Fostering constructive interactions with the public during geothermal projects

POLICY BRIEF

The GEOENVI project has identified that geothermal energy has similar **social acceptability issues as other renewable energy technologies.** Geothermal energy plays a vital role in meeting the EU and international climate targets. It also provides many important socio-economic benefits to communities and industry.

Three **tools helpful in fostering constructive interactions with the public** have been examined: information sharing, creating local benefits, and public participation. This policy brief offers several recommendations to policy makers and project developers on how to integrate social acceptability into projects from the outset.

The main conclusion recognises the **need for a strengthened policy framework that would target improving the social acceptability of innovative (geothermal) projects** and a change of paradigm for the developers, putting the public in a central position.

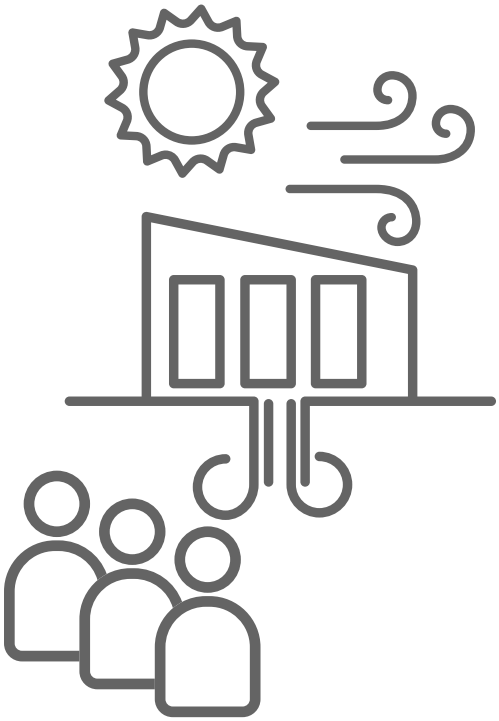
CURRENT CHALLENGES– TERRITORIAL INTEGRATION

The territory of a project should be known in depth, understood and respected, including the public and its value, the energy issues and the entire socio-economic and political context as well. This knowledge can only be acquired with the tools provided by social sciences. It will be the **key to build a project adapted to the territory,** to communicate with and engage the public in a suitable way.

The following tools help improving social acceptability:

INFORMATION SHARING | Quality communication which includes **access to relevant information and environmental data sharing** is essential for building trust between the project developers and the public. It should allow for comparisons with the other energy alternatives, include the socio-economical dimension, the pros and cons of deep geothermal development and transparency.

Social acceptability issues are similar for all renewables

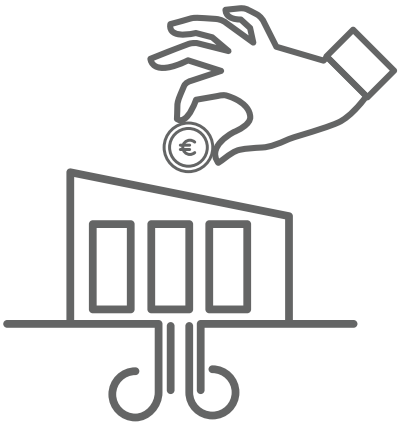


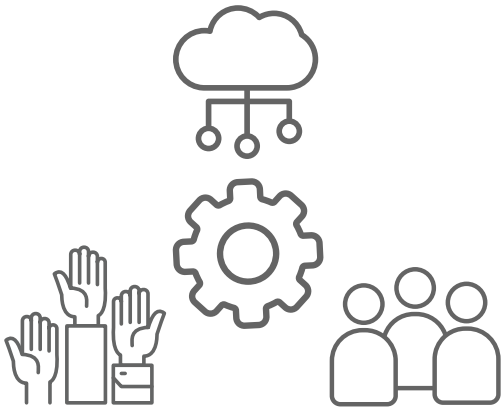
Moreover, the suite of existing information sharing practices could **be better tailored to different audiences,** including experts and the general public. This is a way to fence off possible **misinformation** from other sources and to present an opportunity to communicate **success stories.**

LOCAL BENEFITS | Geothermal development implies a series of positive impacts since energy production from a local and renewable source contributes to climate neutrality and sustainable growth. The benefits can take a **form of economic advantages** such as territorial royalties, job creation, regional financing and lowering the community's energy bill, or attracting tourism. The **pros and cons must be transparent,** and the use of cascade heat must be encouraged.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION | The public has the possibility to participate in the development of geothermal projects. However, the **quality of the dialogue should be improved.** The local community must receive appropriate information (in its timing and content), and a **chance to express its opinion,** knowing how it will be taken into account. Participation also **increases transparency** of the decision-making process and leads to more efficient and integrated projects.

Three tools foster constructive interactions with the public: information sharing, creating local benefits, and public participation





RECOMMENDATIONS

INFORMATION SHARING

Defining a European standard on information sharing and promoting transparency (pros and cons), allowing comparisons.

Selecting relevant information, while respecting balance between confidential and publicly available data, including socio-economical information.

Adapting the communication to the target audience, using clear methodology and mediators, knowing the public and social constructions.

Improving data sharing and accessibility of information based on open data policy with an appeal system in place for specific data requests.

LOCAL BENEFITS

Establishing a fund derived from taxes to support local community, operating transparently.

Supporting local utilisation of geothermal heat.

Establishing a plan for valorising local benefits covering communication tools, training and educational activities, and data collection on job creation, environmental and economic benefits both for local and national level.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Fostering public engagement policies based on territorial integration.

Deepening of the participatory process and stimulating a quality dialogue between the project developers and relevant stakeholders.

Making communication an ongoing process since the very initial project phase.

Promoting tools and approaches fostering public engagement and co-ownership like crowdfunding.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The regulatory framework should be strengthened in both directions: by **increasing the direct and indirect engagement of the public** in innovative projects and offering benefits to the community. At the same time, by providing a **useful guideline for the project developers or operators on improving their relationship with the public** and building a cooperative environment where everybody involved thrives.

Detailed overview of the recommendations and countries comparison can be accessed here.

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This policy brief is part of a series conducted in the framework of the GEOENVI project. Its aim is to respond to the need for harmonisation of environmental regulations and to address concerns about potential environmental effects of geothermal projects in Europe. GEOENVI strives to facilitate the incorporation of geothermal strategy in Europe's energy transition, while respecting sustainability and creating a robust strategy to answer environmental concerns. The project developed a unique Life Cycle Assessment methodology for evaluating geothermal projects.

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