

RIFS-Blogpost

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The panel of our podcast launch event (L-R): Victoria Luh, Franziska Mey, Michael Knappe and Olaf Sundermeyer.

Brandenburg has set itself the goal of creating a climate-neutral economy and way of life by 2045. But this vision will only become reality if it is supported by people on the ground. How can strategies to foster sustainable development be

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negotiated and put into practice in communities? In the RIFS podcast “Wandel verhandeln. Nachhaltig in Brandenburg” (Negotiating change. Sustainability in Brandenburg) we go looking for answers. Today sees the release of the sixth episode, which features excerpts from a panel discussion held at the launch event.

We invited journalist Olaf Sundermeyer (rbb), politician Michael Knappe (mayor of Treuenbrietzen) and researcher Franziska Mey (research group leader at RIFS) to talk about the role of transparency, dialogue, and participation in the transformation towards sustainability. Our colleague Victoria Luh moderated the discussion. At the outset, she posed a question that many of those attending had asked themselves in the wake of the state elections on 22 September 2024: To what extent did Brandenburg’s sustainable development policies contribute to the success of the far-right party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), which captured 29.2 per cent of the vote? And how can we forge a pathway towards sustainability that everyone can embrace?

1.1 A loss of confidence, a ray of light

These are difficult times for advocates of sustainable development in Brandenburg. This year, just 52 per cent of respondents to the 2024 Brandenburg Monitor – a representative, state-wide survey – feel that the state is “moving in the right direction” – down from 66 per cent in 2020. Public debate surrounding the energy transition, sustainability, and structural change undoubtedly contributed to this drop in public confidence, said Victoria Luh: “The coal phase-out and the Building Energy Act were hugely unpopular in some quarters, leaving many people unnerved and causing widespread uncertainty.” The AfD benefited from this in the election.

Some places bucked this trend, however. Among them: the village of Feldheim in the municipality of Treuenbrietzen. The renewables frontrunner and energy independent community boasts a wind farm (123 MW), an energy storage plant (10 MW), a biogas plant, a wood chip heating system and a local heating network. The plants were built gradually: As early as 2008, citizens founded a community-owned utility company in partnership with the municipality. Today, residents pay around half as much for energy as the rest of the country. The election results also differ: The SPD enjoys unbroken popularity in Feldheim, with the AfD polling well below its average in Brandenburg.

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1.2 Build trust, take your time

Michael Knape, the mayor of Treuenbrietzen since 2002, suggests that two factors played a decisive role in the town's successful energy transition: trust and time. Building trust is a matter of taking things one small step at a time, he explained. "If we had approached people with the vision and the facilities that we have today – it would have been too much of a stretch for most," said Knape. Feldheim's renewable energy infrastructure was built up over time. With every year and every success, it became easier to win over people: "When you build that foundation of trust, eventually people begin to say: 'They'll know what they're doing'."

Knape emphasized the urgency of the climate crisis. But people also needed a chance to "catch their breath", he suggested. Moving too fast risks a backlash that will be reflected in election results.

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1.3 Citizen participation: Who is the fastest?

Asked about the role of civic participation in supporting the transformation towards sustainability, political scientist Franziska Mey pointed out that choosing the right form of participation can make all the difference. "One important aspect that also comes out in our research is that you need to start communicating very early on. The aim is to get people on board with a project, rather than simply informing them." A number of tried and tested methods are available, such as "vision workshops", in which participants work together to develop a concept for the future of their region, or citizens' councils, in which a group of randomly selected participants with very different views enter into dialogue.

But civic participation is not a fix-all solution: "The AfD does participation too – and very professionally," says Olaf Sundermeyer. In the last five years, the party has made significant gains in this area and has proved more agile than its rivals. "The AfD is prepped and ready to campaign on a number of issues – there's refugees and migration, of course, and wind power. As soon as opposition against a new project begins to stir, the AfD injects itself into the debate with a speed and audacity that other players struggle to match." Certainly, the AfD has outperformed its competitors in recent months.

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1.4 Antisocial media

The weakness of traditional media has also become a problem, said Michael Knape, with many people now sourcing their news from dubious sources and via "antisocial media". Countering this disinformation is no easy task.

There is a strong culture of remembrance and democracy in Treuenbrietzen, with discussion groups on the history of the town and a student parliament, which was established at the town's comprehensive school in 2005. Cause for concern remains however. Shortly before the election, the school invited pupils to 'speed date' local candidates at a meet-and-greet event. The results of an under-16s election held shortly after rattled Knappe: "We were shocked to learn that 46 per cent of our pupils ticked the box for the AfD." Nevertheless, listening to young people, offering them platforms and taking their opinions seriously is the right approach, said Knappe. However, more people need to get involved, he urged.

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1.5 A cautious hope: the "wind euro"

In Treuenbrietzen, a people- and community-centred approach to the energy transition has paid dividends. According to Knappe, enabling citizens to share in the profits generated by renewables has been crucial to securing their support for the development of further infrastructure.

Since 2020, the state of Brandenburg has subsidised the operation of wind turbines with a special wind energy levy. Revenue from the levy is used to fund measures that will promote acceptance, for example to support events, social activities or cultural, educational or leisure facilities. It can also be used to improve amenities in towns or infrastructure. This so-called "wind euro" will be increased on 1 January 2026. The wind energy levy is the subject of the third episode of our podcast series.

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1.6 Fear of change

So far, the law has only had a limited effect, said Franziska Mey. "Nevertheless, I do think that this is an opportunity to create added value on the ground and to show that renewables can generate benefits for communities." In this respect, it is a step in the right direction.

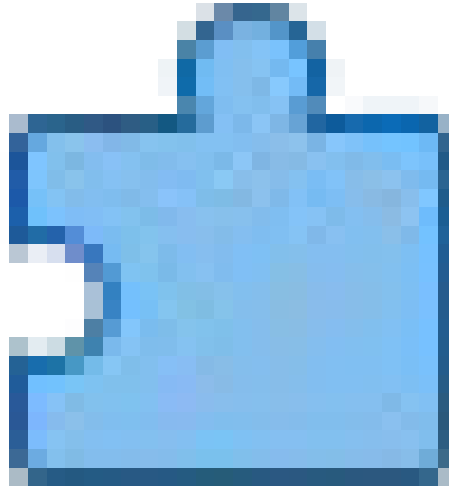
If the wind euro is a success, will it boost centrist parties in the state? Olaf Sundermeyer expressed his doubts: "I have the impression that the AfD is about identity, not money. In my opinion, it's not economic issues that are shaping people's voting preferences – it's identity and the question: 'How do I want to live?'" Fear of change undoubtedly influences how many people respond to this.

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1.7 Negotiating change: with knowledge, courage and a new error culture

So, how can we "negotiate change"? That's the question our podcast asks, and the panel discussion at the launch offered plenty of food for thought. Michael Knape said that federal politicians must be willing to place more confidence in local authorities and to "allow more leeway for experimentation instead of drafting rules and regulations for everything." Smaller communities need more personnel so that they can submit funding applications, for example.

From a scientific perspective, choosing the right participation method is critical, said Franziska Mey. Different approaches are suitable depending on the initial situation and objectives. Olaf Sundermeyer urged local politicians to show courage and push ahead with climate action projects instead of cowering to the AfD "in anticipatory obedience".



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Research Institute for Sustainability · Wandel verhandeln #6: Energiewende und Demokratie – Was braucht es vor Ort?

1.8 Share our content

