

Life cycle impact assessment for a district heating project with seasonal storage

A case study analysis for a project based in Bracht, Hessen, Germany

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1 Abstract

A Life Cycle Impact Assessment (LCIA) is performed for a solar district heating community project in Bracht, Rauschenberg, Germany.

2 Introduction

Heating is an important topic for energy consumption since it amounts to roughly half of the consumed energy in the EU. Currently, 60% of that energy is generated from fossil fuels [1]. District heating is a setup where one heating generator plant serves many households connected via pipes. District heating works in two ways: Either to utilise surplus heat from sources such as waste incineration plants for heating purposes in residential areas and service centers [2], or to use a dedicated source of energy, e.g. biomass or solar thermal collectors. There are 6000 existing district heating systems across the EU [1]. Process heating uses a similar setup but is targeted at industrial purposes, which usually require higher heat temperature.

Solar thermal collectors (STCs) are devices that absorb solar radiation and convert it into heat. There are different types of solar thermal collectors, including flat plate solar collectors, unglazed water collectors, and evacuated tube solar collectors. They are combined with heat pumps to bridge the gap between solar field produced water temperature and district heating delivery system required temperature [3]. According to [4], there are more than 300 large scale district heating systems globally that are powered with STCs, and more than 1200 STC systems that provide industrial process heat.

STCs are a mature technology. In 2023, the total operational solar thermal capacity reached 560 GWth, which covers roughly 800 km² of collector area [4]. STC-provided capacity varies seasonally depending on available sunlight. Sometimes STCs are used only for parts of the year, e.g. to enable turning off a biomass-powered plant in the summer since it would run

at extremely low capacity. STCs can be combined with a short term heat storage acting as buffer or a seasonal heat storage tank (e.g. underground hot water basin) to store extra heat from the hot season for the cold season, which incurs heat losses. If space restrictions require such a setup (or if land is cheaper), the geographical location of an STC can be remote from consumers and plants via pipelines (e.g., 4 km in Priština [1]). However, there is a trade-off since the remote location required laying the necessary pipes underground.

In scientific literature, LCA case studies exist for the district heating system in Milan [5] and Marseille [6]. LCA, in particular the ReCiPe method, has been used to assess the environmental impact of different STC powered district heating configurations by [7]. The outcome was that larger systems that serve many households have a lower environmental impact per energy unit served.

In [8], the authors provide an LCA study of a STC plant connected to the Geneva district heat network and find that there is no LCA data available for the coupling of large scale solar thermal installations and district heating networks, and provides suggested numbers that could be used to complement district heat production routes in the KBOB database.

For the community project in Bracht, while the economic viability of the project in comparison to energetic renovation was analysed by [9], the environmental impact has not yet been studied in detail. This is the subject of the given study.

3 Methodology and research questions

The foreground data is collected from various online sources and combined with background data from the Ecoinvent v3 database [10] and from the UVEK LCI database version DQRv2:2025 database [11]. Environmental impacts are assessed using the mid-point level Environmental Footprint (EF) method [12], and the Ecological Scarcity 2021 v1.04 method [13] at the single score level with UVEK LCI weighting set. The LCIA is performed using the SimaPro 9.6.0.1 software [14].

The research questions are formulated as follows:

- (1) What is the relevance of the additional electricity required in the setup (amounting to 6% of overall energy consumed) and the supplemental biomass boiler (amounting to 26% of overall energy consumed) with respect to the overall environmental impact? The hypothesis is that the additional electricity and biomass required will amount to a sizable part of the overall environmental impact.
- (2) How does the STC based system with seasonal heat storage compare to other heating technologies in terms of environmental impact? The comparison will include district heating from other sources that would be available in small communities (such as a heat pump or wood chips), and consumer side heating installations such as oil or gas boilers. The hypothesis is that the STC based system will have a lower environmental

impact compared to other district heating setups and to fossil energy based consumer installations.

- (3) What is the environmental impact contribution of the seasonal heat storage unit for the production, construction, and use stages in the life cycle? A sensitivity analysis will be performed to assess the benefits of the STC based system with a seasonal heat storage component included under several assumed loss coefficients for the storage component and the transport pipes system.

4 Goal and scope

The goal and scope definition of an LCA provides a description of the product system and its system boundaries, and a functional unit.

The district heating project that is the topic of this analysis is led by a cooperative comprising future household consumers and the local council. The project setup consists of a solar thermal collector field, a seasonal storage unit also called Pit Thermal Energy Storage (PTES), a heat pump which is using power from the grid, a buffer storage unit, a backup biomass combustion unit that if required can be used as an alternative source of heat (for the cases where there is no availability of heat from neither the solar collector nor the storage), and a distribution network for the customer households (see Figure 1). A receiver unit is installed in each participating household. There are at least 180 consumer households expected, which is roughly 60% of all households in the community.

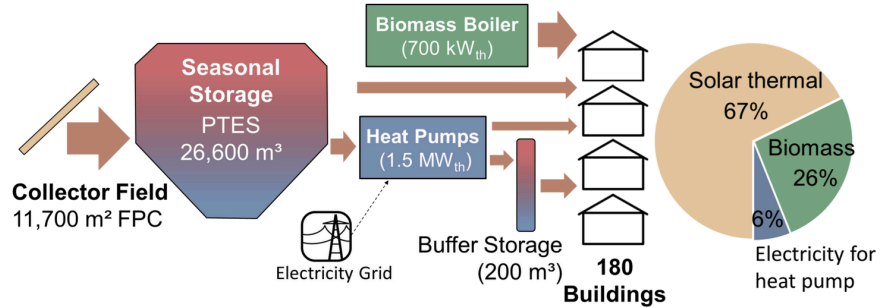


Figure 1: System overview for the Bracht community district heating network. (Source: University of Kassel)

The functional unit is defined to be 1 MegaJoule (MJ) of thermal energy provided to the consumer directly at the consumer site during the heating period. Using MJ instead of kilowatt-hours of thermal energy (kWh_{th}) ensures consistency with the UVEK processes for other forms of district heating in SimaPro that the comparison will be performed against.

The lifetime of the installation is assumed to be 50 years. The system diagram shown in Figure 2 describes the product system and its boundaries.

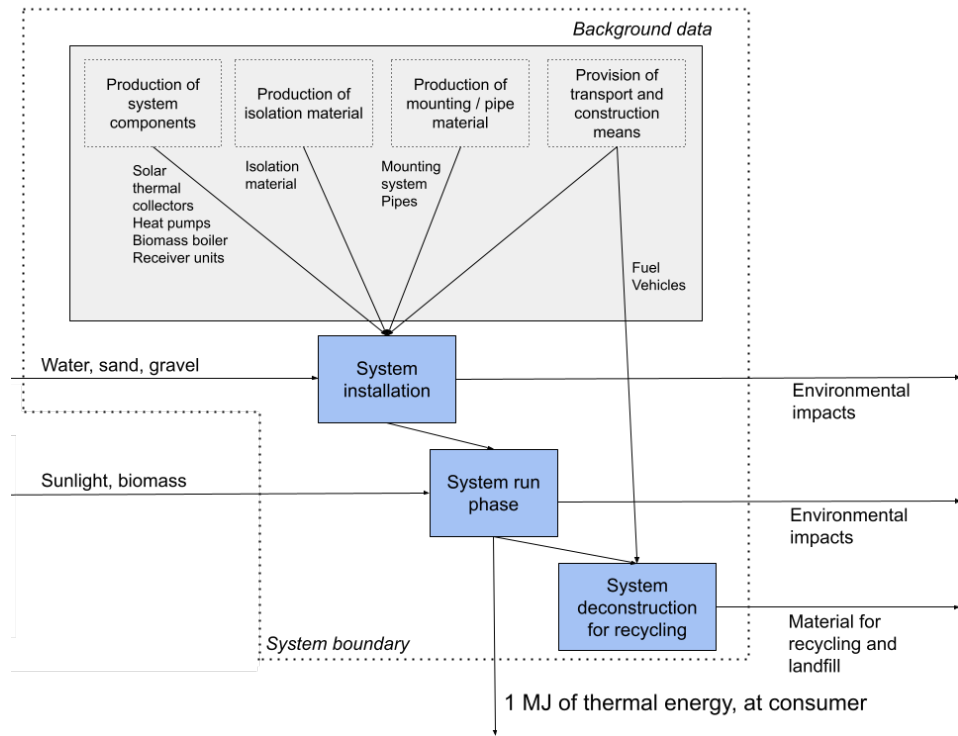


Figure 2: System diagram for the Bracht community district heating network, with functional unit as stated.

System deconstruction was modeled for the solar thermal collector field and the seasonal storage unit. Disposal (via municipal waste incineration) of the plastic material used for seasonal storage unit sealing and insulation was included in the modelling.

5 Life Cycle Inventory

There is a lot of information available on the project website [15], which has been used as the source for detailed life cycle inventory information for solar thermal collector field, seasonal storage unit, and heat preparation (heat pump, buffer storage, installation facility, and consumer installations) can be found in the supporting information appendix in Section 9.1. The heat transport network was modeled based on existing UVEK LCI data. The modelling default electricity source was chosen to be the European Network of Transmission System Operators for Electricity (ENTSO-E) production mix [11], aiming to make the model representative for a plant located in the European region.

The remainder of this section describes the assumptions for component lifetimes, electricity requirements and loss coefficients.

5.1 Component lifetimes

The planned lifetime for the Bracht plant is 50 years. The assumed individual component lifetimes and the resulting relevant multipliers are shown in Table 1. The assumed individual component lifetimes are in line with the assumptions used in [16].

Table 1

| Component | Years | Multiplier | Source |
|-----------------------------------|-------|------------|--------|
| Solar thermal collector | 30 | 1.67 | [17] |
| Seasonal storage unit | 30 | 1.67 | [16] |
| Heat pump | 20 | 2.5 | [18] |
| Heat buffer storage | 20 | 2.5 | [17] |
| Heat installation facility | 50 | 1 | [19] |
| Heat exchange station at consumer | 20 | 2.5 | [16] |
| Heat transport network | 50 | 1 | [16] |

5.2 Electrical power requirements and loss coefficient assumptions

Several estimations of annual collector output can be found in the relevant performance data from [20] for the solar thermal collectors used in this project. They are based on geographical location and on the desired output temperature. The geographically closest matching entry is 5.283 kWh per collector per year for the Würzburg location and 75 degrees output. For the given 855 collectors, this leads to an estimate of 4.517 MWh per year.

The Bracht documentation [21] states that in total, 2.700 MWh per year are expected to reach consumer households. This means that the assumed loss coefficients for the storage unit and in the pipes together is estimated to amount to a significant factor of 40% loss.

The electrical power is generated to 67% from the solar thermal collectors and stored (2.258 MWh), to 26% from biomass (904 MWh), and to 6% from the grid (209 MWh). This is the percentage distribution included in Figure 1.

There is no detailed information how the expected loss was estimated. However, based on the published numbers and an assumed 20% loss coefficient in the pipes, the resulting expected loss in the seasonal storage unit can be calculated at 50%. These assumptions were used in the modelling. Further discussion of loss coefficients and a related sensitivity analysis can be found in ?@sec-sensitive.

6 Results

For answering the first research question about the relative environmental impact of the additional electricity and the supplemental biomass boiler, the influence of the different components of the solar thermal district heating system on environmental impact was assessed using the Ecological Scarcity 2021 v1.04 method at the single score level with UVEK LCI weighting set.

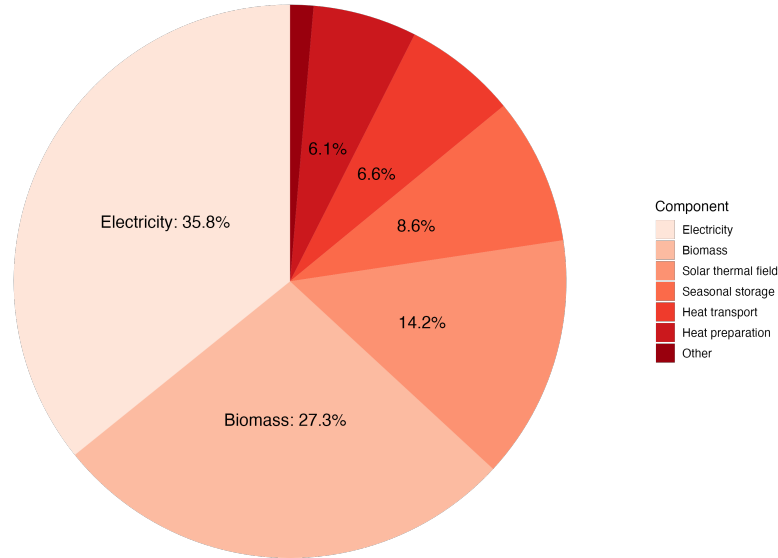


Figure 3: Relative environmental impact of Bracht community district heating network system components using the Ecological Scarcity 2021 v1.04 method at the single score level, using the UVEK LCI weighting set.

The results are shown in Figure 3. While the solar thermal collectors contribute two thirds of the energy production (see Figure 1), their relative environmental impact amounts to less than 15%. The biomass and electricity (ENTSO-E as discussed in Section 5) required in the setup for one third of the energy production contribute two thirds of the environmental impact. This is the combined environmental impact based on the UVEK LCI weighting for the relative importance of the damage categories.

For further detail on the damage categories involved, Figure 4 provides the individual results for the most relevant damage categories *Climate change*, *Particulate matter*, *Eutrophication, marine*, *Land use*, *Resource use, minerals and metals* and *Resource use, fossils*. It reveals that the biomass required in the setup is the dominant influence in the damage categories land

use, particulate matter (PM), and marine eutrophication. Electricity dominates the impact for fossil resource use and climate change. The resource use is most heavily influenced by heat preparation and the solar thermal collectors. The seasonal storage unit impacts climate change and fossil resource use.

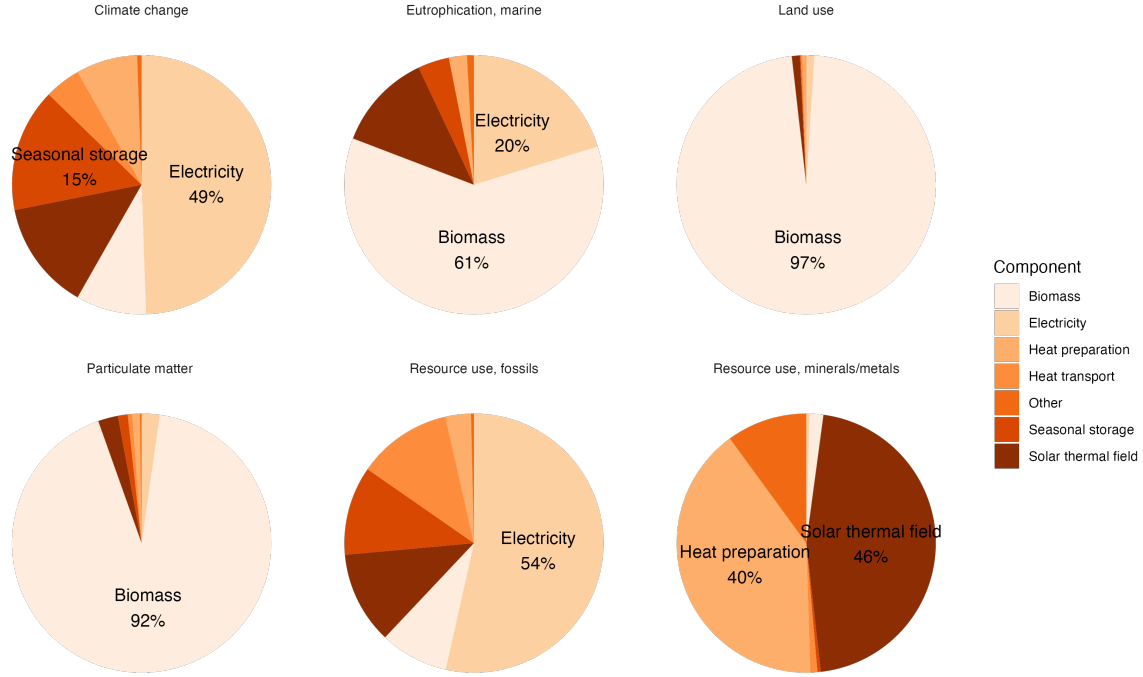


Figure 4: Relative environmental impact of Bracht community district heating network system components using the Environmental Footprint Method

To summarize, the electricity and biomass required to power and supplement the system play the dominant roles with respect to the overall environmental impact.

The electricity use can not be avoided since it is required to run the heat pump. Its impact can be lowered by using green energy, which will be investigated in Section 7.2. The opportunities and effects of using less biomass by lowering heat loss coefficients are assessed in Section 7.3.

To address the second research question, a comparison of the environmental impact of the heat generated from the STC based district heating system with seasonal heat storage to other heating technologies is performed. Figure 5 shows the results for comparing the environmental

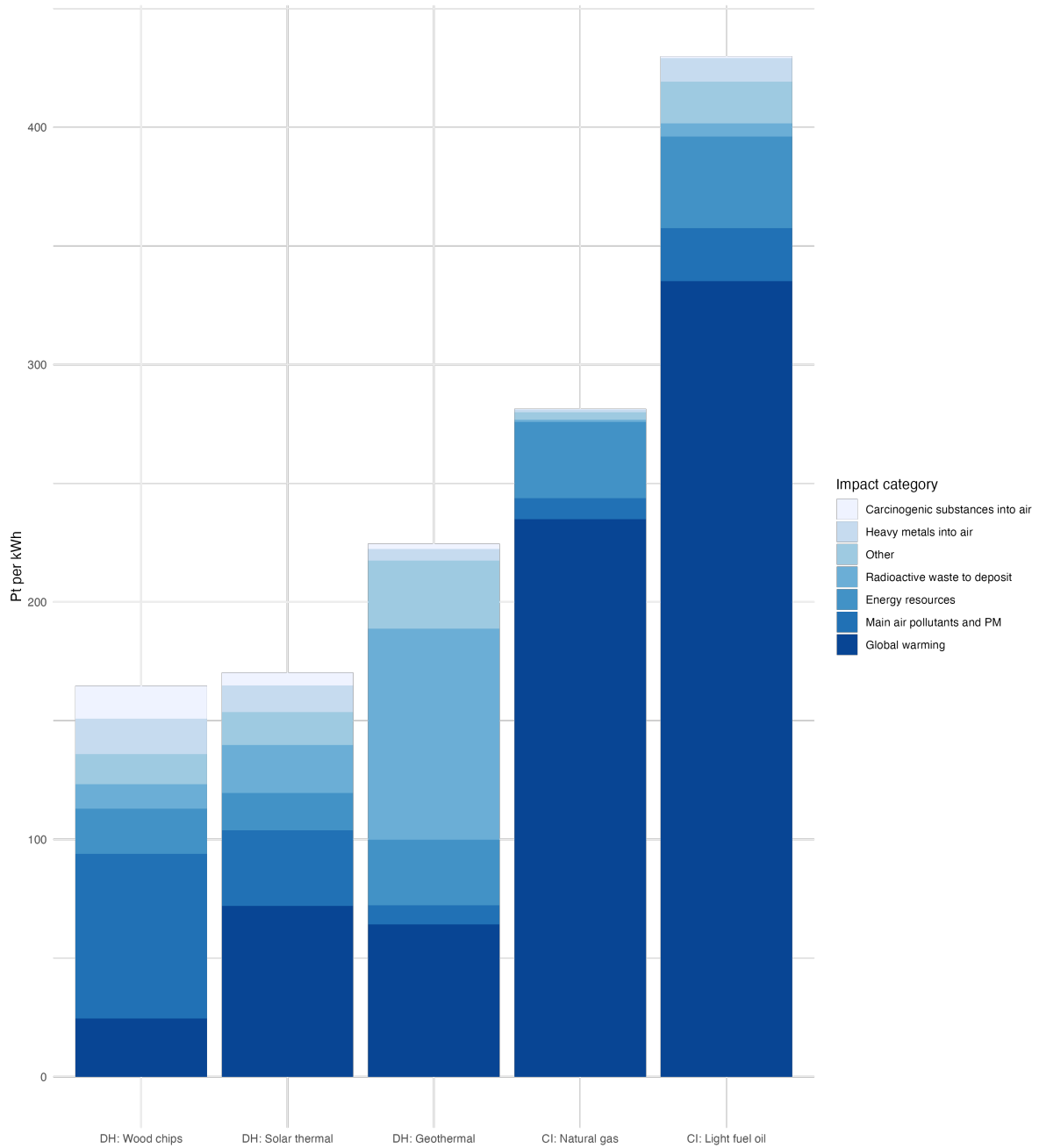


Figure 5: Comparison of environmental impact of Bracht community district heating network to other energy sources for district heating (wood chips, heatpump), and to other types consumer installations (gas, oil). Analysis based on the Ecological Scarcity 2021 v1.04 method at the single score level, with UVEK LCI weighting set.

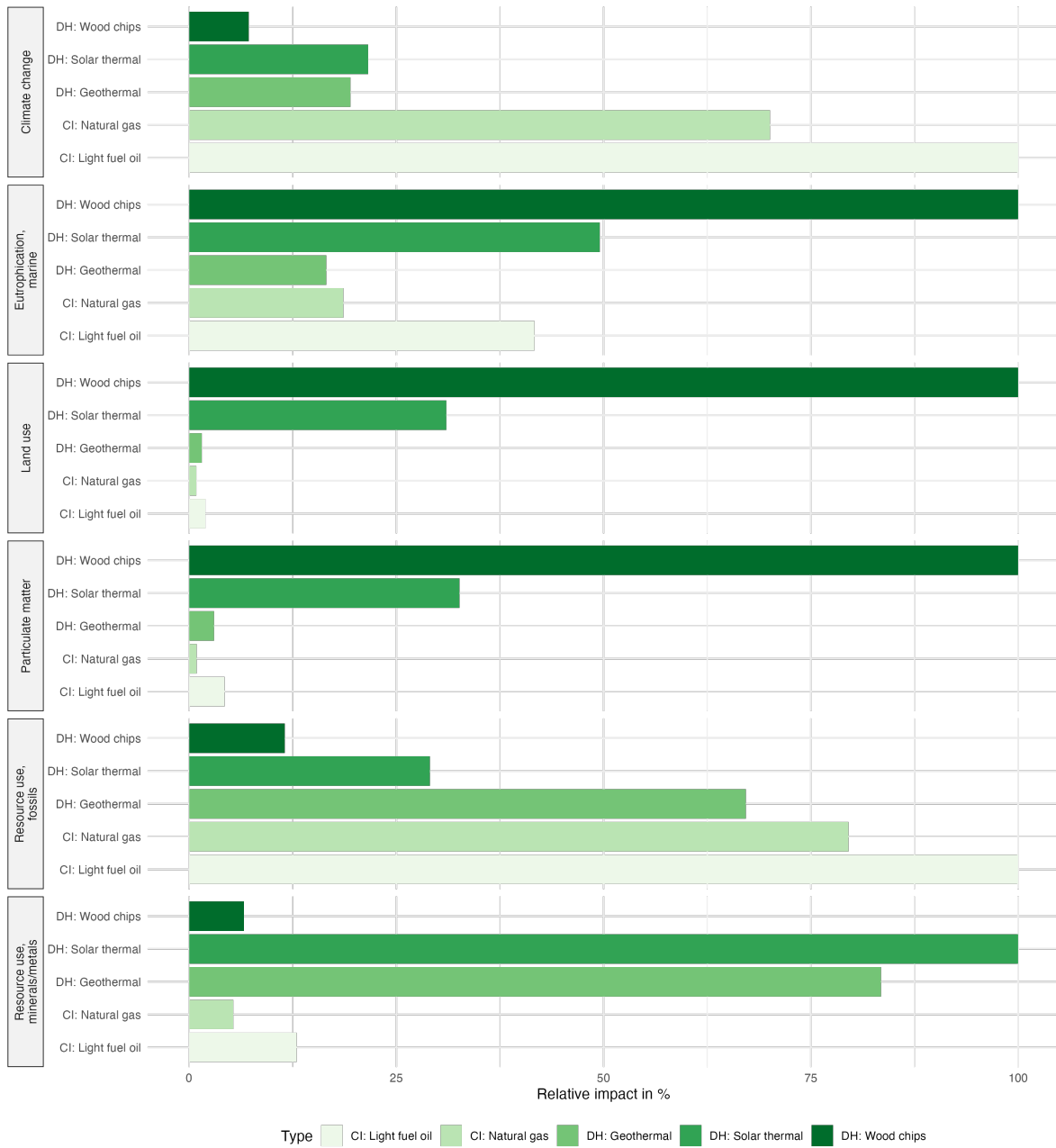


Figure 6: Damage assessment using the Environmental Footprint Method, visualized as relative environmental impacts in comparison.

impacts of solar thermal based district network heat to other forms of district heating (DH) available in small communities with energy sources such as wood chips (biomass) or geothermal heat pump, and to the usually available consumer side heating installations (CI) such as a oil or gas boiler. This was assessed using the Ecological Scarcity 2021 v1.04 method at the single score level with UVEK LCI weighting set. The results are shown in environmental impact points per kWh of heat.

The result is that the heat produced by the Bracht plant shows the second lowest environmental impact compared to the other heating technologies. The largest contributor is the “Global warming” category. As already shown in Figure 4, this is caused mostly by the electricity requirements, and to a lesser extent by the seasonal storage unit and the solar thermal collectors. The lowest environmental impact is returned for the district heating system based on wood chips as the energy source.

Figure 6 provides the individual results for the most relevant damage categories. These confirm that oil and gas boilers have a very high impact in the damage category climate change (which is equivalent to global warming in the Ecological Scarcity methods), and reveals that they the highest in fossil resource use. District heating with wood chips as the energy source has the relative worst impact in three categories: marine eutrophication, land use, and particulate matter (PM). While the latter was visible in Figure 5 and has a sizeable impact on the overall single score, the former two have no significant effect. The district heating systems with solar thermal based and geothermal energy source have the highest results for the metal and minerals resource use.

7 Discussion

TBD

7.1 Modeling limitations

- Winter electricity
- Heatpump 24x: Could be causing too much resource use for minerals and metals
- Transport network lifetime 30 years / 50 years: Not dominant

7.2 Sensitivity analysis: Source of electricity

This is for the first research question

TBD: Add results for a couple of different electricity sources

7.3 Sensitivity analysis: Loss coefficients

This is for the third research question

TBD: Add results for lower loss in pipes and lower loss in SSU

8 Conclusion

A case study life cycle assessment was performed for the solar district heating community project in Bracht, Rauschenberg, Germany. The results compare favorably to other heating technologies in terms of environmental impact. To further improve, the recommendations are (1) to consider a lower operating temperature for the system to achieve better overall efficiency through avoided heat losses, (2) to use green energy for running the heat pump, and (3) to lower or even completely remove the amount of biomass burnt by improving the heat loss coefficients for storage unit and transmission pipes.

9 Supporting information

This section documents the supporting information related to the life cycle inventory in Section 9.1, the exact data used for process modelling in SimaPro in Section 9.2, and the project organization in Section 9.3.

9.1 Life Cycle Inventory

There are several components described in the following sections: solar thermal collector, seasonal storage unit, and heat preparation.

9.1.1 Solar thermal collector (STC)

The relevant data for the solar thermal collector can be found in Table 2.

Table 2

| Dimension | Value | Source |
|-----------|---|----------------|
| Size | 11'638 m^2 (855 x 13.6 m^2) | [22] |
| Type | Flat-plate collectors Vitosol 100-F XF13 Viessmann | [22] [23] [20] |
| Land use | 23.500 m^2 | [22] |

| Dimension | Value | Source |
|----------------------------------|---------------|----------------|
| Mounting infrastructure material | 15 t steel | [15] |
| Collector weight | 50 kg / m^2 | Own assumption |
| Production country | China | Own assumption |
| Transport per container ship | 8000 km | Own assumption |
| Transport per lorry | 1000 km | Own assumption |

9.1.2 Seasonal storage unit (SSU)

The relevant data for the seasonal storage unit can be found in Table 3. A picture of the floating cover can be found in Figure 7.

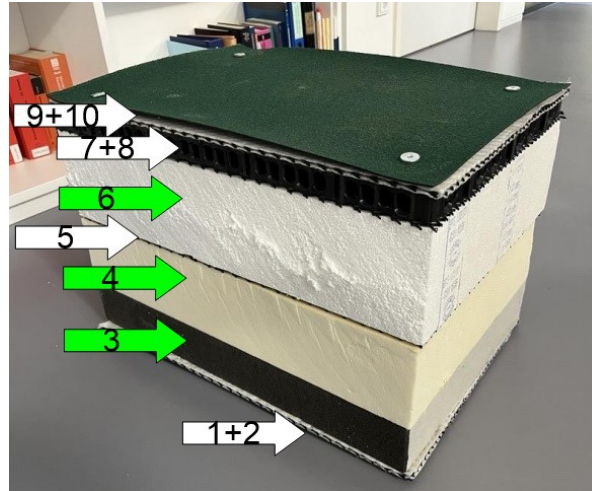


Figure 7: Floating cover profile. Source: Bracht community.

Table 3

| Dimension | Value | Source |
|-------------------|---|------------------------|
| Volume | 26'600 m^3 | Figure 1 |
| Resource: water | 26'600 m^3 filled from local source | [24] |
| Cover layer 1, 10 | Polyethylen (HDPE) sealing membranes 1.5 mm, 1.5 kg / m^2 | [24], estimated weight |
| Cover layer 2, 9 | Fleece (0.1 kg / m^2) laminated plastic grid (HDPE, 0.5 kg / m^2) | [24], estimated weight |

| Dimension | Value | Source |
|-------------------------------|---|------------------------|
| Cover layer 3 | Foam glass, 8.33 kg / m^2 | [24] |
| Cover layer 4 | Polyurethane (bauder foam): 3.125 kg / m^2 | [24] |
| Cover layer 5, 7, 8 | Airing gap made of plastic grid, 0.5 kg / m^2 each | [24], estimated weight |
| Cover layer 6 | Polystyrene (XPS), 3 kg / m^2 | [24] |
| Floating cover dimensions | 70 m x 70 m = 4900 m^2 | [25] |
| Floating cover weight | $2 * (1.5 + 0.1 + 0.5) + 8.33 + 3.125 + 1.5 + 3 = 20.155$ kg / m^2 | Calculation |
| Ground liner | Polyethylen (HDPE), 2.5mm, 2.5 kg / m^2 | [24], estimated weight |
| Ground liner dimensions | Bottom 20 m x 20 m, vertical height 15 m, surface area on each of the four sides 5250 m^2 | [25] |
| Ground liner weight | 2.5 kg / m^2 | Assumption |
| Production country | China | Assumption |
| Transport per container ship | 8000 km | Assumption |
| Transport per lorry | 1000 km | Assumption |
| Required construction process | Excavator 26.600 m^3 | Figure 1 |

9.1.3 Heat preparation (HP)

The relevant data for the heat preparation unit can be found in Table 4.

Table 4

| Dimension | Value | Source |
|----------------------------|---|----------------------------------|
| Heat pump | 2x Carrier Aquaforce 61XWH-ZE (630 kW max electrical input power) | [22] [26] |
| Electricity requirements | 209 MWh per year | Own calculation, see Section 5.2 |
| Buffer storage | ca. 200 m^3 = 200'000 l | Figure 1 |
| Biomass boiler | Mawera boiler with 700 kW thermal power | [22] |
| Controller | Vitocontrol 200-M | [22] [27] |
| Heat installation facility | 50 m^2 | Own assumption |

9.2 SimaPro Data

Table 5 and Table 6 show the parameters and calculated parameters that were defined as helpers for modelling the solar thermal based district heating process in Simapro. The data for the process itself is shown in Figure 8.

Table 5

| Name | Value | Comment |
|----------------------|-------|---|
| Plant-size-m2 | 23500 | The total size of the plant in sqm |
| STC-size-m2 | 11638 | The total size of the STC panels in sqm |
| STC-weight-per-m2 | 50 | The weight of the STC per sqm |
| STC-prod-MWh-per-a | 2700 | Production from the STC per year in MWh |
| Lifetime | 50 | The lifetime of the plant in years |
| MWhtoMJ | 3600 | Conversion from MWh to MJ |
| Mult30To50 | 1.67 | Multiplier for components with 30 years lifetime |
| Mult20To50 | 2.5 | Multiplier for components with 20 years lifetime |
| SSU-volume-m3 | 26600 | The volume of the SSU |
| SSU-top-m2 | 4900 | The size of the SSU at the top (floating cover) in sqm |
| SSU-side-m2 | 5250 | The size of the SSU at each of the four sides in sqm |
| SSU-bottom-m2 | 5400 | The size of the SSU at the ground in sqm |
| Steel-kg | 15000 | The weight of the required steel for the STC foundation |
| Freight-ship-dist-km | 8000 | The transport distance per freight ship in km |
| Lorry-dist-km | 1000 | The transport distance per lorry in km |

Table 6

| Name | Value | Comment |
|----------------------|---|--|
| STC-prod-MJ-lifetime | STC-prod-MWh-per-a * Lifetime * MWhtoMJ | The total production from the STC over the plant lifetime in MJ |
| STC-weight-t-total | (STC-size-m2 * STC-weight-per-m2 * Mult30To50 + Steel-kg) / 1000 | The total transport weight of the STC over the plant lifetime in tons |
| SSU-ground-m2 | SSU-bottom-m2 + 4 * SSU-side-m2 | The total size of the SSU that is touching the ground on the bottom and sides in sqm |

| | | | | |
|----|--|--|------|-----------------------------------|
| 1 | Products | | | |
| 2 | district heat, at consumer, solar thermal, 1MW/MJ/RER U | | 1 MJ | |
| 3 | | | | |
| 4 | Resources | | | |
| 5 | Water, cooling, unspecified natural origin, DE | SSU_volume_m3/STC_prod_MJ_lifetime | m3 | SSU |
| 6 | Land use II-III | Plant_size_m2*Lifetime/STC_prod_MJ_lifetime | m2a | Total plant |
| 7 | | | | |
| 8 | Materials/fuels | | | |
| 9 | steel, electric, unalloyed, at plant/CH U | Steel_kg/STC_prod_MJ_lifetime | kg | STC |
| 10 | flat plate collector for PVT, aluminium copper absorber, at plant/CH/I U | (STC_size_m2*Mult30To50)/STC_prod_MJ_lifetime | m2 | STC |
| 11 | transport, transoceanic freight ship/tkm/OCE U | (STC_weight_t_total * Freight_ship_dist_km)/STC_prod_MJ_lifetime | tkm | STC |
| 12 | transport, freight, lorry 40-50 metric ton, EURO 5/RER U | (STC_weight_t_total * Lorry_dist_km)/STC_prod_MJ_lifetime | tkm | STC |
| 13 | Polyethylene, HDPE, granulate, at plant/RER U | (SSU_top_m2*1.5*2*Mult30To50)/STC_prod_MJ_lifetime | kg | SSU layer 1, 10: Sealing membrane |
| 14 | Polyethylene, HDPE, granulate, at plant/RER U | (SSU_top_m2*0.5*2*Mult30To50)/STC_prod_MJ_lifetime | kg | SSU layer 2, 9: Plastic grid |
| 15 | Fleece, polyethylene, at plant/RER U | (SSU_top_m2*0.1*2*Mult30To50)/STC_prod_MJ_lifetime | kg | SSU layer 2, 9: Fleece |
| 16 | Foam glass, at plant/RER U | (SSU_top_m2*8.33*Mult30To50)/STC_prod_MJ_lifetime | kg | SSU layer 3: Glapor |
| 17 | Polyurethane, rigid foam, at plant/RER U | (SSU_top_m2*3.125*Mult30To50)/STC_prod_MJ_lifetime | kg | SSU layer 4: Bauder Foam |
| 18 | Polyethylene, HDPE, granulate, at plant/RER U | (SSU_top_m2*0.5*3*Mult30To50)/STC_prod_MJ_lifetime | kg | SSU layer 5, 7, 8: Plastic grid |
| 19 | Polystyrene, extruded (XPS), at plant/RER U | (SSU_top_m2*3*Mult30To50)/STC_prod_MJ_lifetime | kg | SSU layer 6: XPS |
| 20 | Polyethylene, HDPE, granulate, at plant/RER U | ((SSU_ground_m2)*2.5*Mult30To50)/STC_prod_MJ_lifetime | kg | SSU ground liner |
| 21 | transport, transoceanic freight ship/tkm/OCE U | (((((SSU_top_m2*20.155) + (SSU_ground_m2*2.5))*Mult30To50)/1000 * Freight_ship_dist_km)/STC_prod_MJ_lifetime | tkm | SSU transport |
| 22 | transport, freight, lorry 40-50 metric ton, EURO 5/RER U | (((((SSU_top_m2*20.155) + (SSU_ground_m2*2.5))*Mult30To50)/1000 * Lorry_dist_km)/STC_prod_MJ_lifetime | tkm | SSU transport |
| 23 | excavation, hydraulic digger, average/m3/CH U | 26600/STC_prod_MJ_lifetime | m3 | SSU excavation |
| 24 | heat pump, brine-water, 50kW/RER/I U | (25*Mult20To50)/STC_prod_MJ_lifetime | p | HP heat pump |
| 25 | Heat storage 2000l, at plant/CH/I U | (100*Mult20To50)/STC_prod_MJ_lifetime | p | HP heat pump |
| 26 | Building, hall/CH/I U | 50/STC_prod_MJ_lifetime | m2 | HP building |
| 27 | Heat exchanger of Mini CHP plant/CH/I U | (180*Mult20To50)/STC_prod_MJ_lifetime | p | Distribution infrastructure |
| 28 | transport, district heat, large area network, for warm water/MJ/CH/I U | (STC_prod_MWh_per_a*Lifetime)/STC_prod_MJ_lifetime | MWh | Lifetime 30 years |
| 29 | | | | |
| 30 | Electricity/heat | | | |
| 31 | electricity, production mix ENTSO/kWh/ENTSO U | (209*Lifetime)/STC_prod_MJ_lifetime | MWh | |
| 32 | heat, mixed chips from forest, at furnace 1000kW/MJ/CH U | (904*Lifetime)/STC_prod_MJ_lifetime | MWh | |
| 33 | | | | |
| 34 | Waste to treatment | | | |
| 35 | deconstruction, average/CH U | (STC_weight_t_total*1000 + (((SSU_top_m2*20.155) + (SSU_bottom_m2*2.5))*Mult30To50))/STC_prod_MJ_lifetime | kg | |
| 36 | disposal, polyethylene, 0.4% water, to municipal incineration/kg/CH U | ((SSU_top_m2*5.5 + SSU_ground_m2*2.5)*Mult30To50) / STC_prod_MJ_lifetime | kg | |
| 37 | disposal, polyurethane, 0.2% water, to municipal incineration/kg/CH U | ((SSU_top_m2*3.125)*Mult30To50) / STC_prod_MJ_lifetime | kg | |
| 38 | disposal, polystyrene, 0.2% water, to municipal incineration/kg/CH U | ((SSU_top_m2*3)*Mult30To50) / STC_prod_MJ_lifetime | kg | |
| 39 | | | | |

Figure 8: SimaPro data excerpt.

9.3 Project organization

In this section, the time plan and the meeting notes are documented.

9.3.1 Time planning

Figure 9 documents the time plan that was followed for this project. The live version can be found [here](#). Access is given upon request.

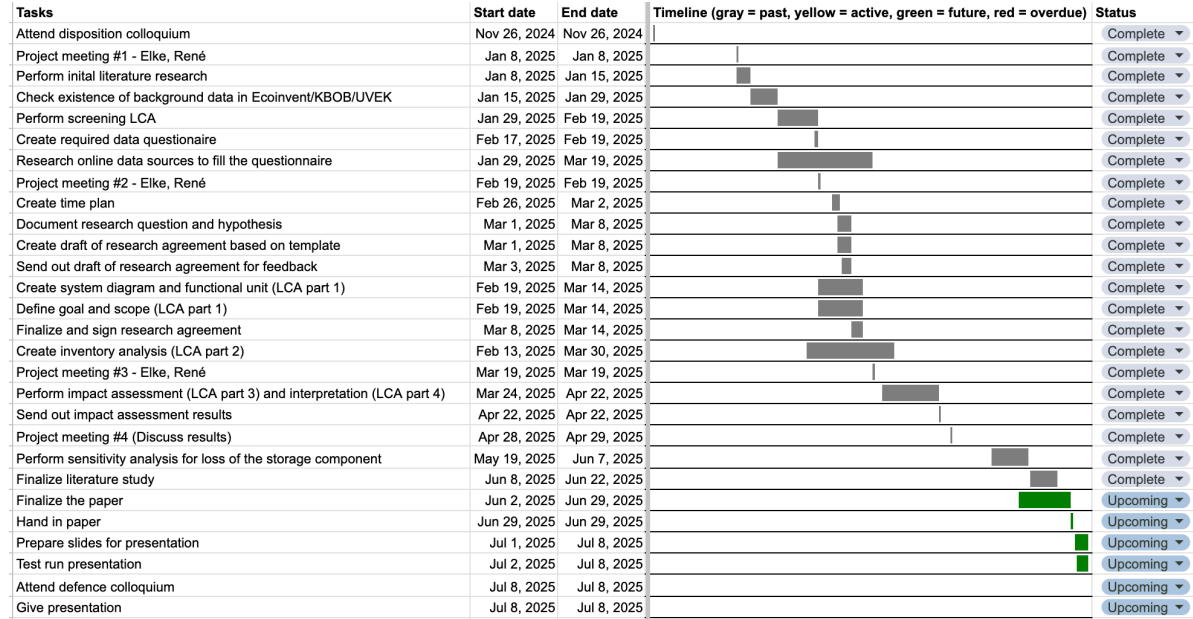


Figure 9: Gantt chart used for time planning.

9.3.2 Meeting notes

The notes for the meetings can be found [here](#). Access is given upon request.

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