Consid*EUR*ing Climate Change

Towards a study on the financial and soft relationships between the Erasmus University Rotterdam and high- and low-carbon energy industries, and advice on their future in light of climate change

Changerism
Think-and-Do Tank
in Sustainability

Erasmus
Sustainability
Hub

About Changerism

Changerism is an interdisciplinary think-and-do tank that specializes in complex sustainability challenges. We carry out research, advice, campaign, and communication projects in the fields of climate, energy, production, consumption, construction, and mobility.

You can download this research proposal and find more of our work here:
http://changerism.com

About Erasmus Sustainability Hub

The Erasmus Sustainability Hub aims to co-create the transition towards a sustainable future for the Erasmus University Rotterdam and beyond. To this end it connects passionate people at the university to collaborate on diverse sustainability oriented projects.

Find out more here:
http://erasmussustainabilityhub.com

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Introduction

> "We will educate present and future leaders who use the warmth
> of their hearts to keep their heads cool and their hands productive"
>
> Inscription at the tree planted by the Dalai Lama on the EUR campus, May 12th 2014

The conclusions of the most recent report by the United Nations (UN) Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) are dire. It concludes that human influence on the climate system is clear, and recent anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gases, in particular carbon dioxide (CO_2), are the highest in history due to our burning of fossil fuels. This is expected to cause further warming and long-lasting changes in all components of the climate system, increasing the likelihood of severe, pervasive and irreversible impacts for people and ecosystems. Fortunately, it is stated that substantial emissions reductions over the next few decades can reduce climate risks in the 21st century and beyond, increase prospects for effective adaptation, reduce the costs and challenges of mitigation in the longer term, and contribute to climate-resilient pathways for sustainable development. Although many adaptation and mitigation options can help address climate change, no single option is sufficient by itself. The report concludes that effective implementation depends on policies and cooperation at all scales.[1]

The research proposal before you offers one way in which adaptation to and mitigation of climate change risks can be addressed at the scale of higher educational institutions such as the Erasmus University Rotterdam (EUR). It steers towards a critical re-evaluation of the existing relationships between the university and fossil fuel energy companies and advice on their future, as these high-carbon businesses contribute to dangerous climate change to a disproportionately large extent.[2] To this end, it proposes to answer the following questions:

I) What financial and 'soft' relationships exist between the EUR and fossil fuel energy companies?
II) What financial and 'soft' relationships exist between the EUR and low-carbon energy companies, i.e. those in the renewable energy industry?
III) What advice can be given on the future of these relationships, in light of climate change?[3]

In the following pages, these questions are firstly shortly embedded in the EUR-context. Then, methodologies will be formulated according to which the questions can be researched.

Between grey and green

Rotterdam is the host city of the Erasmus University. It is a low-lying city in the Netherlands, a country itself prone to future risks of climate change.[4] Some parts of the EUR campus lie below sea level by more than two metres,[5] and due to projected global mean sea level rise by the year 2100 this can increase by up to another 82cm.[6] Furthermore, because Rotterdam is connected to the outside world through many (inter)national partnerships and networks, perturbations of regional climate subsystems invoked by climate change can have profound effects for the city

as well. Although this context alone should prompt the city of Rotterdam to develop world leading climate change adaptation and mitigation initiatives, sadly it is instead (probably against will) complicit in engendering the climate risks it will have to face in the future. Illustrative for this is the pride its port takes in its relationship with high-carbon fossil fuels, in the form of transshipment of large amounts of oil (24% of the port's total transshipment capacity is represented by crude oil) and in handling more coal than any other European port.[7,8]

As the EUR forms the vanguard of current and future intellectual life in and far beyond Rotterdam, problematizing its own contribution to climate change can catalyze broader societal advancements towards climate-resiliency. Thankfully, its Executive Board has already shown to possess the courage needed to take steps in this direction, through implementation of policy to reduce CO_2-emissions and opting to increase the usage of renewable energy resources.[9,10] These steps fit within EUR's recently published 'Strategic plan 2014-2018' report[11], in which sustainability features as one of the key concepts for its future orientation. Likewise, the mandate EURfossilfree campaigners received from the Executive Board to produce this proposal also fits within the university's ambitions of becoming more sustainability-orientated, for it endeavours to contribute to countering what many see as the greatest challenge of the 21st century: anthropogenic climate change.

For the Executive Board to accept this proposal, and support its intentions to answer the questions formulated above, research details are provided below.

Research setting

The EURfossilfree campaigners and the Erasmus Sustainability Hub (ESH) ask the Erasmus university to support this proposal to study (I) what financial and 'soft' relationships exist between the EUR and fossil fuel energy companies, (II) what financial and 'soft' relationships exist between the EUR and low-carbon energy companies, i.e. those in the renewable energy industry, and to receive (III) advice on the future of these ties, in light of climate change. Suggested methodological approaches to (I), (II), (III) can be found below. Then, given the expansiveness of these questions, some project parameters (dealing with scope, budget, duration, etc.) will be shortly proposed.

Methods

(I) What financial and 'soft' relationships exist between the EUR and fossil fuel energy companies?

Mapping out different EUR-relationships with high-carbon industries fossil fuel energy companies are essential to effectively help counter climate change. These relationships can be broken down to (A) financial ties and (B) 'soft' ties. The former represent financial flows, the latter all non-financial, more qualitative relationships.

Ad A
Selected financial officers at EUR faculties, the Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam (EUR Holding), and the EUR faculty services will be asked to submit to the EURfossilfree/ESH research team documents that give insight into financial flows between their body and the companies included in this study since the academic year 2013/2014. These documents will elucidate former and current money flows, not limited to but including: (in)direct financial interests, paid-for research, financial sponsorship of events, and paid-for partnerships. Also, interviews with selected knowledgeable EUR faculty, EUR holding, and EUR facility services employees (e.g. marketing officers) will be held to gain insight into financial ties between the EUR and high-carbon fossil industry. These interviews can motivate further lines of inquiry, such as researching high-carbon industry related ancillary activities of employees.

Ad B
Relevant officers at EUR faculties, the Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam (EUR Holding), and the EUR faculty services will be asked submit to the EURfossilfree/ESH research team documents that give insight into the more soft relationships maintained between their body and the companies included in this study since the academic year 2013/2014. These officers can include for example external relation managers and human resource managers, but will differ per EUR body. These documents will elucidate former and current qualitative ties relating to high-carbon fossil fuel energy companies, not limited to but including: partnerships, guest lectures, case studies, recruitment activities, on-campus proliferations (e.g. through posters and affiches), membership in executive and advisory boards and committees. Also, interviews with selected knowledgeable EUR faculty, EUR holding, and EUR facility services employees (e.g. those managing project and/or event portfolios) will be held to gain further insight into these non-financial ties between the EUR and high-carbon fossil industry. These interviews can motivate further lines of inquiry, such as researching the fora through which fossil fuel energy companies exchange thoughts with EUR-bodies.

II) What financial and ‘soft’ relationships exist between the EUR and low-carbon energy companies, i.e. those in the renewable energy industry?

To answer this second question, the same methodology as under (I) will be followed. On grounds of the outcome of this parallel study, a comparison can be drawn between EUR ties with both high- and low-carbon energy industries, represented by fossil fuel energy companies and the renewables energy industry, respectively.

III) What advice can be given on the future of these ties, in light of climate change?

The outcome of the research on questions (I) and (II) will allow for a comparison to be made, and contrasts found will inform advice on what changes should follow in our relationships with fossil fuel energy companies and renewable energy companies, in light of climate change. Advice will range from questions that tightly relate to the generated data. As such, it can be imagined that suggestions will be made about (far-reaching) recalibration of partnerships, how on-campus proliferation should be tuned, how board membership could be impacted, or how

ancillary activities of prospective EUR employees should be weighted in acquisition procedures, and so forth.

Defining further research parameters

Of course, the study as described above is expansive and therefore demarcations have to be set to its scope. Limiting the study to the three most academic years is one example of this ('13/'14, '14/'15, '15/'16). We believe talks with members of the Executive Board should help set more borders to the proposed study. Here we suggest some talking points with respect to this topic.

Firstly, the issue of width should be settled. Should the study focus on *all* EUR faculties, departments and holdings? Or should a relevant selection of faculty(ies), department(s), or holding(s) be selected for the study? A preliminary round of data gathering carried out by the author of this proposal showed far-reaching ties between the RSM and certain fossil fuel energy companies. This implicates particular EUR bodies call for sharper focus to map out those ties more thoroughly. Because of this, we think an explorative round of research to define these bodies of specific interest is called for.

Secondly, there is the issue of who should carry out the research. We believe the Erasmus Sustainability Hub is perfectly suited to help get in touch with enthusiast students and members of students organizations willing to take up this consultancy-like research project.

Thirdly, with regards to the project management structure, we foresee completion of the study to be feasible over a period of six months from its launch date. To attain this goal supervision would be in the hands of one project manager and two researchers. We suggest the project management and research assistance to formally be in hands of selected persons at relevant student organizations. We think first of allocating time for this project at the ESH.

Fourthly, we suggest covering budget costs for project management and research assistance to be the responsibility of the EUR. Financial support would predominantly be used to remunerate these activities and overhead costs. The allocation of budget has to be determined in consultation with the board.

Fifthly, we suggest the end report to be predominantly digitally disseminated and to have a place on a relevant page of the EUR website. Specifics of the end report format can be further discussed with the Board.

The EUR has to act now

Anthropogenic global warming is real and starting to have effects on our planet. If we don't act now, our way of life will be compromised in various ways due to an out of control global ecosystem. Naturally, this will take a hefty toll on societies around the world. Make no mistake about the short term in which dangerous global warming will be a fact of life: children born today, will have to deal with a blown carbon budget somewhere around their second or third year of study at the EUR.[12] The reality that accompanies such a situation is not one the EUR should aim to be (even partly) responsible for. Instead, it should do everything in its power to pro-actively mitigate climate change and not become (haphazardly) complicit by remaining

passive in this regard. To this end, this EURfossilfree research proposal aims to contribute to the development of a type of relationship (re)building with high- and low-carbon energy companies at the EUR which is informed by reflexivity about their current and future effects on climate change. The EURfossilfree team and the Erasmus Sustainability Hub hope to receive full support from the Erasmus University Rotterdam in carrying out the proposal.

REFERENCES

[1] This paragraph follows closely the IPCC AR5 climate report main statements, as published in its most recent synthesis report: https://www.ipcc.ch/news_and_events/docs/ar5/ar5_syr_headlines_en.pdf

[2] The highest-carbon fossil fuel energy companies are defined by the Carbon Tracker Initiative in their 'unburnable carbon' report: http://www.carbontracker.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Unburnable-Carbon-Full-rev2-1.pdf. They are equivalent to around 27% of global proven fossil fuel reserves, in terms of their carbon dioxide emissions potential and ties with them should therefore especially be looked into in the proposed research. However, in light of climate change, this does not mean that university ties with unlisted fossil fuel energy companies mean they are unproblematic.

[3] Carrying out this research proposal has been one of the goals set by the EURfossilfree campaigners held at the university during the academic year of '13/'14 (see attachment 1 for more information on the EURfossilfree campaign). In response to the EURfossilfree campaign, the Executive Board of the EUR has shown a profound willingness to cooperate with carrying out this analysis. In doing so, it has taken the lead amongst the higher educational institutions of Europe in committing itself to counter anthropogenic climate change on an institutional level.

[4] See for example http://www.knmi.nl/cms/content/112431/zware_herfststormen_in_europa_door_orkanen_in_een_warmer_klimaat

[5] Measured with respect to the Nieuw Amsterdams Peil (NAP). See for more, http://www.ahn.nl/ An interactive viewer of height levels is available at http://ahn.geodan.nl/ahn/

[6] http://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/assessment-report/ar5/wg1/WG1AR5_Chapter13_FINAL.pdf

[7] http://www.portofrotterdam.com/nl/Business/natte-bulk/Pages/Raffinage%20en%20pijpleidingen.aspx

[8] http://www.portofrotterdam.com/nl/Business/droge-bulk/Pages/kolen.aspx and http://www.portofrotterdam.com/nl/Brochures/Coal-Eng.pdf

[9] http://www.eur.nl/eur/duurzaam/campus/co2/

[10] http://www.eur.nl/postacademisch/studievoorlichting/nieuws/detail/article/56402-erasmus-universiteit-zet-vergroening-door/ and http://www.eur.nl/efb/info_efb/ontwikkeling_campus/nieuws/nb_cio/archief/nieuwsbrief_juli_2012/zonnepanelen/

[11] http://www.eur.nl/english/strategy2018/

[12] http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/earth-will-cross-the-climate-danger-threshold-by-2036/

ATTACHMENTS

1: The EURfossilfree campaign

In acknowledgment of the dangers of global warming, in February ‘14, a group of fifty prominent Erasmus University Rotterdam (EUR) professors, lecturers, and PhD candidates with sustainability-related areas of expertise declared support for the EURfossilfree campaign.[1] In doing so, they supported the attempt to inquire what the role of our university could be in mitigating climate change. More concretely, the Executive Board was firstly asked to rethink university ties with the fossil fuel energy industry (FFEI) and secondly, to ask the pension fund for governmental and educational sectors, the ABP pension fund, to rethink their investments in the fossil fuel energy industry in light of its disproportionate contribution to anthropogenic climate change through investments in carbon dioxide-intensive business models.

The initiative led to a meeting in May ‘14 with mr. Pauline van der Meer Mohr, Chair of the Executive Board of the EUR. Through the formulation of a mandate, the EURfossilfree supporters were granted permission to firstly, write this research proposal on the EUR’s financial and qualitative ties with the FFEI and secondly, assist the EUR approach the ABP pension fund to critically rethink their investments in the FFEI.

Following up on the meeting, EURfossilfree supporters together with volunteers from the national 350.org movement started pressing ABP to divest from fossil fuels. Direct talks with ABP were organised in September ´14, and national newspapers and internet platforms took notice of the campaign. In September-October ‘14, the Executive Board of the EUR initiated a number of conversations with influential players at ABP and asset manager APG, conveying the concerns formulated by EURfossilfree. In December ´14 a petition was launched, further putting climate change related concerns on the table at the pension fund. In March ´15 the petition was handed over to ABP during an event in Amsterdam. In October ’15, after a lot of regional, national, and international attention, the ABPfossilfree campaign convinced the ABP pension fund to commit to hefty CO_2-emission reduction ambitions. In their sustainability policy, the fund committed to reduce CO_2-emissions of its investment portfolio by 10% in 2016, and by 25% in 2020. Also, the fund decided to end its investments in 30% of the dirtiest holdings, in part due to climate risks associated with those holdings. See for more: www.abpfossielvrij.nl.

In December ’15, the Executive Board of the Erasmus University supported and approved this research proposal. A small subsidy was awarded to carry out the project. To this end, in January ’16 the EURfossilfree campaign started a collaboration process with the Erasmus Sustainability Hub (ESH). In march ’16 the EURfossilfree project started. It focuses on the Rotterdam School of Management (RSM) faculty.

[1] http://www.erasmusmagazine.nl/nieuws/detail/article/6777-eur-herzie-betrekkingen-met-fossiele-energie-industrie or, see English version of this letter at the following link: http://www.erasmusmagazine.nl/international/detail/article/6775-eur-rethink-ties-with-fossil-fuel-energy-industry/ The list of supporters is not completely shown here.