

An Exploration of Policy-related Documents on District Heating and Cooling in Flanders: a Slow and Bottom-up Process

Authors : Isaura Bonneux

Abstract : District heating and cooling (DHC) is increasingly recognized as a viable path towards sustainable heating and cooling. While some countries like Sweden and Denmark have a longstanding tradition of DHC, Belgium is lacking behind. The Northern part of Belgium, Flanders, had only a total of 95 heating networks in July 2023. Nevertheless, it is increasingly exploring its possibilities to enhance the scope of DHC. DHC is a complex energy system, requiring a lot of collaboration between various stakeholders on various levels. Therefore, it is of interest to look closer at policy-related documents at the Flemish (regional) level, as these policies set the scene for DHC development in the Flemish region. This kind of analysis has not been undertaken so far. This paper has the following research question: "Who talks about DHC, and in which way and context is DHC discussed in Flemish policy-related documents?" To answer this question, the Overton policy database was used to search and retrieve relevant policy-related documents. Overton retrieves data from governments, think tanks, NGOs, and IGOs. In total, out of the 244 original results, 117 documents between 2009 and 2023 were analyzed. Every selected document included theme keywords, policymaking department(s), date, and document type. These elements were used for quantitative data description and visualization. Further, qualitative content analysis revealed patterns and main themes regarding DHC in Flanders. Four main conclusions can be drawn: First, it is obvious from the timeframe that DHC is a new topic in Flanders with still limited attention; 2014, 2016 and 2017 were the years with the most documents, yet this number is still only 12 documents. In addition, many documents talked about DHC but not much in depth and painted it as a future scenario with a lot of uncertainty around it. The largest part of the issuing government departments had a link to either energy or climate (e.g. Flemish Environmental Agency) or policy (e.g. Socio-Economic Council of Flanders) Second, DHC is mentioned most within an 'Environment and Sustainability' context, followed by 'General Policy and Regulation'. This is intuitive, as DHC is perceived as a sustainable heating and cooling technique and this analysis comprises policy-related documents. Third, Flanders seems mostly interested in using waste or residual heat as a heating source for DHC. The harbors and waste incineration plants are identified as potential and promising supply sources. This approach tries to conciliate environmental and economic incentives. Last, local councils get assigned a central role and the initiative is mostly taken by them. The policy documents and policy advices demonstrate that Flanders opts for a bottom-up organization. As DHC is very dependent on local conditions, this seems a logic step. Nevertheless, this can impede smaller councils to create DHC networks and slow down systematic and fast implementation of DHC throughout Flanders.

Keywords : district heating and cooling, flanders, overton database, policy analysis

Conference Title : ICEEEP 2025 : International Conference on Energy Economics and Energy Policy

Conference Location : Dublin, Ireland

Conference Dates : August 23-24, 2025