The energy transition is a challenging research area for which many uncertainties are still in search for answers. The three energy challenges of carbon mitigation, energy security and combating energy poverty have proven the need for an energy transition towards a more sustainable energy system. Policy intentions on different scales are supporting this transition, acknowledging the fact that both large scale and small scale production is needed in order to tackle the energy challenge. Moreover, the inherently distributed nature of renewable energy is asking for place-based approaches where the local level is crucial. The physical impact of this changing energy system will present challenges for the spatial development of different regions. In parallel with the energy challenges, the society as a whole is changing; public authorities are no longer the sole actors in shaping our environment. More and more problems are put on the agenda by civil society and more and more actions are started by engaged volunteers. These projects are embedded in local context and are using local potentials, while changing the spatial relations. Local energy initiatives can have a role to play in a society in which the government is retreating more and more. Civic initiatives however can also be confronted by institutional barriers. If these civic initiatives want to be successful, they therefor need to take first of all the biophysical and built environment into account as the context for the project. Moreover, the institutions and actors and their interrelations are all defining space.

If we look at this trend of civic initiatives in general, a parallel can be drawn for local energy initiatives and how spatial policy can deal with these initiatives in such a way that the (spatial) policy goals regarding energy can be reached. First of all spatial policy needs to become aware of the fact that local energy initiatives actually can have a role in supporting spatial policy. Once spatial policy has become aware of the value of civic initiatives, it needs to explore what potentials these initiatives have within the energy transition and how they can add up with public and private interventions. Than spatial policy needs to look into the specific areas in which a benefit could be attained from civic initiatives. Finally, an exploration needs to be made on how spatial policy can facilitate local energy initiatives and which (planning) instruments can be used.

The objective of the research is to gain insight into the relational space of local energy initiatives and the conditions that shape community involvement and, in turn, to provide spatial policy guidance on local energy initiatives and to formulate which future spatial policy responses might be needed.