

From local to national: Tackling fuel poverty in Austria

Karl-Michael Brunner
Institute for Sociology and Social Research
Vienna University of Economics and Business
Augasse 2-6
1090 Vienna
Austria
Karl-Michael.Brunner@wu.ac.at

Sylvia Mandl
Austrian Institute for Sustainable Development
Lindengasse 2/12
1070 Vienna
Austria
Sylvia.Mandl@oin.at

Anja Christanell
Austrian Institute for Sustainable Development
Lindengasse 2/12
1070 Vienna
Austria
Anja.Christanell@oin.at

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Abstract

Despite media coverage and reports by social organisations stating that the problem is pressing, to date, no official recognition of fuel poverty can be observed in Austria yet. In recent years, a social scientific study has begun to investigate the matter from the perspective of the people concerned and their energy practices, conditions of action, and coping strategies. It became clear that low-income and/or fuel poor households are characterised by a number of energy burdens and that the scope of action is limited in many cases. Therefore, the question arose which measures could be taken to counteract fuel poverty and how the energy burdens of these households could be overcome by increasing the energy efficiency of the homes, among other measures.

Based on the results of this study, the authors have started a new project in late 2011 (funded by the Austrian Climate and Energy Fund) which aims to develop, implement and evaluate tailor-made advice services for the improvement of energy efficiency and the mitigation of fuel poverty in 400 to 500 Austrian households. Three different sub-projects covering fuel poor households from urban, suburban as well as rural regions serve as examples of implementation. The programmes and measures will be evaluated regarding their effectiveness and their improvement of advice services. Benefits (e.g. mitigation of burdens related to fuel poverty, reduction of CO₂-emissions) and costs will be calculated. On the basis of the evaluation of all three sub-projects, strategies will be

developed in close cooperation with stakeholders in order to implement effective efficiency programmes and measures against fuel poverty nationwide.

The paper presents first results from the local sub-project.

Introduction

A growing awareness for the problem of fuel poverty can be observed within our society. One indicator for this is the increase in the number of media coverage about people who are unable to heat their homes during winter or struggle to pay their energy bills. What is more, social organisations report that more and more people with energy-related problems are consulting respective advisory centres. Fuel poverty cannot be considered a problem only on a global level anymore but also affects well-off industrialised countries. While the term energy poverty refers to the fact that 1.4 billion people worldwide do not have access to energy (especially electricity) and that for another billion people, energy is available only in irregular intervals (Sovacool et al. 2012), fuel poverty in industrialised countries denotes something else. It implies, amongst other things, an inability to heat or light the flat sufficiently; expenses above average for energy provision; energy inefficient flats, heating systems and household appliances; health hazards caused by bad housing conditions and reduced thermal comfort; debts with energy suppliers; power cuts because of outstanding payments; cutbacks in other areas in order to pay for energy (Brunner et al. 2012a).

A combination of factors accounts for fuel poverty: high energy prices, low incomes and low energy efficiency of flats (Boardman 2010). If a household may be considered as fuel

poor, however, depends on the respective definition. A widely known one is the British definition, according to which a household may be considered as fuel poor if it needs to spend more than 10 per cent of its income to achieve adequate energy services in the home. As there are debates about this definition, efforts have been made to find other ways of defining fuel poverty (Moore 2012). Enormous differences can be observed between the nations of Europe concerning the perception, measurement and control of fuel poverty. While the UK, for example, already looks back on a long history of engaging in and trying to combat the problem, other countries have only developed a marginal perception of the issue, if at all (EPEE 2009). It has been estimated that between 50 and 125 million people within the EU are living under conditions of fuel poverty, and these figures are predicted to rise further in the near future. Social and political awareness for this problem, however, is still relatively low or rather, varies considerably (Santillán Cabeza 2010). It has to be noted that, over the past years, signs of recognition of the issue of fuel poverty can be noticed on an EU level, accompanied by respective policies intending to combat the problem (Bouzaroski et al. 2012). Even so, a common definition is still not in sight at the present moment.

Austria is one of the countries which still need to develop a thorough comprehension of the problem. It can be observed that fuel poverty is increasingly being discussed in public by social organisations who are in touch with those affected by the problem and are trying to find solutions on the one hand, and activists who take up the cause of fighting poverty in all its manifestations on the other. Having said this, it also has to be noted that on a political level, fuel poverty is still not being recognized, and none of the departments assumes responsibility for this issue. Single measures in the course of the implementation of the Third EU Single Energy Market Package, designed to protect vulnerable consumers, have also been taken in Austria, but yet, a comprehensive debate of this issue on the level of society or politics is still pending. A definition of fuel poverty is still pending, therefore precise numbers are not available and it remains difficult to reliably estimate the frequency of fuel poverty. Although quantitative empirical reports are still due, there are at least some preliminary qualitative insights about the causes, forms and consequences of fuel poverty in Austria (e.g. Brunner et al. 2012a).

The “pilot project against fuel poverty” discussed below strives to avoid weaknesses of previous energy related programmes targeting behavioural change. It has become evident that few programmes are based on a solid prior analysis of the situation and that a more detailed segmentation, allowing for tailoring the activities to specific segments of a target group is still underdeveloped (Dahlborn et al. 2009). A literature review on energy related intervention programmes detected that nearly no intervention strategy was based on an analysis of behavioural determinants or focused on the behaviour of target groups (Uitdenbogerd et al. 2007).

The “pilot project against fuel poverty”, especially the local example described later on here, aims to overcome some of these weaknesses by building on the findings from a previous project (Brunner et al. 2012a; Brunner et al. 2012b). This concerns the particular characteristics of and access to fuel poor households, as well as specific forms of being affected by and

ways of dealing with fuel poverty. “Knowing the target group” (Mourik et al. 2009) is the main prerequisite for successful intervention programmes. Bearing this in mind considerably facilitates the development, implementation and evaluation of target-group-specific counselling programmes and packages of measures. A selection of insights from this project shall be described briefly in the following paragraphs.

Fuel poverty in Vienna: Results from the NELA project

The project NELA (German acronym for “Sustainable Energy Consumption and Lifestyles in Poor and at-Risk-of-Poverty Households”), was realised between 2008 and 2011 and financed by the Austrian Climate and Energy Fund. Its main aim was the investigation of energy practices in poor and at-risk-of-poverty households in the Austrian capital Vienna (Brunner et al. 2012a; Brunner et al. 2012b). The project was based on the qualitative research paradigm (methodology of Grounded Theory) and strived to analyse energy consumption under limited financial conditions in its various manifestations, underlying motives and driving forces and causes. The perspectives of those concerned and their ways of dealing with the situation in conditions of living and housing which contain elements of fuel poverty to a greater or lesser extent formed the core of the project. In total, 50 qualitative interviews were conducted in poor and at-risk-of-poverty households (plus 10 in high-income households). Additionally, quantitative data (e.g. on the appliances featured) and to some extent also data on the real energy consumption, evidenced by energy bills, was gathered. Some of the results of the NELA project shall be summarised here.

Analysing the interviews, it became evident that energy practices in poor and at-risk-of-poverty households result from the interplay of a number of factors. Living and housing conditions represent a crucial factor here. A large number of households live in deprived conditions, carrying multiple burdens (lack of financial resources, energy-inefficient dwellings, old devices, high energy costs, long-term illnesses, just to name a few). Debts, lack of provisions and economising as a way of life are the order of the day. Adopting a modest lifestyle in various dimensions often becomes a necessary long-term strategy in order to cope with the situation. The limited financial resources of most of the interviewees are mirrored in the state of their dwellings. The majority lives in blocks of flats or similar blocks of flats for rent, the larger part of which date back years in their construction, are badly insulated and have leaking windows and doors. Only a small share of the people live in thermally improved, energy-efficient flats. Income does not only limit the free choice of dwelling, but is frequently also reflected in household equipment and appliances. The latter are often little energy efficient, old and second-hand appliances are common, and compared with high-income households, the degree of equipment is generally low.

High energy costs or unexpected additional margins of energy suppliers, augmenting the debit of the households concerned, represent another problematic area of living in conditions of poverty. Two thirds of the people interviewed perceive their energy expenses to be a burden. Frequently, low-income households display a fragile financial management, leaving them unprepared for high supplementary payments at the re-

ceipt of the annual statement. Delayed payments may in consequence lead to power cuts, which further on could initiate a spiral of debts. Even though various strategies are being adopted to keep energy costs at a minimum and exploit saving potentials, a lack of feedback systems often renders them a highly insecure tool. In most cases, the annual energy bill remains the only feedback which allows evaluating if the effort of reducing energy consumption has been successful. Moreover, the resulting savings are often made void by rising energy prices.

Within the sample of 50 interviewees, a large number of different coping strategies regarding heating and lighting practices could be identified and divided into strategies for efficiency and strategies for sufficiency, both of which are characterised by low necessity for investment. What could be termed efficiency strategies are mainly low-cost investments, which allow for increasing the efficiency of the dwelling (e.g. windows) or appliances (e.g. water-saving taps). They include sealing leaking windows and/or covering them with thick protecting curtains, or installing window blinds, all with the aim of preserving heat (cf. Harrington et al. 2005). All actions geared towards reducing energy consumption through cutbacks and sacrifices can be considered sufficiency strategies. In 21 out of the 50 households, the heating is turned on only in one room of the flat. For one third of the households, the cold part of the year also signifies having to put on various layers of clothing inside the house. Another related strategy for coping with the cold inside the flat is “slipping under the covers”, even at daytime. 31 out of 50 households adopt one or more of these three strategic options aimed at lowering the heating costs and satisfying their energy needs at least to some extent. Similar efficiency and sufficiency strategies could be detected regarding lighting practices.

In the comparison of low-income and high-income households in the sample it showed that the first, to a greater extent than the latter, tend to make financially feasible “small investments” directed at energy saving. However, the financial resources available clearly limit the scope of action in order to improve energy efficiency of household appliances and equipment of flats, which is why a large number of the interviewees only see meagre possibilities of achieving additional savings. Besides financial restrictions, a lack of real-time feedback systems complicates the traceability of the savings gained.

The analysis of the interviews revealed a large number of specific situations of stress and coping strategies of poor and at-risk-of-poverty households (cf. Gibbons/Singler 2008). According to the British definition, not all of these households fall into the category of fuel poverty. In the project in question, four distinct types of households could be identified: “the over-charged” (living in heavy fuel poverty), “the modest fuel poor”, “the modest non-fuel poor” and the ones “on a low income” (non-fuel poor), varying in their respective characteristics and strains.

For the design of the project at hand, some of the conclusions were deduced from the NELA project:

1. The results of the projects have shown that the structural conditions of action which increase the vulnerability of the households but lie largely without their reach can be traced back primarily to the inefficiency of the structure of the buildings, of heating technology and of major household

appliances. For households at risk of poverty it is hardly possible to sufficiently realize efficiency potentials of the cladding, heating technology and appliances. Small, almost cost-neutral efficiency potentials (e.g. energy saving bulbs), on the other hand, are already being exploited in many cases. For further measures, money and competences are often lacking, despite an existing wish for increased efficiency in the building. Assistance in this area is undoubtedly required.

2. Energy counselling is often considered the main path towards a realisation of energy saving potentials. In order to facilitate this, however, specific counselling models which are tailored to the experiences of those concerned are called for “tailored messages” (Mourik et al. 2009). They need to be flexible enough to cater to the highly diverse and individual circumstances of the target group. What is more, these services should be cheap or even free of charge. Energy counselling for households at risk of poverty requires a thorough understanding of the situation and burdens of the poor (as elaborated by this research project). Counselling based on these burdens can only follow the model of standard energy counselling aimed at behavioural changes to some extent, but should also contain social elements. Juridical advice on dealing with landlords is just as important as the review of legal claims (e.g. heating subsidy). On-site counselling shall help understand the circumstances of the people and offering support, for example in the case of necessary efficiency increase, problems with the landlords, problems with mould or dealing with the energy supplier. Avoiding power cuts or energy-related debts is of equal importance. To sum up, energy counselling in low-income households raises demands which surpass the common, often middle-class oriented energy counselling models. Besides high social competence and sensitivity, an understanding of the multiple strains and advice catering to the specific needs of the situation are also necessary.
3. Another important insight concerns the question of access to the target group. Energy counsellors and researchers might be perceived as supervisory bodies (of energy suppliers, the welfare office or the immigration department), which often render access and building of trust difficult. Lack of trust in turn might result in a rejection of the assistance offered, even under the worst conditions. Therefore, it is crucial to create access and information transfer through representatives of trusted institutions or even from the same milieu. Such “actors of proximity” (Dubois 2012) are on the one hand equipped with a knowledge of local customs and living conditions, and are often socially well-connected on the other, facilitating the building of trust. Energy efficiency projects with low-income households furthermore stress the “need for being proactive in approaching clients and suggest that an element of community engagement (neighbourhood events for example) will also demonstrate success in accessing clients who are harder to reach” (ACHIEVE 2012).

Before entering in more detail on the results of the local part of the project, the following paragraphs shall briefly describe the overall concept of the study.

Pilot project against fuel poverty

The “pilot project against fuel poverty”¹ is the practical and implementation-oriented continuation of findings from the NELA project, as described above. Following up these first qualitative insights into the Austrian situation regarding fuel poverty, this pilot project is directed towards two main aims presented in the following paragraphs.

1. RAISING ENERGY EFFICIENCY AND REDUCING BURDENS

In 400–500 Austrian households, target-group-oriented energy efficiency measures are planned to be implemented. The project is being realised in cooperation between three energy counselling projects for low-income households of the clerical organisation Caritas (1. energy savings check; 2. VERBUND-sponsored Caritas Electricity Assistance Fund; 3. neighbourhood parents). The households are selected within the projects due to the urgency of their situation. The free-of-charge offer by this organisation grants households in need individual counselling sessions which directly relate to their lived-in worlds. At the same time, the chance of having access to these households is being used to gather quantitative data about the respective situation of fuel poverty and thereby evaluating the accuracy of the counselling programmes. A two-part questionnaire forms the basis for data collection. The first part captures basic socio-demographic data on the client, the household constellation and the composition and amount of household income and expenses. In the second part, data about the building substance, the stock of appliances, heating and ventilation behaviour, energy consumption including possible cutbacks, and strains of the situation is being recorded.

The drop-in centres of the organisation Caritas represent the first contact point for people seeking advice on their problem situation. In these centres, social workers offer counselling in individual conversations and liaise free-of-charge energy consulting sessions. During this first contact, the first part of the questionnaire is being filled in by the responsible social workers in the course of a personal interview. Data for the second part of the questionnaire is gathered by the energy counsellors during energy consulting sessions within the household of the clients. One year after these sessions, the households are being visited again in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the counselling service (CO₂ reduction, energy savings, reduction of strains) and the offer (e.g. satisfaction of the clients, needs of the energy consultants and social workers, logistics).

2. ELABORATION OF A DATA-BASED PROGRAMME AGAINST FUEL POVERTY

Based on the results of the evaluation and an analysis of international programmes and projects, recommendations for fighting fuel poverty suitable for an implementation in the Austrian context are being developed. In a dialogue between the stakeholders, the recommendations are being tested on their practicability and a programme against fuel poverty with

a practical orientation is being elaborated. The following results are planned:

- a potential analysis of the realisation of the measures throughout all of Austria (e.g. cost-benefit-analysis, CO₂ reduction)
- an evaluation of the offer of counselling services and, following from this, recommendations for an implementation in Austria
- a comprehensive catalogue of measures including selected international best practice examples and
- an implementation-oriented programme against fuel poverty for politics and the energy industry, tailor-cut to the Austrian context.

The pilot project at hand has a double orientation: on the one hand, it aims at reducing fuel poverty; on the other, it aspires to contribute to the reduction of emissions harmful to the climate. In this sense, the project follows current international discussions on “synergies” and “co-benefits” of programmes for the reduction of fuel poverty (Boardman 2010; Heffner/Campbell 2011). It strives to make a contribution to a more sustainable energy system by integrating social, ecological and economic aims.

From local: Case study “Grätzleltern” (neighbourhood parents)

The title of the paper at hand is: “From local to national: Tackling fuel poverty in Austria”. In the following, initial results of the local part of the “pilot project against fuel poverty” shall be presented in detail. The concluding chapter offers a preview on national components.

The project “Grätzleltern”² (neighbourhood parents) was initiated in 2012 by the Caritas Vienna and the services for innovation of the boroughs of Vienna (“Gebietsbetreuung Stadterneuerung”). It is one of three projects which form part of the “pilot project against fuel poverty” and specifically targets structurally disadvantaged residential areas. In most of these areas, pre-WWII residential buildings dominate. It therefore starts from one of the roots of the problem of fuel poverty, which is, energy inefficient flats. Following the principle of capacity building, the residents of the buildings in question receive training on the topics of energy, housing and community life, and then pass on the recently gained knowledge as multipliers (so-called “neighbourhood parents”) in the course of home visits in their communities and circle of acquaintances within the neighbourhood. By doing so, they assume a bridging function between households in difficult situations regarding energy and housing, and professional service centres and offers. On the one hand, this initiative strives to make a contribution to the fight against fuel poverty, contributing to health promotion and the improvement of housing conditions. On the other hand, the target of the project is to strengthen the competences of the residents and support their empowerment.

1. The pilot project against fuel poverty is being funded by resources from the Austrian Climate and Energy Fund (total budget: EUR 430.000) and is being realised in the period from 2012 to 2014, under the direction of the Austrian Institute for Sustainable Development (ÖIN) in cooperation with the Institute for Sociology and Social Research at the Vienna University of Economics and Business, the Austrian Energy Agency, Caritas Austria, Caritas Vorarlberg and Caritas Vienna.

2. “Grätzleltern” is a Viennese expression denominating a neighbourhood or part of the city; the term “parents” was chosen because the people involved work in teams of two.

The project focuses on two boroughs of Vienna with a high proportion of residents confronted with difficult housing conditions due to constructional as well as social reasons. The effectiveness in improving energy efficiency of the so-called “area-based approach” which forms the core of the project is being advocated by many voices (e.g. Boardman 2007; Darby 1999; RAND Europe 2012). It is widely known that people tend to follow the advice of their social network in their consumption decisions rather than advice of external persons (McMichael 2007). Neighbourhood structures and social networks are therefore crucial starting points for the successful realisation of the project. Two target groups are in focus here: people in difficult housing conditions which do not have easy access to already existing counselling services or are without the reach of these services; and Austrians and people with a migratory background ready to act as neighbourhood parents and prepared to convey knowledge and competences on energy, housing and community life to their acquaintances and their communities within the district area. Counselling sessions which directly relate to the situation of the respective households might achieve a higher degree of efficiency in stimulating behavioural changes (Abrahamse et al. 2007). What is especially relevant for the target group here is the low-threshold, outreach approach in different mother tongues. The neighbourhood parents are familiar with the lived-in world of those affected and act as neighbours rather than professionals. This follows experiences from already existing energy counselling services which consider trust in the counsellor a crucial element for the success of the intervention (Darby 1999). Results from the NELA project and other studies have shown that the share of migrants among the people concerned is considerable. This is why the project also focuses on a strong intercultural cooperation: Like the residents of the project area, the neighbourhood parents come from a variety of backgrounds, work in inter-culturally composed tandems and therefore also contribute step-by-step to an ethnical opening of the communities. A similar project with and for migrants in Germany has recorded good results following this strategy (Hesse et al. 2006). With this target group, counselling services are especially well-accepted when free of charge (CAG Consultants 2010), which is also why the services of the neighbourhood parents are for free for the residents. Project aims include improving the housing situation, increasing energy efficiency and enhancing healthy living conditions, that is, measures which target three crucial characteristics of fuel poverty. Further aims include a low-threshold knowledge transfer and promotion of existing offers, strengthening neighbourhood structures, developing competences of the residents and stimulating an active participation in society through capacity building. Results from the NELA project have shown that fuel poverty, especially within the group of “the over-charged”, can only be effectively coped with if there is empowerment in all possible dimensions.

PROJECT PROGRESSION TO DATE AND PRELIMINARY RESULTS

In March 2012, the project entered the implementation phase. First, residents who showed interest in becoming neighbourhood parents were invited to participate in a teambuilding workshop with the Caritas. In the following, training seminars with energy counsellors lasting for several days were held,

where the participants were prepared for their advisory work within the households. The neighbourhood parents were instructed on the topics of energy saving, water and electricity consumption, waste avoidance and separation, acting with consideration on housing substance, healthy room climate and mould abatement, constructional improvement and greening, basic knowledge of laws regarding residency, as well as avoiding the debt trap.

Since late October 2012, the neighbourhood parents have assumed their work, visiting residents of the two Viennese districts in their homes on request in teams of two. The visits are free of charge and, if possible, are made by people with the same mother tongue.³ In order to draw attention to this offer and reach as many residents as possible, respective information was disseminated through numerous institutions, clubs, networking platforms and services. Furthermore, the neighbourhood parents themselves advertise the project in their own neighbourhood, facilitating a low-threshold access (Darby 1999). Residents of the project area may claim their counselling session directly with the neighbourhood parents or through a point of contact at the Caritas. When registering for the service, the social workers of the Caritas already record the data of the first part of the questionnaire (mostly basic socio-demographic data on the client). Following this, the neighbourhood parents clarify the relevant needs of the situation in a first home visit, together with the residents of the household. Questions such as “Why is my electricity bill that expensive?”, “What can I do against the mould in my flat?”, “Which rights and responsibilities do I have as a tenant?” are clarified and passed on to other points of contact, if required. At the same time, the second part of the questionnaire (on the building structure and other factors) is being filled in by the neighbourhood parents during the visit. A while after the first session, a second visit is made with the aim of exchanging experiences and clarifying open questions. One year after these sessions, the households are visited again in the course of the “pilot project against fuel poverty”, in order to comprehensively evaluate the actual changes.

To date, about 60 households could be visited and advised. In the following, some of the results on the recruitment of neighbourhood parents and on the elements constituting fuel poverty in the counselling households shall be presented.

SOCIAL BACKGROUND OF THE NEIGHBOURHOOD PARENTS

Who were the people which finally participated in the training for becoming a counsellor? At present, the team of neighbourhood parents comprises 16 people of mixed ages in total (10 women, 6 men), with a majority of people from a migration background. A large part was motivated to participate in the project by the possibility of improving their knowledge of German by active language use during the activities. None of the team members is currently in full-time employment, but as most of them would prefer to work more hours, the project also represents a meaningful activity which they can pursue besides their part-time employment or job search. Overall, the neigh-

3. The languages spoken by the neighborhood parents include Italian, Polish, Romany, Greek, Arabic, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Ukrainian, Hebrew, Bosnian/Serbian/Croatian, Turkish, Kurdish, Farsi, Dari, Tadjik, Uzbek, Nepalese, Bengali, Hindi, Urdu and Fulani.

bourhood parents come from heterogeneous backgrounds. Individuals which have worked as architects or stockbrokers and are now acting as neighbourhood parents during their parental leave or retirement can be found among the project participants, as well as asylum seekers and people in education. The social milieus of the neighbourhood parents also vary. Some of them have already faced the strains on which they now give advice in their own households.

MANIFESTATIONS OF FUEL POVERTY IN THE HOUSEHOLDS COUNSELLED TO DATE

As already mentioned, fuel poverty results from an interplay of low income, high energy prices and energy inefficient flats and appliances in most cases (Boardman 2010). The following paragraphs present some preliminary results on this from the data analysis of about 60 households (the dimension of energy prices is captured mostly by questions on energy costs):

Household income

Almost half of the clients counselled are out of work, with an average duration of unemployment of around 2.3 years. For most of them (around 60 per cent) the guaranteed minimum income paid by the state constitutes part of their income; 12 per cent receive benefits by the job centre. Only 25 per cent have an earned income. The average energy costs of the households lie at around 9 per cent of the net household income whereas the Austrian average lies at around 5 per cent.

Energy efficiency of the buildings and appliances

The larger part of the buildings which house the households examined was erected before 1945. At the same time, there is no evidence of redevelopment measures in two thirds of the cases. Accordingly, many of the residents have to live with strains caused by rather leaky windows (54 per cent) and doors (53 per cent). More than half of the households (51 per cent) claim that walls and floors of their flats are frequently cold. In 67 per cent of the households, mould was identified, mostly in the bathroom/toilet, but also in other parts of the flat, representing a health hazard. Previous results on equipment with appliances in the households are consistent with the findings from the NELA project: equipment is scarce, and only slightly more than half of the households own a washing machine; 12 per cent own a dishwasher. The average age of appliances is high, with around 13 years for fridges and more than 10 years for stoves, indicating low energy efficiency. It is also conspicuous that two thirds of the people interviewed have an electric boiler within their homes, indicating a relatively energy inefficient form of warm water supply. 47 per cent of the cases have experienced a breakdown of the heating for more than three days in the past two years.

Energy prices/costs

The number of households which have to worry about being able to pay the energy bills is extremely high (96 per cent). 88 per cent of the cases state to have experienced difficulties in paying the energy bill in the past two years. These numbers are emphasised by the high percentage of cases which received overdue notices by their energy suppliers in the past two years (77 per cent). 11 per cent of the households even suffered at least one power cut in this period.

Coping strategies

In the paragraphs on the NELA project, different coping strategies of fuel poor households were pointed out. Analyses of the local project until now also show a clear tendency towards sufficiency strategies: 54 per cent state having to limit water consumption due to cost reasons, 60 per cent name financial limits as a reason for heating fewer rooms than they would like to, and 34 per cent of the households also curtail lighting. All in all, the results to date indicate that many of the households may be classified as fuel poor, adding them to the group of multiply strained “over-charged” households (Brunner et al. 2012a). The project therefore seems to achieve a high accuracy in the identification of fuel poor households (Dubois 2012).

CONTINUATION AND BROADENING OF THE PROJECT

During the pilot phase of the project part named “neighbourhood parents”, the target is to reach around 120 households. In order to reach more households beyond this number through trained multipliers, and consequently achieving a more sustainable result, the project is planned to be continued for a longer period of time (until the end of 2014). This should ensure that the project reaches more people in disadvantaged, structurally weak residential areas of Vienna.

To national: 2 Austria-wide projects

While the focus of the project part “neighbourhood parents” lies on the urban area, placing local structures at the centre, the other two parts of the “pilot project against fuel poverty” comprise wider areas, to some extent covering all of Austria.

SUB-PROJECT 1: ENERGY SAVINGS CHECK FOR HOUSEHOLDS WITH A LOW INCOME

The project part “energy savings check” especially caters for suburbs and rural areas of the Austrian province of Vorarlberg. The energy savings check is an EU-funded regional project in the Bodensee-areas of Austria, Germany and Switzerland. In addition to the individual energy counselling sessions, households are offered optional, cost-free emergency assistance (as, for example, switchable socket strips).

SUB-PROJECT 2: VERBUND-SPONSORED CARITAS ELECTRICITY ASSISTANCE FUND

The VERBUND-sponsored Caritas Electricity Assistance Fund registers Austrian-wide urban, suburban and rural households. The project is a collaboration between the Austrian Energy supplier VERBUND and the clerical organisation Caritas. Besides energy counselling services within households, the sub-project 2 also offers financial emergency funds to help pay energy bills. In addition, it finances an exchange of larger electrical appliances if energy counsellors consider it necessary.

Evaluation of energy counselling

If energy counselling programmes shall be implemented on a national level in the way described here, it first has to be evaluated which potentials they offer. Within the “pilot project against fuel poverty”, therefore, a year after the first round of counselling sessions (2013/14) the efficiency of the measures taken will be evaluated.

The evaluation is first formative, that is, accompanying and constitutive, already collecting feedback in the implementation phase in order to concurrently improve the counselling sessions. On the other hand, the project is also being evaluated summatively, that is, balancing, by drawing conclusions regarding the effectiveness and development of the energy counselling services and recommendations for an implementation throughout Austria resulting from this. Methodically, the evaluation uses quantitative (questionnaires) and qualitative (e.g. group discussions, workshops) methods (Harmelink et al. 2008; Rossi et al. 2004).

The following points describe concrete targets of the evaluation.

MEASURES OF INTERVENTION IN THE HOUSEHOLDS

Here, the aim is to identify the size of the savings potential (in TJ, CO₂, €) if the exemplary measures as part of the current “pilot project against fuel poverty” are being realised on a large scale and throughout Austria. In addition, cost efficiency achieved by the diverse measures per saved ton of CO₂ is being calculated.

SATISFACTION OF THE HOUSEHOLDS WITH THE COUNSELLING SESSIONS

Furthermore, it is being analysed how well the households who received counselling were able to implement the energy saving measures and how they impacted on their situation. It is planned to also evaluate the degree of satisfaction with the energy counselling sessions and discover further needs and possibilities of improvement in the households concerned.

ACTIVITIES OF THE COUNSELLORS

Also on part of the counsellors, the measures taken are being evaluated and suggestions for improvement are being collected. Moreover, the households who received counselling comment on how they estimate the quality of the activities of the counsellors.

Concluding remarks

Discussions on fuel poverty and the development of measures to combat the same are still only at the start. The “pilot project against fuel poverty” aims to implement and evaluate measures for increasing energy efficiency and reducing the often multiple strains in 400 to 500 Austrian low-income households. As first results presented in the paper at hand have shown, the energy counselling sessions and surveys of the energy and housing situation have started out, and it can already be perceived that the approach and access to the households chosen for the present project yields a high accuracy regarding fuel poor households. The main part of the work, however, is still to be accomplished.

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