., ministries, funding authorities, innovative businesses, academia)

4. **Draft an action plan**: Summarize key findings and create an initial action plan based on stakeholder input.

5. **Facilitate a Policy Lab session** to discuss, refine, and agree on the joint purpose, barriers, and actions. The outcome should be an action plan with deadlines, budget considerations, and potential funding sources.

6. **Expand stakeholder involvement**: Invite additional stakeholders to review, contribute to, and support the action plan.

7. **Publish and implement the action plan**: Make the plan public and begin working on the agreed-upon actions while ensuring accountability among stakeholders.

3. Best practices from WEnnovate

3.1. Application of the Policy Lab in WEnnovate

WEnnovate established a Policy Lab to integrate deep-tech innovation in the energy transition into the policy cycle, encompassing agenda setting, policy development, implementation, and monitoring/evaluation. The Policy Lab in this project was just one moment/meeting in a broader approach that led up to the Policy Lab meeting. If the Policy Lab was used in future projects we would recommend using a large part of the project, for example, the interviews, the stakeholder meetings and papers on recommendations and actions as part of a broader methodology of the Policy Lab. We would recommend having several meetings with the policymakers in a line up to a joint action plan, as it takes a while to get familiar with this kind of new process, to build trust and to envision joined goals. One meeting is not enough to result in the needed impact. We, however, feel confident that our Policy Lab influenced their visions on digitalization in the energy system and understanding of the needed actions. We will publish a white paper on the approach with Policy Labs as a result of this project. In the future after more experience and development, Policy Labs could improve subsidy call texts, introduce new tools, enhance goals' communication, tackle organizational and legislative concerns, define acceptable risk levels, and foster trust and leadership. While the core principles of collaboration, co-creation, and open exchange are consistent across sectors, each Policy Lab will have unique characteristics due to its experimental nature and diverse participants.

The Policy Lab functioned in two main capacities:

- Raising Awareness: It effectively raised awareness among policymakers and businesses regarding the latest deep-tech advancements in the energy transition and highlighted the necessary support to bridge existing gaps.

- Highlighting Policy and Business Impact: The lab emphasized the effects of sectoral policies and business decisions on the energy sector. By recognizing these impacts, stakeholders were able to incorporate them into decision-making and policy creation at local, European Union (EU), and international levels.

Following the first and second stakeholder meeting in June 2024, which brought together national stakeholders to discuss energy digitalization support in Europe and target countries (including The Netherlands, Ukraine, Slovakia, and Hungary), WEnnovate identified critical needs for policy change and support to facilitate tangible actions. The Policy Lab proved to be an instrumental tool for fostering dialogue, aligning interests, and driving evidence-based policy change within the context of energy transition.

3.1.1. Policy Lab sessions

To enhance the effectiveness and impact of the Policy Lab sessions, the agenda was carefully defined using strategic planning and targeted input. A pivotal part of this planning process involved leveraging the List of Recommendations for the Action Plan, a document that comprehensively addresses the key challenges and opportunities within deep-tech and digital innovation ecosystems aimed at accelerating the energy transition.

Selection of Recommendations

To ensure that discussions during the Policy Lab sessions were focused and actionable, 10 specific recommendations were selected from the List of Recommendations. These recommendations were chosen to serve as focal points, guiding stakeholders toward productive and solution-oriented dialogue. The recommendations provided a structured approach that supported in-depth exploration of pressing issues and enabled a clear, goal-oriented path for collaborative problem-solving.

Agenda Prioritization

The chosen recommendations were strategically prioritized based on their potential to address the following aspects:

- Critical Barriers to Innovation: Emphasis was placed on recommendations that tackled the most pressing challenges facing deep-tech advancements and the integration of digital tools within the energy sector.
- Opportunities for Immediate Impact: Recommendations that offered opportunities for immediate implementation and potential for significant short-term results were given priority.
- Scalability and Long-term Value: The agenda also reflected a focus on recommendations that could be scaled up for broader adoption and provided long-term benefits to the energy ecosystem.
- Stakeholder Engagement

The structured agenda facilitated meaningful engagement by providing stakeholders with a clear framework and shared objectives for the Policy Lab. This enabled participants—including policymakers, industry leaders, researchers, and civil society representatives—to engage in an informed discussion and collaborative problem-solving. The selected recommendations acted as anchors for the conversation, ensuring that the dialogue was aligned with the overall goals of enhancing digital innovation and fostering an inclusive, adaptive ecosystem for deep-tech solutions.

Outcome Expectations

By grounding the session in these 5-10 recommendations, the Policy Lab aimed to:

- Foster a shared understanding of current challenges and opportunities in energy digitalization and deep-tech adoption.
- Identify practical steps for incorporating policy changes and collaborative strategies that support the development and scaling of digital innovations.
- Lay the groundwork for concrete, actionable outputs that inform subsequent policy development and strategic initiatives.

This approach ensured that the Policy Lab sessions were not only discussions of theoretical importance but practical workshops that generated tangible insights and pathways for policy and ecosystem development.

Final output

The primary outcome of this Policy Lab session will be an action plan designed to assist policymakers and stakeholders in implementing the necessary policy changes to support the smooth digitalization of the energy sector.

3.2. Experiences and tipps

Invitations

An effective communication strategy is essential for engaging politicians and policymakers from local governments. Clearly articulate the topic's importance to ensure stakeholders understand the relevance of their input and feel motivated to participate actively. When inviting politicians and policymakers, use clear, impactful language to convey the importance of their participation. Briefly outline how their insights could directly shape effective, actionable policies. Consider sending pre-read materials or an agenda outline to help them prepare and understand the session's goals.

Duration

Flexible timing encourages a natural flow of conversation, allowing participants to engage more openly than in traditional stakeholder meetings. Avoid rigid time slots to foster a more relaxed, productive dialogue. If discussions become particularly engaging, use these buffer times to extend the conversation. This flexibility can also reduce participants' pressure to rush through their contributions.

Agenda

A well-structured agenda with a clear storyline enhances the session's focus. Group recommendations and actions into strategic, tactical, and operational categories for easy reference. Additionally, allocate time for participants to exchange experiences, which fosters learning and may inspire future collaborations.

Facilitation

Periodically refocus the discussion on the main objective: action development. Encourage participants to think practically by asking, "What actions are we currently taking? What are we missing? Who should be involved?"

- Set a Collaborative Tone: At the start, emphasize the co-creation nature of the session, encouraging everyone to participate and share openly.
- End Goal Reminders: Continuously remind participants of the session's purpose by tying their contributions back to the desired outcomes. This maintains focus and promotes actionable dialogue.
- Experience Exchange: Allocate time for experience-sharing. Hearing from others can spark new ideas, lead to practical insights, and open doors to future collaborations.

Methods and Tools

Tools like Mentimeter are valuable for collecting real-time feedback. A recommended session flow includes first asking, "Do you agree with this recommendation?" followed by "Are there any actions already underway, or should new actions be implemented?" This sequence encourages feedback on the recommendation and naturally transitions into discussions on current priorities, concerns, and ongoing actions.

Follow up

After the session, share a concise summary of decisions, actions, and next steps, helping participants stay engaged and follow up effectively.