



European Energy Poverty:

Agenda Co-Creation and Knowledge Innovation
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Making the Most of Qualitative Evidence for Energy Poverty Mitigation: A Research Agenda and Call for Action

Authors: Lucie Middlemiss, Koen Straver, Marlies Hesselman, Sergio Tirado Herrero, Marielle Feenstra, Tom Hargreaves, Sandrine Meyer, Kimberley O'Sullivan, Siddharth Sareen, Harriet Thomson

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Introduction: the value of qualitative evidence

The field of energy poverty brings together a wide range of researchers, from numerous disciplines and using a range of methods. Qualitative research on energy poverty, especially on the lived experience of energy poor households, has burgeoned in recent years. Contributions stem from researchers based in a range of disciplines and nations, and studying varied contexts and spatial patterns of energy poverty. This growing interest in qualitative evidence on energy poverty has given new insights into the complex, multi-dimensional and dynamic nature of this problem. It has helped contextualise existing quantitative data, by showing how policy plays out in peoples' lives, and revealing what is working or not in these households' everyday basis.


The strengths of qualitative research are numerous, but principally, it allow us to:

- **Grasp the systemic nature of this problem:** as qualitative researchers we use terms like multi-dimensional, multi-scalar, dynamic and relational to describe the phenomenon of energy poverty. What we mean is that energy poverty has a number of drivers and impacts, which have intersecting effects, and are cross-sectorally impacted (e.g. by housing, health and welfare policies). Qualitative work reveals the 'systemic' nature of energy poverty, and in doing so the (unintended) effects of policy on the problem.
- **Engage in people-centred research:** quantitative understandings represent people as numbers, percentages or proportions. In qualitative work we hear the accounts of daily life that our respondents share with us, and we use this to build both a picture of the challenges and opportunities they face, as well as to reflect on policy implications. Qualitative research centres energy-poor and practitioner experiences as the main focus of analysis. As a result, it can play an emancipatory role in representing the interests of people experiencing this problem. Dimensions of energy poverty that are hidden in quantitative data aggregates can be revealed through qualitative research, contributing to more appropriate and tailored policy interventions that better reflect the needs of energy poor households.

In a recent ENGAGER workshop in Amsterdam (30-31 October 2019), 50 researchers, policy-makers and practitioners from across the Netherlands and the ENGAGER network (UK, ESP, ROM, BEL, FRA, NOR, DEN) came together to discuss how to "Make the Most out of Qualitative Evidence for Energy Poverty". We offer this research agenda as a call for action to 'make the most' of qualitative evidence following this event.

The problem: we are not making the most of qualitative evidence

Despite the growing interest in qualitative evidence on energy poverty, those of us working in this field observe sub-optimal use of this evidence. As qualitative researchers we look to quantitative work in this field, a methodological approach with more established policy impact, to understand the potential for making our work policy- and practice-relevant, and to advance inter- and trans-disciplinary debates. In quantitative work on energy poverty, we see long-standing debates about how the problem is measured and understood, a history and practice of sharing and reusing data, as well as a strong link to policy through indicators and targets.



The **key challenges** we identify for qualitative research in ensuring we ‘make the most’ of this evidence are:

1. **How can qualitative evidence be used more effectively?** Qualitative researchers create deep and rich data, that are often used only once by the originating researcher. Qualitative data tends to be understood as the property of the researcher, and subject to concerns about privacy and ethics of reuse, and as such is rarely shared or reused, or even stored for posterity in an archive.
2. **How can qualitative evidence be linked across studies?** Qualitative studies tend to involve small numbers (‘n’) of respondents, addressing specific populations, or particular aspects of energy poverty, usually within short timeframes. This results in a body of evidence which speaks to specific experiences, places and times, rather than the phenomenon of energy poverty as a whole.
3. **How can conversations about qualitative research practice be stimulated?** Conversations across nations and between researchers about qualitative methods design and refinement are limited, unlike in quantitative research.
4. **How can qualitative evidence be used to inform policy?** Small ‘n’ studies can be disconcerting for policy-makers who are trying to make population level impacts, although the long-standing recognition of the value of this evidence in science has begun to penetrate policy and planning circles.
5. **How do we bring qualitative and quantitative evidence together?** We discern opportunities for such research, but a lack of emphasis, incentives and enabling structures for working across qualitative and quantitative evidence in order to learn more about energy poverty, and to inform its management.

Solutions

Creating infrastructure and culture for re-using and linking

The first solution is to create infrastructure for and a culture of reusing and linking qualitative data (addressing challenges 1 and 2 above). The field has strong infrastructure in place to bring people together (ENGAGER) and share data and cases (EPOV - the EU Energy Poverty Observatory). The additional infrastructure needed to make the most of qualitative data takes two forms:

1. To create a **pan-European archive of qualitative evidence on energy poverty**. This is a secure, and access-controlled repository where all qualitative researchers on this topic can store their data, and which can be used as a starting point to share data, to look at data longitudinally and to link data across studies. Note that qualitative data sharing requires different protocol to quantitative data sharing for ethical reasons. As such such an archive requires data to be only accessible on application.
2. To **invest in creating new qualitative data at a national, or EU scale**. This could involve local citizens (experts by experience) and expert panels, or annual national qualitative surveys, creating public data to enhance and deepen understanding of this problem. Such platforms can create synergistic links with existing initiatives like the European Social Survey, and synthesise and elevate insights from sub-national scales.

3. To create **ethical codes of practice** for sharing data across research teams and across borders.


Alongside these infrastructural investments, there is a need for a cultural shift among qualitative researchers to facilitate data sharing. Sharing data among qualitative researchers is more challenging because of the co-constructed nature of the data, the ethics of data storage and sharing (need to protect people's privacy) and the contextually embedded nature of the data itself. There are methods and techniques in existence that allow us to overcome these barriers, including those developed by the Timescapes project (a pioneering qualitative longitudinal archive, see <http://www.timescapes.leeds.ac.uk/>). The added value of pooling data resources, and looking at qualitative cases over time and from different geographies is enormous: it allows us to go some way towards overcoming challenge 4 (impacting policy) above.

Building competencies and communities to work across studies, nations and data-types

Creating a culture of data sharing and reuse in this research community will depend on this second solution being in place: building competencies and communities to work across studies, nations and data-types, including across qualitative and quantitative methods. We can draw here on established practices to share and reuse qualitative data and on the communities that exist around EPOV and ENGAGER. We also need to partner with Energy-PIECES and Energy-SHIFTS projects, which are aiming to promote inclusion of the social sciences and humanities in energy research. We can stimulate some of this competency and community building using our existing infrastructures. We would also like to contribute to transformations in European funding to accommodate innovation in research methods, as well as incorporating qualitative methods as a central part of mixed-methods research. This solution addresses challenges 2 and 5 above.

Some concrete actions on this solution will include:

1. Continue to build competencies for this kind of qualitative research, work which began in ENGAGER's training school in Barcelona (see <http://www.engager-energy.net/training-schools/>). **Future events and activities** aimed at developing this research and action agenda could focus on working with data from multiple European contexts, with participants bringing data to answer a specific research question and analysing it in workshop-style sessions. This would allow us to share data, techniques and competencies as we develop them, as well as to showcase the potential of data sharing.
2. There is also a **need for funders to recognise the value of qualitative inputs**. Specifically, we would like to see more room for qualitative-led, and mixed methods research in Horizon proposals. Our ambition includes explicit recognition of cross-sectoral, trans-disciplinary research on energy poverty as a priority in the new EU research framework Europe 2020.

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3. We are committed to **bringing people with experience of energy poverty** into our research as ‘experts by experience’ to create participatory, co-designed research which fulfills some of the promised emancipatory function.

Create opportunities to talk qualitatively to policy and practice

As a community, we are centrally concerned that our research should impact the governance of energy poverty. This could mean working with a range of stakeholders, whether at the global, European, national, subnational, regional or local level. Indeed, researchers at our October 2019 workshop in Amsterdam had experience of collaborating with housing associations, energy advice services, energy companies, utilities, local and national governments, and the United Nations. There is more to be done here in raising understanding of the value of qualitative evidence in shaping policy and practice. Here we mainly refer to the roles of researchers in creating opportunities for qualitative knowledge co-production. This solution addresses challenge 4 above.

Our primary responsibility as qualitative researchers is to find creative ways of getting the message that **qualitative research is useful and productive** out into society. This requires us to raise the visibility of our research in a range of policy, practitioner, and lived experience communities, articulating the key findings, and its value as a method more generally. We need to do this by **building communities of researchers, policy-makers and practitioners** working on these topics, including offering training opportunities for these communities to help them to understand qualitative data and its use. We should also be mindful that **impact is possible at a range of scales**, and through partnerships with a range of actors: including the examples featured above. We also need to look to **integrating qualitative and quantitative findings** so as to increase visibility and impact.

As qualitative researchers we are keen to offer **innovative responses** to this challenge. These might include:

1. Showing how the lived experience is a productive site for monitoring policy impact, or for discussing the impacts of future policies on energy poverty.
2. Facilitating co-production experiments, cross-sectoral and trans-disciplinary collaboration with policymakers and practitioners to solve specific problems.
3. Offering to enrich the intelligence on energy poverty for specific stakeholders, in order to engage with closed policy making cultures.
4. Taking a constructively critical, solution-oriented approach, not holding back from critique, but following this up by providing constructive alternatives.

In summary

Energy poverty is a persistent policy problem across Europe. At least part of the reason for this is that existing policy approaches are informed by a narrow range of evidence and understandings. As we have set out in this policy brief, making better use of qualitative evidence can help to:

1. enhance and develop social intelligence on the complex and dynamic realities of energy poverty;
2. generate more contextually appropriate and tailored interventions that recognise and address dimensions of energy poverty that are not measured or recognised in the existing quantitative evidence base; and
3. build a cohort of researchers and policy makers who are able to draw on multiple forms of both qualitative and quantitative evidence in order to transform energy (poverty) policy.

We hope that funders (national research councils and EU funding programmes) take this challenge seriously and act on our recommendations.

