



***SMEPlus: Improving policy instruments to increase the
energy efficiency in industrial SMEs***

***Action plan for the Province of Groningen,
The Netherlands***



General information

Project:

SMEPlus – *Improving policy instruments to increase the energy efficiency in industrial SMEs*

Partner organisation:

Province of Groningen

Country:

The Netherlands

NUTS2 region:

Groningen

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1. Introduction

1.1 The European context for our climate goals

In 2015, the Paris Agreement was signed. In 2019 The Netherlands presented their own Climate agreement - Het Klimaatakkoord. The goals in this national Climate agreement were based on the Paris Climate agreement.

In December 2019, the European Commission presented the EU Green Deal, the European translation of the Paris Agreement, which should lead to Europe being the first climate neutral continent in 2050.

Moreover, in order to reach this, the EU decided that it should raise the ambition for CO2 reduction in 2030 from 40% to 55%. To be able to achieve this, the EU presented the Fit for 55 package in July 2021. This is a very broad package of policy and legislation, mainly in the field of energy transition and transport, which should result in 55% CO2 reduction in 2030. This has major effects on the Dutch national goals and strategy even though they were already ambitious.

In August 2021 the last IPCC report showed us that climate change is big, bigger than in de thousands of years before. Which proves that human interference is the cause of climate change.

It also clear that climate change leads to more extreme weather; more heat, more heavy rain and storms, etc. The impact on a country that is partly below sea level and the delta of some great rivers coming from our neighboring countries is enormous. Last summer, we and our neighboring countries Belgium and Germany have suffered from extreme rain fall, which led to floods causing a lot of damage.

It is becoming clearer and clearer that doing nothing is no longer an option. This realization has woken up our government. In the next years steps will be taken to pressure the largest CO2 emitters into taking energy-efficiency and CO2 reduction steps. Large steps.

1.2 Dutch goals within the EU

The Netherlands have defined the following climate goals, many of them based on EU goals, but some go further.

2020: 20% reduction of greenhouse gas emissions

There are 3 key objectives for 2020, also known as the “20-20-20” targets:

- A 20 % reduction in EU greenhouse gas emissions from 1990 levels;
- Raising the share of EU energy consumption produced from renewable resources to 20%;
- A 20 % percent improvement in the EU's energy efficiency.

For the Netherlands this means the following:

- A non- Emissions Trading System share of 16 % (binding);
- 14 % renewable energy (binding);
- 1,5 % savings per year.
- 2030: 40% reduction of greenhouse gas emissions

The Netherlands were very much in favor of raising the EU ambition for 2030 from 40% to 55% emission reduction compared to 1990 and to translate this to a robust and effective legislative framework.

The Dutch government considers that it is essential to fully integrate a growing supply of renewable energy into the EU energy system and advocates the development of an internal EU energy market.

It is within this national context that the province of Groningen defined their own Climate goals. The national goals are always the bare minimum and only a global basis for our own goals and plans towards a CO2 neutral future.

1.3 Joining SMEPlus

In the beginning of 2017, we were approached by the University of Gävle, asking if we wanted to join a European project about Energy Efficiency in SME's. As we were just starting our own project aimed at SME's, we were keen on joining and learning about the projects and experience of other EU countries. We based our project on the Dutch Environmental law, which obligates SMEs to take certain energy-efficiency measures. We were curious how other countries worked on this subject. Do any of them have a law similar to ours? What policy instruments do they use, and do they work?

Luckily our second proposal got approved and in November 2019 we had the project kick-off in Gävle, the city that houses the lead partner.

1.4 The impact of Covid measures on the project

Unfortunately, Covid came along quite soon, so that we were only able to do 2 physical study visits, to Sweden and Austria. After that came more than 1,5 years of online meetings. We experienced that sharing experiences and learning from (and inspiring) each other is quite difficult, if not impossible, when you're not able to meet.

Now it is the end of 2021 and luckily, we were able to do 2 more study visits. During both, we experienced that online meetings are OK to talk about general things, but really discussing things about the action plans works so much better when face to face.

2. Regional context

2.1 General information

The province of Groningen is one of the 12 Dutch provinces and is in the north-east. The province has 10 municipalities.





Damage caused by earthquakes due to the extraction of gas.

The Dutch government has decided to stop the extraction of natural gas in Groningen as soon as possible. Generating enough sustainable energy (solar, wind) will become more important very quickly. But there is not enough space in The Netherlands to produce enough sustainable energy for the current energy usage. Therefore, the region (but also the national government) is looking for best practices to improve energy-efficiency in the (industrial) SMEs, the biggest users of natural gas.

2.3 Economy

Groningen has multiple economic issues which have an impact on the energy transition. Villages and cities are becoming emptier (some towns are becoming more and more a ghost town with boarded up shops and houses) because people move to other regions and the cities. This is caused by unemployment in the region. Students who graduate from the university usually leave Groningen to work somewhere else, in the bigger cities.

Economic development is therefore very important for this region, that is (relatively) far away from the main economic hotspots in the Netherlands. We want to learn from our project partners on how to urge/stimulate industrial SMEs to take measures and also improve their economic and innovative position in The Netherlands, Europe and the world.

The Northern Netherlands is recognized as the energy region of the Netherlands. Partly because there is more space to generate sustainable energy. But also because the universities in Groningen have more of a focus on energy innovations than other universities.

The RIS3 for the North of Holland (provinces of Groningen, Friesland and Drenthe) has 5 priorities, one of them being energy (transition).

One of the challenges that the Northern region faces is to have reliable, clean and efficient energy: improving energy efficiency will improve the competitive position of the region and indirectly the Netherlands and the European Union.

3. Policy context

3.1 General overview of the policy instrument

The policy instrument that we addressed in the project is the *law enforcement project* under the Energy Transition Program Province of Groningen 2016-2019.

This political program ended in 2019 and was succeeded by the new program called the Climate Agenda 2020-2023. This is the same type of program, but every 4 years, after the provincial elections, the new coalition parties write a coalition agreement/plan with the global goals for the next 4 years. These are not only the goals for the climate, but the general goals and policies for the province for the economy, nature, environment, spatial planning, infrastructure, climate.

Based on this agreement and what it says about the province's climate goals, a new Energy or Climate program is written and new funding is allocated.

Both programs are committed to the national climate goals (the minimum).

Below we explain more about both programs and policy instruments.

The Energy Transition Program 2016-2019

In the period 2016-2019 the program was called the Energy Transition Program. It was executed by a team of about 24 people, the Energyteam.

The goal specifically for SME's was to improve their energy efficiency and with this their competitiveness through better use of the (law) instruments that are available to us or within our influence. We worked together with our regional partners, and with the industrial SME sector. From this came our good practice the law enforcement project.

Our good practice/policy instrument

In concrete this meant that in the years 2016-2019 (later extended to 2020) we executed a project, that combined informing/stimulation with law enforcement (carrot and stick approach). This is the policy instrument that we submitted in the Smeplus project.

For this we had a budget of € 1,1 million, for the years 2016-2019. This is a relatively large budget compared to other energy projects within the Energy Transition Program, this is because it was intended to pay for the law enforcers. These have an average cost of about € 100.000 per year per law enforcer.

We worked together with the municipalities, business clubs/associations, the Environmental Service Groningen (ODG, Omgevingsdienst Groningen). We executed this project successfully from 2017 to 2020.

The law enforcement policy instrument explained

The carrot and stick approach is based on the Dutch Environmental Protection Act. This law has articles in it about energy efficiency.

The Environmental Protection Act, Activities Decree Article 2.15.

This article states that all business that use more than 50.000 kWh electricity or 25.000 m³ natural gas equivalents have to take all energy efficiency measures with a return of investment of 5 years or less.

This basically means that all medium and large enterprises have a legal obligation to save energy.

To help these SMEs (and also the law enforcement officers) the government published several lists of measures for energy saving in SMEs. They are called Erkende Maatregelenlijsten energiebesparing (EML). These lists contain measures that have a return of investment of 5 years or less.

If a SME takes all the measures (that are applicable to them) from a certain list then it is automatically compliant with the law.

There are lists made for 19 sectors: agricultural sector, auto repair shops, industrial buildings, building materials, commercial data centers, retail, printing, paper and board, health and welfare institutions, hotels and restaurants, offices, food industry, metal-electro and metal, furniture and wood, mobility sector, educational institutions, rubber and plastics industry, sports and recreation, service stations and car wash establishments, paint and printing ink. The lists are checked and if necessary updated reach year.

From July 1st 2019, the law was expanded with an extra decree: the 'Information obligation energy saving' (Informatieplicht energiebesparing). This means that from this date the SMEs that have the above stated energy saving obligations have to actively report to the national government their energy usage and if they have taken the obligated measures (from the measure lists above). This data is stored in a national database. The municipalities and environmental services can retrieve data about the SMEs within their jurisdiction from the national database and use it to prioritize the law enforcement.

The Provinces and municipalities are the Managing Authorities for this law. For SMEs the municipalities are managing and executing authority, the Province is managing and executing authority for the large, industrial SMEs. But the Province has a leading/directing role towards municipalities regarding the execution of national and regional legislation. Therefore municipalities and SME's were within our influence.

In 2016 and part of 2017 we did the preparations of the project. We used datasets from the national government to estimate the number of SME's that have legal obligations to save energy. From this we calculated how many law enforcement officers we would need to visit the SMEs with obligations. We started with one and through the years this was expanded to 3. In the end, in 2020, we had one.

Instead of paying 100% of the law enforcers salaries, we made the following offer to the municipalities: We will pay 60% of the staff for the municipalities. They had to pay for the remaining 40% themselves.

This was a good deal for the municipalities because we gave them the chance to execute law enforcement (which is their responsibility) with a big discount.

The law enforcement was executed by the ODG; this is an organization that is funded by the province and municipalities and has the task to execute all environmental law enforcement (not only on energy-efficiency). So with our subsidy the municipalities could 'buy' law enforcement hours from the ODG without having to pay the full price. Our goal was to help and stimulate municipalities to take action and take their responsibility as the authorized supervisor for the SME's and their obligations in energy-efficiency.

The Climate Agenda 2020-2023

As stated, the Energy Transition program and with this the law enforcement project (and its funding) ended in December 2019. We did get an extension with a small budget (€ 40.000) for 2020, so the ODG could tie up loose ends (do some last visits to SME's and check plans and reports).

In 2019 a new program was written, and it was named the Climate Agenda 2020-2023.

Provincial coalition agreement

The Climate Agenda (and before that, the Energy Transition Program) is based on the coalition agreement, a general program written by the provincial parties elected in 2019 stating which general goals the province will focus on in the next 4 years. It is very abstract in its goals, which are about the economy, environment, energy transition, culture, health, infrastructure and traffic/mobility.

In the coalition agreement there is a passage that states that SME's have to be helped with energy-efficiency and also help them find funding to do this. The province of Groningen doesn't have funds to give subsidies to SME's, so they have to be helped towards national subsidies, tax deductions or other (external) funds. This passage gave us a direction to move in for SME's: more carrot (helping, stimulate) than stick (law enforcement).

SMEs in the Climate Agenda

In the Climate agenda the provinces goals for energy transition and CO2 reduction are made more concrete and budgets are allocated. It has chapters about Built Environment, Electricity (production, infrastructure), Industry, Mobility, Agriculture. This is based on the chapters in the Dutch National Climate Agreement so that it is clear what the national goals and context are for each subject.

SMEs are in the Industry chapter. The program focusses on CO2 reduction. In general, in the Netherlands, the focus shifted from energy-efficiency alone more to CO2 reduction, which is a broader concept. This means that the national law is also now changing to CO2 reduction instead of energy efficiency alone, which means that more measures will become obligated for SMEs to take. For instance, sustainable energy production.

Connection to SMEPlus

In 2019, when we were writing this new program, the SMEPlus project had not yet started. Therefore, we used the lessons learned from our own law enforcement project to write the general chapter about SME's. Because the Climate Agenda is a general program with somewhat flexible budgets, there is room for changes.

Smart Businesses Groningen

A project that is named in the Climate Agenda under the chapter Industry is Smart Businesses Groningen (Groningen Werkt Slim, GWS).

In September 2019, the province joined the GWS platform. The platform was founded in 2018 by the municipality of Groningen and the Groningen business associations and is intended to help SMEs become more sustainable. The pillars are energy efficiency, sustainable energy, circularity, and green mobility. The platform initiates its own projects or joins or adopts projects of the partners of external parties.

The GWS Smart CO2 calculator

In 2020 a CO2 calculator was introduced to the GWS website. It can be filled in by a SME and it gives him a global picture of the current energy consumption (electricity and gas, but also fuels) and CO2 emissions. It also gives a global indication of the areas in which savings can be made. The results are a starting point for GWS advisor and SME; it shows where the SME stands and what possible CO2 reduction measures could be. The advisor helps the SME make choices and prioritize between measures. SME's can find the calculator themselves and, after filling it out, are contacted by the GWS advisor. Or, when they are already in contact with the advisor, he/she will ask the SME to fill it out. This way it can always be the starting point.

By joining GWS the province can execute her own goal (from the coalition program) towards helping SMEs in energy efficiency. Even though there is less budget available, this is still an important goal for our province. And joining GWS helps us towards this goal, within our limited budget.

There are not yet any concrete expected results defined for the GWS project. The last years were start-up years. In 2021 This does not mean that we won't report concrete results. Indicators we will use are number of SMEs that reached out to GWS by phoning or emailing, filled out the CO2 calculator, had a visit by the GWS advisor, etc.

3.2 Improving the policy instrument

We want (and need) to improve our policy instrument towards SMEs because:

1. Law enforcement is an expensive instrument because of high staff costs.
2. After we stopped our subsidy (of 60% of the staff costs) to the municipalities, most of them immediately stopped the law enforcement.

This has taught us that, unfortunately, granting a subsidy to municipalities does not mean that they will include supervision/law enforcement in their standard assignment to the ODG after the subsidy has ceased to exist. This is because municipalities have too little budget for environmental supervision as it is and they therefore have to make choices in which subject time is and is not spent. Unfortunately, energy efficiency is then placed at the bottom of the priority list because it is not a direct threat to the environment (unlike, for example, dangerous gases or explosion hazards).

Also, in the Climate Agenda 2020-2023, there is less budget available for energy efficiency for SMEs than in the former program. We went from € 1.1 million for 4 years to about € 400.000 for 4 years. The reason for this is that we had to catch up in 2016-2019 (most municipalities had never supervised on energy efficiency before) and this required a large budget. That is why it was made available at the time. In the new program the focus is more on stimulating and helping SMEs.

Therefore we can't and don't want to prolong the subsidized law enforcement project in its current form and why we are looking for other ways to combine our own experiences with those we learned from the project partners.

3.3 Policy objective and measures

As stated in chapter 3.3 of this action plan, our policy instrument is represented in the Climate Agenda 2020-2023, in the chapter about Industry.

The goal for the Industry is to reduce their emissions to a maximum of 2.06 Mton CO₂ by 2030. This is a goal that we will have to achieve together with all parties in this sector.

Concrete projects in this chapter are:

- The Province of Groningen will be a partner in partnerships such as Smart Businesses Groningen (GWS), to help SMEs further help with CO₂ emission reduction and sustainability.
- We will prolong the law enforcement (carrot and stick) project in a minimal manner and help and stimulate municipalities to do their law enforcement task.

3.4 Allocated funding budget

Funding is available and provided for by the Province of Groningen. When we work together with partners such as GWS and municipalities, they will also provide budget. But, as stated, we have a limited budget, and it is not very high. We don't have any ERDF budget as it is not available to governments to spend.

This is a big difference with the other project partners, who do have (large) ERDF budgets at their disposal.

As mentioned, we had € 1.1 million available for law enforcement, mainly intended for personnel costs of the law enforcement officers. Because the municipalities themselves had to pay 40% of the costs, we were able to put 3-4 supervisors/officers to work for several years.

As stated, for the period 2020-2023 we have 'only' about € 400.000 at our disposal. Therefore, we have to be creative and efficient in spending it. In 2020 and 2021 we spent € 100.000 per year on GWS.

In 2022 our budget is € 120.000. It is to be expected that the same amount will be available for 2023. This is budget coming from the Climate Agenda. This budget is meant for energy efficiency. GWS has a broader focus, also on green mobility and circular economy; for these subjects we will get budget from other provincial departments (mobility en economic departments).

3.5 Expected results

The expected result from the carrot and stick (law enforcement) approach is the number of SMEs that have been checked by law enforcement and have taken the mandatory energy efficiency measures.

In the period 2017-2020 more than 400 SMEs were visited by a law enforcement officer. More than 800 administrative checks were done.

40% of the SMEs were already compliant to the national environmental law. The rest was informed about their obligations and given a deadline by which they had to make and deliver an energy-efficiency plan, and after that a deadline by which they had to take the viable (= with a return on investment of 5 years or less) measures.

It is not yet to say how many SMEs have taken the viable/obligated measures because this will be checked in the next years. Because of this we also can't say yet how much energy has been saved or CO2 reduction has been achieved, because most SMEs have not taken all measures yet. They can get up to a few years the time to take them, based on natural replacement/repair moments.

4. The planned action: Creating energy networks and an energy measures tool

4.1 The background

From 2017 to 2020, we performed our carrot and stick approach at more than 800 SMEs in the province of Groningen. This supervision was partly administrative: supervisors requested energy data and energy savings plans from SMEs and assessed them. Also, data was retrieved from the national database (see chapter 3.1).

All this data was used to do the physical checks; these were carried out at more than 400 SMEs to check what measures they had (or had not yet) taken. In addition to the fact that the audited SMEs had to start working on energy savings, this also provided a wealth of data. In the first instance, this data was mainly used to point out to the SMEs themselves their obligations for energy saving. This directly results in energy savings and CO2 reduction.

4.2 Interregional inspiration

Because of the financial difference between the province and the other partners - the province itself does not have large ERDF budgets at its disposal - we have looked at the parts of the project partners' good practices or planned actions that we can use to improve our policy instrument.

The action we are going to take has been inspired by the Romanian and Swedish project partners.

These partners made us think about the following:

1. How can we improve the way that we collect, monitor, and use the data so that we get a better picture of what measures (geographical groups of) SMEs have (or have not) taken?
2. How can we get SMEs on business parks to work closer together and share their good practices and achieve the most energy efficiency (and CO2 reduction)?
3. And how can we use the outcome of points 1 and 2 to help other SMEs (that are not geographically connected or part of a business park) better in taking more measures and achieving more energy efficiency?

In Sweden, the University of Gävle created energy networks with SMEs who are in a geographical area together (ENERGIG energy networks). These networks consist of SMEs from different sectors/branches, which has the advantage that they don't see each other as competition. For these networks a database was created with take measures and the costs of these measures.

From this good practice we want to use the element of creating energy networks and a database with potential and already taken energy efficiency measures, accessible to the SMEs within the network. We can start with business parks that are already connected to GWS.

In Romania the South-West Oltenia Regional Development Agency will create a tool for better monitoring the results after implementing energy efficiency measures.

From this idea we will use the element of creating a tool to combine, analyse and use the energy efficiency data (energy usage and taken measures) that is available to us but now scattered in different databases. And then use this data to improve the carrot and stick approach and the advice given by GWS.

4.3 Objectives

The main objective of the action is:

Improve our policy instrument to better help SME's to take more energy efficiency measures by:

- Creating energy networks: groups of SMEs who are on a business park together or otherwise geographically connected and who work and learn together in taking energy efficiency measures.
- Creating a tool to combine data from different databases regarding energy efficiency measures.

By combining, comparing, and using the data that we get from the different databases and the experience from working with energy networks we can improve and streamline our policy instrument: the carrot and stick approach and the advice given by the GWS advisors.

4.4 Activities

In this paragraph we explain which activities are needed within the action.

First the action can be divided into 2 sub actions, each with their own activities. Of course, both sub actions and their activities never stand alone and are always in connection.

Sub-action 1: Creation of the energy networks

Our goal is to create 2 energy networks. We will start by asking the business parks that are connected to GWS because they are already working on energy efficiency and familiar with SMEPlus. This makes them attractive and suitable to start with because we will be able to start quickly. We first aim for a minimum of 5 SMEs per network. More is always possible but we want to avoid waiting too long.

The first step for this sub action is to inform the business park managers about the planned activities and the goals of the energy networks. Then we will use the available data to analyse how many and what kind of SMEs are on the business parks. We are going to involve the managers of the business associations of the parks in this because they are best informed about what is going on at the SMEs and the business park. They can help us create the network.

Next steps are organizing meetings for the SMEs during which we ask who wants to participate in the network.

After that we will organize individual visits to each participating SME to check the data we already have and get more information about plans they have. The advisor will then make a plan for the business park, based on the information that he/she retrieved from the SMEs.

Sub-action 2: Creation of a tool for combining data from the different energy measures databases

For the 2 energy networks we will create a tool to combine the energy-efficiency data that is available in the different databases: the national database, the ODG database, and data from the CO2 calculator. This way it will give us (and later the energy networks) a total overview of all the available data on energy usage and taken energy efficiency measures in the energy network, without having to go from database to database, which takes a lot of time.

The goal of the tool is to help the SMEs in the energy networks take more energy efficiency measures.

We will do this together with our stakeholders/collaborative partners ODG and GWS.

This tool will first be a pilot, for the 2 energy networks. If successful we can expand it to more networks/SMEs.

The first step is to retrieve, combine and compare the data from the different databases. We need to know what the differences between the databases are. What categories do they use, are there also differences per SME? What data or which categories are missing?

The next step is to analyse the new combined data set and use this to make a plan for the tool. What data do we want to retrieve from our tool and how do we present it? And what data do the SMEs and networks need and how can this be made available openly (due to privacy issues)?

We will discuss this with the business parks and (when established) the energy networks.

From this we get a picture of how to engineer the tool. Then we develop the tool and present and test it within the energy networks.

In this table the activities or the 2 sub-actions and responsible bodies are listed.

1. Activities for the energy networks	Responsible body/person
1.1 Inform the business park managers about the planned activities and the goals of the energy networks.	Province of Groningen and GWS advisor/project coordinator
1.2 Discuss/check data from databases with business park management. Discuss the specifications for the tool.	Province of Groningen and GWS advisor/project coordinator
1.3 Organize meetings with SMEs on business parks and create energy networks. Get information on what data they need (get specifications for the tool).	Province of Groningen and GWS advisor/project coordinator, stakeholders.
1.4 Organize meeting with SMEs participating in energy networks to discuss the plan for the tool.	ODG law enforcement officer and GWS advisor, Province of Groningen, stakeholders.
1.5 Individual visits to SMEs within networks to give advice and help with planning energy efficiency measures	GWS advisor

1.6 Evaluate the results, improve energy networks.	Province of Groningen and GWS advisor/project coordinator, stakeholders.
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2. Activities for the tool	Responsible body/person
2.1 Retrieve, combine, and compare the data from the different databases. Anonymize and categorize the data. Discuss with business park management.	ODG law enforcement officer and GWS advisor
2.2 Based on the discussion with park management and the wishes of the networks make a plan for the tool.	Province of Groningen and GWS advisor/project coordinator
2.3 Create the tool and present to networks.	GWS advisor/project coordinator, Province of Groningen, stakeholders.
2.4 Test and use the tool (by energy networks)	GWS advisor, Province of Groningen
2.5 Evaluate the results, improve and implement the tool.	Province of Groningen and GWS advisor/project coordinator, stakeholders.

4.5 Players/Partners involved

Partners that need to be involved are the ODG and the GWS and its partners (especially the business associations of the business-parks).

Also, universities and students from the University of Groningen and Hanzehogeschool Groningen will be given the opportunity to join in the action so that we can learn from each other.

2.2 Based on the discussion with park management and the wishes of the networks make a plan for the tool.												
1.4 Organize meeting with SMEs participating in energy networks to discuss the plan for the tool.												
2.3 Create the tool and present to networks.												
2.4 Test and use the tool (by energy networks)												
1.5 Individual visits to SMEs within networks to give advice and help with planning energy efficiency measures												
1.6 and 2.5 Evaluate the results, improve energy networks and tool.												



4.7 Expected costs and funding sources

The activities will be executed in house, by GWS, the province of Groningen and the ODG. These institutions have already been funded by us, also for projects like this.

If external budget is necessary for the development of the tool, then it will be funded by the GWS partners.

4.8 Output indicators

The main output indicators are the creation of 2 energy networks, the creation of one tool and to help 10 SMEs/SME's in achieving more energy efficiency.

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