

Evaluation of Agora Energiewende

Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

Mercator Foundation and the European Climate Foundation commissioned NewClimate Institute to comprehensively evaluate Agora Energiewende, an initiative to support the German (and European) energy transition. The purpose of the external evaluation is to assess the past performance of Agora Energiewende and how Agora Energiewende may need to be further developed for a next funding period in order to successfully fulfil its objectives.

The evaluation covers two main questions:

- Is there still a need for an organisation like Agora Energiewende and what is the main future role of such an institution to support a successful energy transition?
- How would Agora Energiewende have to be adapted to adequately and successfully play that role?

In order to provide validated answers to these questions, three different sources of data were used, complemented with comprehensive desk research:

- Data derived from detailed 30- to 60-minute interviews with 36 main stakeholders, selected in consultation with Mercator and the European Climate Foundation
- Data from a comprehensive online survey sent to the 4000 newsletter subscribers, with a high turnout (500 respondents, 13% response rate)
- Statistics provided by Agora Energiewende itself (e.g. number of reports, downloads, events, participants lists)

The main messages under the different topic areas are summarised in the following.

Status of the energy transition and needs for its implementation

- **The energy transition has evolved but is far from being complete.** Agora Energiewende started from the premise that the central question is no longer *whether* there is the need for an energy transition but rather *how* it must be implemented. Today, the nature of the challenges has changed, moving further towards implementation detail with new priorities. While the main challenge – to develop a comprehensive vision and strategy – remains, the challenges regarding implementation detail have moved to coal phase-out, efficiency, security of supply, design of electricity markets and system dynamics/ flexibility.
- **An Agora-style organisation is still very much needed** to support the energy transition as a translator and mediator of complex information and as an objective provider of implementation options and their implications; contributing, as such, to a long-term, systemic perspective of the energy transition.

General performance of Agora Energiewende

- **Agora Energiewende has contributed substantially to the progress of the German energy transition** and is still very much needed to address future challenges.
- **Agora Energiewende is seen as a high quality, well respected think tank** whose main role consists in indicating options for action and potential consequences to political decision makers rather than in pushing specific political models and strategies. This view is supported by those that benefit from the energy transition ("friends") as well as those that see a major challenge in the transition ("critics").
- **Agora Energiewende has become important and influential and established a well-recognised and highly respected brand name** after only three years of operation ("breath-taking development").
- Main success factors of Agora Energiewende include **outstanding technical expertise leading to high quality outputs, thematic focus, sufficient base funding** and an **extensive network**.
- **The recommendations of Agora Energiewende seem balanced in most cases, as the extremes on the business-side and on the NGO-side both are unhappy at times.** Agora Energiewende has a clear starting point: The energy transition, defined as climate targets, high shares of renewables and nuclear phase-out as agreed by the German Bundestag in 2011, needs to be implemented.

By those that support this assumption, Agora Energiewende is perceived as objective to the extent possible. Some (in particular NGOs that took part in the expert interviews and online survey) say that Agora Energiewende could be even more radical on certain positions. Others (some businesses, associations, politicians asked in the expert interviews and online survey) criticise that Agora's positioning is ideologically driven and considerably narrows down the solution space. Also those that do not agree with the recommendations, though, highly value the quality of the work as such.

- **In most cases Agora Energiewende influences by indicating options for action and potential consequences** to political decision makers (indirect political influence welcomed by many). Situations in which Agora Energiewende pushed certain political positions, directly influencing policy ("advocacy"), were criticised by a few.

Structure (in particular the council)

- **The dual structure of Agora Energiewende, comprising a council and a research team, has proven useful for impact and credibility.** The public perception of Agora Energiewende is driven by the high quality and highly visible work of the research team. The pure existence of the council with its high-level members gives Agora Energiewende significant external legitimacy and credibility. However, the concrete role of the council is not clear enough to outsiders.
- **Main success factors of the council include high level membership, open and constructive discussions, high level of expertise of the members, and the capability of the council members to act as multipliers, increasing reputation and impact of the work of the research team.**

Research

- **Success factors of the research include:**
 - **Overview publications to establish the brand name** in the style of "12 Insights on Germany's Energiewende" as an important flagship; a new publication in a similar style would be very welcome.
 - **Exceptional quality of the research work in general**, confirmed by the online survey and in-depth interviews.
 - **Agora Energiewende is a frontrunner in its topic area**, selecting the right topics at the right time and moving them ahead.
 - **Simple presentation of complex content.**
- **Downloads of reports are generally high.** Downloads are in the order of 2000 to 3000 for most reports and up to 7000 for the "12 Insights on Germany's Energiewende", which is exceptionally high.
- **The evolution of Agora's research content - moving from the general to the more specific - responds to the stakeholders' interests:** While general topic overviews received highest attention and most downloads in the first year, in-depth technical studies were the most downloaded documents in the second year, and policy reform proposals took the lead in the third year.
- **Particularly successful outputs** were the "12 Insights on Germany's Energiewende" and Agora's work on capacity markets and costs of PV.

Public dialogue

- **Events are well frequented and of high quality.** The 18 events with 2287 participants to date have been followed by a wide audience and rated very highly. The number of events organised by Agora Energiewende quadrupled from the first to the third project year and the total number of participants almost tripled in this period. Some perceive the events to be too Berlin focused.
- **Media presence is remarkable.** It provides visibility of key results not only in Germany but also in Europe and – increasingly – beyond. The number of press clippings rose sharply from 140 in the first project year to over 5000 in the third project year. Of particular value is the ability of Agora Energiewende employees to translate the complex matters of the energy transition into simple terms, either in the written outputs or in direct conversations.
- **Online tools are a unique selling point.** Of those who use the online tools, a majority considers them to be of very good quality.
- **Presence in social media could be enhanced.**

Conclusions

The general concept underlying Agora Energiewende has proven useful and valuable. Fundamental conceptual changes are not necessary to ensure the success of a second funding period.

The results of this evaluation confirm broad achievement of Agora Energiewende on the key performance indicators as established in the founding document:

- An environment of trust among the participants of the council of the Agora Energiewende has been established and allows for an open and trust-based cooperation.
- In many cases, important decision makers have been provided with sufficient and up-to-date knowledge on technological, economic, political and social facts on the energy transition.
- Many important open issues on the energy transition are supported so that political decisions can be made on the basis of sufficient information on the intended and unintended impacts.
- Agora Energiewende has been established as a process where important actors in the energy policy field have an informed discussion on issues of the implementation of the energy transition.

Still, some fine tuning might be helpful to further increase the success of Agora Energiewende in terms of finding commonly accepted and broadly supported solutions to the central challenges of the energy transition:

Future topics

- **Stay focussed.** While a wealth of new topics was proposed (in the online survey and expert interviews) it seems to be essential that broadening of topics should not be at the expense of depth. Detailed knowledge is the unique selling point of Agora Energiewende. Broadening (without additional resources) risks losing that unique selling point.
- **More long-term in addition to short-term.** In general, Agora Energiewende should address more fundamental/ systemic/ long-term questions (a second “12 insights”) in addition to details on specific, current topics, which is seen prominently by most users. Probably a balanced mix is the solution.
- **Gradual expansion of scope:** potential topics for gradual expansion include flexible electricity systems with an emphasis on information technology, and where the topic of electricity links to heat or transport.

European and international dimension

- **Expansion to the European level (Brussels and member states) has highest priority.** Agora’s recently launched expansion to the European level should be continued. Main topics include the interplay between national policies and EU-level directives, such as a shared electricity market with European neighbours. Such an expansion has to take into account specific national contexts and political circumstances and should not simply reproduce the German model. The topic of flexibility of power supply could be used as a conversation starter (as opposed to different types of electricity generation). Opinions are mixed on the precise design of a European expansion strategy.
- **Supporting mutual global learning is a second priority.** There is high demand for exchange of lessons learned between different parts of the world that are undergoing similar experiences, in particular the USA and China.



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