The tambourine gives the pace to renewable energy.

To walk the donkey, our ancestors used to have three instruments: the stick, to keep the direction; the carrot, to give it the right incentive; and the tambourine, to tap the rhythm of its movements. Public policies are said to be working along similar lines. To achieve the community’s goals, local governments implement and enforce regulations (the stick), provide market incentives (the carrot), and try to persuade people to voluntarily move toward these goals (the tambourine). When it comes to renewable energy, cases of adoption of regulations and market tools are various (e.g. see ICLEI & IRENA series of case studies on local policy tools to promote renewable energy). This short article takes a different approach and explains how policy makers could also use the “tambourine” to encourage the production and the consumption of energy from renewable sources, especially in economically challenging times.

The “tambourine” (also labelled “the sermon” or information tools) as a policy approach covers those attempts of policy makers to achieve a result by influencing the behaviour of citizens through the transfer of knowledge and information, communication of reasoned arguments and moral suasion. Similarly to market policy tools, information instruments do not imply any form of obligation or mandatory action for the citizens. As opposed to these tools, however, they do not involve any transfer of material resources to reward or penalize citizens’ behaviour. To encourage the voluntary choice of citizens, policy makers only offer knowledge, good arguments and moral appeal (Bemelmans-Videc and Vedung, 2007).

Renewable energy, and in particular the consumption thereof, can also been promoted by local governments through policies of this kind. Examples include education in schools and universities, or advertisement and information campaigns on the benefits of renewable energy. Moreover, we can consider as “tambourine” tools such as the production of reports on climate change and on renewable energy as a solution thereto. Feasibility studies and potential analyses can be used at the local level to show the path to success. Ambitious targets, in terms of greenhouse gas emissions reduction and renewable energy reliance, can be set to provide the motivation for a community to join hand toward a cleaner development.

These “tambourines” can complement market and regulatory measures for different reasons. Promoting renewable energy through information and advertisement will make it more popular than if it was mandated through command and control policies. Citizens who are convinced by this information will opt for renewables because they want to do so, and not because they have to, or they will be rewarded for doing so. On the other hand, information policies might be particularly indicated where financial resources available to institutions to achieve renewable energy targets are scarce. They are useful to trigger greater engagement of citizens, matching the public intervention with their own behaviour and voluntary action (i.e. the so called co-production of public policies).
To conclude, local governments can promote the production and consumption of renewable energy with a broad range of different policies. Instruments based on market mechanisms, command and control, and information are complementary to each other and none of them can be successful alone. The latter, however, (the “tambourine”) holds a potential which is often underestimated. Policies of this kind can make the consumption of renewable energy more attractive, and inform the people of the great benefits of it. Information and education policy tools can contribute to the real cultural shift which is required for a broad adoption of renewables as a means toward sustainable development. They will lead people to prioritize the protection of the environment as a measure of actual wellbeing, regardless and in spite of the economic conjuncture, but as a free choice of civic engagement.

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