

# POLICY BRIEF #71

14<sup>th</sup> December 2023

## Communicating for change: Citizens' perceptions of the Flemish government's social media communication on energy conservation

*Ibe Delvaux & Wendy Van den Broeck*



During the recent energy crisis, heightened energy prices drew increased attention to energy-saving practices in households, which can have an important impact on climate change mitigation. Effective communication from the government plays a pivotal role in achieving this transformation. Citizens not only depend on the government for conveying policies but also seek guidance on specific actions they can take. When fit to citizens' needs, governmental social media channels could be one of the most important ways for citizens to find this guidance<sup>1</sup>. To delve deeper into this dynamic, we conducted 30 in-depth interviews with individuals across three distinct age groups (young people: 12-18, working adults: 35-60, and seniors: 65+). Our focus was on understanding how and where citizens seek information about energy conservation behaviour and exploring their perceptions and expectations regarding the government's communication initiatives on social media. Based on our findings, we provide concrete recommendations for governments to reach citizens more efficiently, capture their attention and encourage active engagement.

### Highlights of this research

- Flemish citizens **lack knowledge of the different energy-related governmental agencies** and where to find official information. Communication campaigns are needed to guide people to the right channels.
- Different age groups have different motives for energy conservation. These motives should be integrated into the government's communication and tips on energy conservation actions. The current content **primarily caters to adults, neglecting the needs of young people.**
- There is a need for more engaging and accessible communication methods by the government, moving away from extensive text blocks to incorporate **visually oriented content that is easy to comprehend.**

<sup>1</sup> Müller, M. (2022). Spreading the word? European Union agencies and social media attention. *Government Information Quarterly*, 39(2), 101682. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.giq.2022.101682>

## 1. It is easier to keep existing habits than to create new ones

As this research took place amid the energy crisis (February-March 2023), many citizens had been changing their habits towards more sustainable habits, as a result of the high energy prices. Most new energy-related habits consisted of turning the heating down, shortening their shower time, limiting appliance usage, and for some, the installation of new products like solar panels. Of course, these energy conservation actions are not feasible for everybody. Still, **almost all respondents indicated their intention to keep these energy conservation practices in the future.** This was because, as Ella (aged 17) said of changing her behaviour after the energy crisis: *'It's actually not that hard to do. And I'm so used to it now too, so it would be a bit weird to go back to before that'*. Keeping these more sustainable practices would be an important step towards climate change mitigation. Therefore, this is the ideal moment for the government to keep people informed and motivated to keep these habits. For that reason, this policy brief provides an overview of the various channels individuals consult to acquire information on energy conservation practices., and their expectations concerning the government's communication. This will offer the government, but also NGOs, essential insights in making their communication more engaging and fit to the citizens' needs.

## 2. Flemish citizens' information sources on energy conservation

The study highlighted that respondents come across information on energy conservation via various sources, that are not always trustworthy. Important to note is that very few respondents mentioned direct government communications as one of these channels. Many were unaware of energy-related information disseminated through the Flemish government's social media channels, such as the accounts of the Flemish Energy and Climate Agency (VEKA) or of the Flemish Regulator of the Electricity and Gas Market (VREG), which are the main government channels to communicate about these topics. This suggests a limited knowledge of and reach of citizens online. To effectively convey energy-related messages, the Flemish government needs to promote its communication channels to a wider audience and tailor its communication approach to different target groups.

**Young people**, in particular, revealed that they primarily receive information on energy conservation from teachers at school and their parents, with news media also playing a role. However, they consider their school as the primary source of information, as most of them indicated infrequent news consumption. Regarding the government's social media communication, young people expressed a lack of interaction, attributing it to their age.

Louise, aged 15: *'Ouch? Yes, given that I am not yet eighteen I think that is hard to say because I am still young. I think everything mainly goes via my parents and via school and me and the government that's pretty... little. Yes of course they will have an impact, but I think I'm still too young to have that direct interaction.'*

Young people recommend an increased investment in diverse social media channels to effectively engage with them. Currently, the government concentrates its efforts on platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn. However, these are not as popular among young people. As one respondent, Celeste (aged 17), pointed out, *'Almost no one of our age is on Facebook anymore.'* Ella (aged 17) mentioned: *'Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook [...] are all channels that I don't really use, are they also on Instagram?'* The feedback from respondents underscores that channels like Instagram and TikTok hold more appeal for reaching a younger audience.

The main information sources for the **adults** interviewed were traditional news media, social media, and most importantly, their energy providers. This target group is also more up to date with governmental communication, especially communication on energy conservation incentives. However, the fact that there are multiple agencies with different social media channels, leads to a complex web of information sources: *'Honestly, [...] I don't know the exact*

names. Yes, those grants will come from the Flemish government. But what the name of that agency exactly is? That I don't know' (Gerard, aged 58). This makes it clear that also working adults are not familiar with the different social media pages of energy agencies of the government.

**Seniors** are less familiar with digitalisation and prefer traditional media channels such as television and radio. The respondents use the internet only moderately, they use e-mails, Facebook, and Google, but they are not familiar with the digital channels of the Flemish government. Nevertheless, most of the respondents are aware of the information from the Flemish government on energy efficiency via traditional media channels.

The Flemish government must select appropriate communication channels for each target group, according to their specific needs and media preferences. Also, youngsters shouldn't be overlooked, as it is never too early to raise awareness about sustainable behaviour. By investing in the right channels, the Flemish government can develop a more effective and comprehensive communication strategy. The interviews confirmed that the respondents trust the government to give them correct information. Therefore, their communication can have a significant impact.

### 3. Importance of segmentation in governmental communication

Individuals have diverse motivations for conserving energy, as revealed in the interviews. **Working adults and seniors**, for instance, were notably influenced by high energy prices resulting from the energy crisis, prompting behavioural changes related to energy consumption. To effectively engage this demographic in energy-saving practices, the government should emphasize the impact of such efforts on reducing energy bills. Additionally, a more robust communication strategy is needed to inform them about existing support measures.

Conversely, **young people**, who are not yet financially responsible for energy bills, express a deep concern about climate issues. To resonate with this demographic, the government should shift its focus toward highlighting the positive environmental impact of energy saving. The interviews underscored that few respondents recognized the connection between energy conservation and climate change mitigation. In addition, young people are not yet fully aware of how their individual actions can contribute to climate mitigation. To this end, they also expressed their hope that education play a bigger role in informing them of specific behaviours they could adopt.

Furthermore, the current examples and tips provided in social media posts predominantly cater to older citizens, focusing on topics like heat pumps or solar panel installations. This approach may not resonate with younger generations, who feel less targeted by such examples. In summary, the government should adopt a more climate-focused narrative when communicating energy-saving messages to younger generations, while emphasizing cost savings for older demographics.

### 4. Attractive features in social media communication

Upon reviewing the content of social media posts, respondents generally felt that the communication relied excessively on text with insufficient visual support. Respondents expressed a positive inclination towards social media posts featuring clear tables or graphs. However, it was emphasized that visuals must be easily comprehensible. A notable example is the post from the VEKA related to Earth Overshoot Day (Figure 1), where the complexity of the graph hindered the overall readability of the content. Surprisingly, despite this visual challenge, the post garnered significant attention. Its impact was not solely due to visual clarity but resonated deeply, leaving an impression on individuals who were both shocked by the information presented and empowered by the post's message: 'Yes yes yes. The message is very clear, also with the graph. It's not nice to see of course, but it is good to see it' (Ella, aged 17). Importantly, it directed them to a website offering additional information on how they could contribute to energy conservation.

Vlaams Energie- en Klimaatschap  
29 juli 2021

Vandaag is het 'Earth Overshoot Day'. Dé dag van het jaar waarop de grondstoffen van de aarde voor dit jaar uitgeput zijn. Met andere woorden: op bijna 8 maanden tijd hebben we verbruikt wat de aarde op één jaar kan produceren of aanvullen. Hernieuwbare energie speelt een belangrijke rol om onze ecologische voetafdruk te verkleinen én om deze datum op te schuiven. Benieuwd wat je zelf kan doen? Alles over groene energie vind je op onze website [www.energiesparen.be/groene-energie-en-wkk](http://www.energiesparen.be/groene-energie-en-wkk)

#samenvoorklimaatneutraal #VEKA #MoveTheDate  
Global Footprint Network

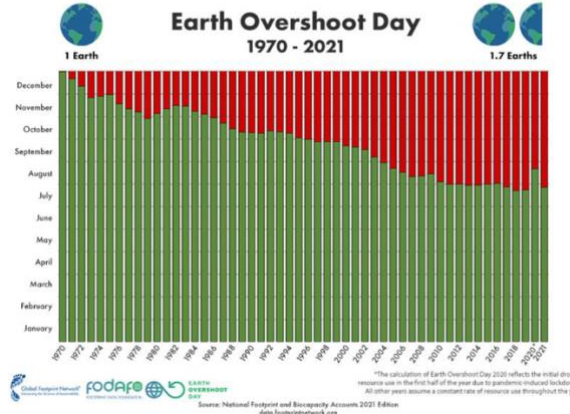


Figure 1: Post on Earth Overshoot Day (Facebook VEKA 29/07/2021)

Concrete actions like '#iktrekhetmijaan' and 'Earthhourday' (Figure 2) were well received by the respondents. The former asks all participants to put the heating down for that day and wear a warmer sweater instead, whereas the latter asks to turn down all electric appliances and lights for one hour on that particular day. Respondents even proposed that these actions be organised more often, and showed interest in seeing the concrete results of these actions on climate change mitigation.

Vlaams Energie- en Klimaatschap  
26 maart 2022

Earth Hour Day of 'Uur Der Aarde' vraagt elk jaar aandacht voor de wereldwijde effecten van de klimaatverandering. Ook dit jaar doen wij mee. Doof samen met ons tussen 20u30 en 21u30 één uur alle verlichting en andere elektrische apparaten in je huis.

#samenvoorklimaatneutraal #VEKA



Figure 2: Post on Earth Hour (Facebook VEKA 26/03/2022)

## 5. Recommendations

This policy brief concludes with three crucial recommendations derived from our research. By implementing these suggestions, we strongly believe that the Flemish government's communication on energy conservation will more efficiently reach citizens, better aligning with their needs. In doing so, they will keep the public well-informed about their role in contributing to energy conservation and climate change mitigation.

### 1 – Do not lose momentum on energy conservation practices

It is important to not lose momentum. People have changed their behaviour significantly due to the increased energy bills. It is important to keep motivating them, even if the prices are stabilising. The benefits of reduced energy consumption for the climate should be clearly explained.

### 2 – Transparent governance: Enhancing information access and social media outreach

The government should enhance the provision of information regarding the specific agencies responsible for overseeing various topics. This will enable citizens to easily identify the relevant channels for communication from governmental bodies. Additionally, to engage a more diverse demographic, the government should expand its presence (for example through ambassadors) across a wider array of social media channels, ensuring outreach to younger audiences as well.

### 3 – Engaging all ages: Targeted advice and simpler messaging for energy initiatives

The government has the opportunity to tailor advice to various age groups. Recognizing the diverse motivators for energy conservation behaviour is crucial for effective communication initiatives. Finally, for improved accessibility, the social media communication of energy agencies should employ simpler language accompanied by easily digestible but impactful visuals. The use of concrete actions could also increase citizen engagement.

*Ibe Delvaux ([ibe.delvaux@vub.be](mailto:ibe.delvaux@vub.be)) is a PhD researcher focusing on how (governments and NGO's) communication can motivate more ecological behaviours.*

*Prof. Dr. Wendy Van den Broeck ([Wendy.Van.den.Broeck@vub.be](mailto:Wendy.Van.den.Broeck@vub.be)) is head of the Media, Marketing, User Experience (MUX) Unit within SMIT and teaches various methodology and marketing courses at VUB.*

*A special thanks to the team of bachelorpaper students that contributed to this research: Charlotte Annaert, Gitte Groven, Rias Smismans, and Anke D'Haen.*



*This research was conducted within the MUX Unit of imec-SMIT, VUB. The Unit is comprised of 21 pre-doc and 6 post-doc researchers and specializes in media, marketing, and user experiences.*