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for a sustainable future

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Fostering Collective Engagement in European Energy Transitions: Principal Drivers and Support Strategies

In Europe, the engagement of citizens and communities as a way of moving forward the sustainable energy transition has become a question of growing concern. To accelerate the energy transition, citizens need to be put at the heart of these processes, as they will contribute to attaining its targets and goals individually, in groups and as communities.

The term 'energy citizenship' is intended in a broad sense to signify **various ways in which citizens can engage in energy transition processes**, inter alia renewable energy generation, political action and consumption-based activities such as energy saving and energy efficiency behaviours. However, people are seen by actors in the energy system - themselves included - primarily in their role as individual consumers and less in their capacity as citizens and collectivities. Hence, the dominant paradigm of citizen engagement revolves primarily around individual action in the marketplace.[1] At the same time, there are increasing calls for more attention to be paid to energy 'demand',[2] **further work is needed to promote collective participation in energy transitions**. People need not solely engage through changing their consumption patterns in their homes, but also through becoming prosumers of clean energy, striving collectively to change systems of production and reduce their overall energy usage, and engaging in direct political action.

This policy brief provides policy guidance, underpinned by new evidence acquired in the framework of the international research initiative DIALOGUES, as to how to progress from the important mobilisation of individual engagement in the energy transition towards more substantial group and community engagement. The analysis covers eight European countries: Austria, Bulgaria, Germany, Greece, Italy, Norway, Switzerland, and Türkiye. The proposed recommendations for policy action need to be adapted to the specific contexts in which policymakers are trying to provide pathways towards deeper energy citizenship.

KEY POINTS

- The dominant paradigm of citizen engagement revolves primarily around individual action in the marketplace. There is **ample space and opportunities for energy citizenship to move toward more collective and political participation.**
- The collective pathway **enables more people to exercise and deepen their energy citizenship**. Constraints to the individual pathway may be overcome through collective forms of public engagement.
- Collective measures are **much more effective in bringing about social change**. Collective forms of energy citizenship are closely linked to a reconfiguration of social roles which in turn tends to result in socio-technical transformations.
- **Political activism may allow for the participation of people who would otherwise not be able to act individually.**
- **Local authorities are key enablers of collective action** in the field of energy. Policymakers at all levels should contribute to using the large untapped potential of local government.
- Local governance actions need to be devised and implemented **in consideration of social groups within the municipality which may be underrepresented** in collective citizen-driven initiatives.

Collective Engagement and Its Role in Energy Transitions in Europe

In recent years, **new forms of collective energy action have started to emerge**, enabling a more active role of consumers in the energy system.[3] These collective action initiatives can be in various forms, including grassroots associations for and against renewables, community energy initiatives, collective renewable energy prosumers, and renewable or citizen energy communities. Local communities across Europe are already getting involved in initiatives such as energy cooperatives, peer-to-peer trading and collective self-consumption to reduce, manage, generate or purchase energy. Furthermore, those undertakings can also include wider objectives and activities (e.g. environmental awareness), as well as contribute to enhancing knowledge and acceptability of renewable energy and clean technologies and reducing consumption across society.

While it is crucial to acknowledge the importance of all forms of energy citizenship and avoid hierarchising them, it is notable that **the collective pathway enables a greater number of people to exercise and deepen their energy citizenship**. Constraints to the individual pathway, such as time, effort, economic and financial capital, knowledge and technical capabilities, may be overcome through collective forms of public engagement.[4] For example, while in reality few individuals or households have the finances or the physical space to install a self-generation renewable energy system, collective schemes and collective ownership structures pool individual resources and efforts. Furthermore, many argue that collective citizen-driven initiatives represent a primary solution to engage and empower people to expand their role in the design and implementation of energy transition strategies.

Additionally, the findings of over 80 in-depth interviews with energy experts across the eight countries show that the interviewees more strongly emphasise collective rather than individual actions, pointing out that **collective measures are much more effective in bringing about social change.**[5] For instance, energy professionals in Greece, Italy and Germany contend that collective organisations can foster social transformations by enabling people to engage in energy citizenship practices in a social context. The collective pathway to energy citizenship comes down to people coordinating their actions to influence the market, institutional and public policy frameworks, as well as communities and other individuals.[6] Collective forms of energy citizenship are closely linked to a reconfiguration of social roles which in turn, through different channels of social resonance, tends to result in socio-technical transformations (e.g. of legislation, and market structures).[7] In some of the examined states, for example, Austria, collective citizen-driven initiatives are observed to **have a considerable impact on regional and national policies.**[8] In addition, such initiatives can significantly contribute to the proliferation of renewable energy sources (RES) projects and the upscaling of technological and other innovations.

Collective forms of public participation in energy transitions are attracting increasing interest among different types of policy stakeholders. The EU has acknowledged and addressed this collective dimension of energy use in recent policy documents such as the Clean Energy Package (CEP) which elaborates on the central role that collectively acting consumers can play in the energy transition.[9] Communities and individuals are given the right to produce, store, consume and sell the produced energy and are recognised as primary actors in the energy transition. Furthermore, relevant literature has emerged to understand the conditions in which these collective energy initiatives can occur and thrive and their contributions towards a zero-carbon society. Academic literature has also shown interest in how community energy interacts with energy justice, redistribution of costs, and the benefits of the transition, particularly for low-income households.[10] Similarly, the creation, scalability, and initial conditions for community energy initiatives have been researched in specific countries or theoretical approaches. An overarching finding is that **community energy is heterogeneous, both in its structures and objectives**; collective initiatives may differ in drivers, motives, contexts, and actors involved.

Collective action, including participation in energy communities, is influenced by a plethora of drivers, including: socio-demographic (education, age, gender, income, location etc.), psychological (knowledge, awareness, emotions, values, beliefs, attitudes, group membership and social influence, perceived moral responsibility etc.), and situational (laws, regulations, available technology, pricing, socio-cultural and socio-economic characteristics). While these factors and their interrelationships are not yet fully understood,[11] knowledge and finance are often pointed out as key enablers, and current legislation, policies and infrastructure as main barriers.[12]

A survey among the participants in eight Citizen Action Labs held in seven of the studied countries – Bulgaria, Germany, Greece, Italy, Norway, Switzerland and Türkiye – has found that people do have the information, but fewer have the financial resources, yet most feel that they are limited in their capacity to act on change. This 'information-resources-action' gap may point to a lack of understanding on how collective action might take place in an energy transition, beyond individual decisions in a marketplace. The Citizen Action Labs sought to contribute to ways of engaging in the energy transition, by **experimenting directly with collective forms of action.**

Drivers and Opportunities for Collective Engagement

Research shows that there is **ample space and opportunities for energy citizenship to move toward more collective and political participation** so as to help foster systemic change.13 Policymaking ought to focus on supporting this shift by empowering citizens to act. While all forms of civil involvement may have both individual and collective dimensions, energy production and direct political action place a particularly strong emphasis on collective actions and political agency.

Collective Renewable Energy Prosumerism

In a collective dimension, energy prosumerism has been deemed a social movement in and of itself as it reconfigures social roles and enables citizens to exert more significant influence in the energy sector.[14] In the context of energy communities, citizens can become involved in varied capacities and activities, including investing in clean energy (e.g. in the form of energy cooperatives) and increasing energy efficiency. Existing energy communities involve municipal entities, households, private businesses, public institutions, cooperatives, and farms.[15] It is observed in the expert interviews that, in many of the countries, **energy communities constitute critical vehicles for citizen participation** fostering a pronounced commitment to the energy transition.[16] Inter alia, they encourage people to become 'protagonists in the energy transition' and more aware of the rights and responsibilities they have therein.[17]

In the case of Greece, there is consensus among the interviewed energy professionals that energy communities are the best way to deploy RES as they **enable citizens to be co-investors, participants as well as co-beneficiaries** of both immediate and longer-term economic, environmental and social benefits. Similarly, in Italy, energy communities are believed to be an especially successful form of engagement which allows people to get involved in strategic decision-making as regards the energy models in their neighbourhood, community and even country. Importantly, energy communities provide an alternative to top-down mechanisms for civil engagement. For instance, experts in Austria point out that, presently, public involvement takes place at the regional level utilizing energy communities or 'citizen participation models' and not via vertical channels established at the national level.

However, in other states, collective prosumerism – including in the context of energy communities – is still rare. In both Bulgaria and Türkiye, while there have been other forms of collective civil action in support of the national energy transitions, energy communities are yet to be founded. In the case of Germany, energy professionals contend that energy communities are essential catalysts of public participation and sustainable energy behaviours but that their number is still insufficient.

Across the eight countries, findings from the expert interviews and the Citizen Action Labs show that the principal impediments to public participation in collective citizen-driven initiatives are **legislative, policy, institutional and administrative** deficiencies. Furthermore, hindrances that play out in some states are popular scepticism of concepts and models promoted by the EU as well as climate sceptic perceptions and negative public opinion of RES as politicised and expensive energy choices.[18] In Germany, the incomplete transposition of the relevant EU acquis into national law is obstructing collective innovations, such as new business models.[19] In Bulgaria, citizens are hindered by the lack of public awareness about the energy transition, regulatory framework, and incentives to empower them to become prosumers and establish energy communities. Insufficient understanding of the key aspects and requirements of the energy transition by politicians and officials at all levels of governance is also a major obstacle.

Additionally, the barriers to civil participation in collective initiatives may be experienced differently by various socio-economic groups and groups with protected characteristics (e.g. age, gender, ethnicity etc.). Policymakers ought to be aware that promoting collective undertakings does not automatically translate into inclusivity. It is the recruitment strategies, composition and rules of participation of initiatives that determine their inclusivity. That collective organisations typically tackle local issues, conflicts, investments and solutions tends to render their membership homogenous, particularly in smaller settlements and less diverse communities.

Important drivers of citizen engagement in collective initiatives, according to experts in several countries, including Italy and Switzerland, are **monetary interest, collective belonging, trust, and structural changes**. The head of an Italian energy institution reckons that energy communities in the country will not thrive 'as long as there is no broad evidence of saving in the bills'.[20] Low levels of trust in public institutions as facilitators of civil participation in energy communities and other collective endeavours are prominent in many countries, for example, Türkiye and Bulgaria.[21] It appears that low trust in state institutions is in part linked to existing cumbersome administrative procedures for RES deployment. Social dynamics, such as social trust, social capital, community consciousness and a sense of collective belonging, are other highly relevant factors for successful collaboration among citizens. Notably, strong cooperation is both a prerequisite for the formation of collective initiatives and a result of their operation:

'Collective action allows for social interaction. Successful energy initiatives are also successful, because of the people and the social benefits they offer.' [22]

Energy issues – as directly relevant to climate change – appear to inherently stimulate a search for collective forms of consciousness. Climate change seems to provoke a shared sense of anxiety and collective identification with a global threat. In turn, this may encourage people to start looking for communities in which to make sense of and act towards resolving the multi-level collective action problem of climate change.

Collective Energy-related Political Action

Engagement of citizens in the energy transition as political subjects emphasises collective actions, such as participation in energy-related decision-making and political activism through social movements. Collective citizen participation in decision-making on energy policies, in particular, is a **major channel for substantive energy citizenship**.[23] It can take multiple forms, for example, co-creating solutions with government authorities through deliberative processes, and providing direct feedback through mechanisms for public consultation and surveillance.[24] Energy communities are salient structures through which citizens can take part in decision-making as a collective. Depending on the scale of energy communities, members may be able to influence energy regulation and policy, for instance through lobbying. However, it is important to recognise that not all energy communities embody principles of collective political action. Apolitical energy communities (e.g. oriented solely towards prosumerism and/or renovations) have been critiqued for unduly focusing on consumerist tenets and overlooking **potentials for impacting underlying systems and patterns of energy consumption and production.**

Collective citizen participation in the making of energy-related decisions is paramount to ensuring procedural justice in the energy transition. Relatedly, it is crucial in terms of **securing public trust as well as acceptance and viability of major socio-economic transformations** linked to the energy transition.[25] For instance, Swiss energy experts who have been interviewed maintain that envisioning and creating just energy systems requires that all citizens be part of the process of arriving at present and future decisions and that the collective dimension of energy citizenship is particularly relevant to this end. It has also been stressed that such forms of collective participation necessitate improved access to knowledge and information on energy matters through the provision of educational programs.

When it comes to collective political activism taking place against the backdrop of multifaceted and inter-related energy, climate and environmental crises, it is notable that this expression of energy citizenship poses a challenge to collective action theories and practice.[26] While the atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases (GHG) is a global problem, the effects of climate change on people and regions vary depending on geographic location and capacities for adaptation and mitigation. Policymakers need to take into account that those most affected by climate change may not be represented or compensated for climate damages and injustices.

On a positive note, collective **political activism may allow for the participation of people who would otherwise not be able to act individually**.[27] Certain individuals and groups in society may experience heightened vulnerabilities and barriers in the face of exposing themselves as energy and climate activists. Social movements, as well as other forms of collectivities, can provide protection and benefits in such cases. What is more, it has been observed that collective formations for political activism are more diverse (e.g. than many energy communities) in terms of participation by members of different social groups. Therefore, by considering such complexities and engaging meaningfully with various social movements in energy transitions, policymakers could further support the involvement of citizen cohorts that are marginalised from transition processes.

What's Next: Policy Recommendations

Energy professionals disagree as to whether bringing citizens on board – also as collectives – requires a bottom-up approach based on energy communities and enabled by decentralisation of energy production, or rather a top-down approach underpinned by heavy regulation. Policymakers should carefully consider the pros and cons of both approaches, taking into account the national context and related factors, such as socio-historical manifestations of citizenship, energy provisioning systems, and path dependencies. In this regard, research shows that **decentralisation can provide a significant window of opportunity** triggering energy citizenship.

An important aspect of decentralisation is the increased delegation of energy governance functions to the regional and local level. **Local authorities are key enablers of collective action** in the field of energy. Policymakers at all levels should contribute to making use of the large untapped potentials of local government to engage in governance through setting favourable framework conditions for collective action, networking, and stimulating and advising citizens. Furthermore, municipalities are in a strong position to help bolster public trust in state institutions as facilitators of the energy transition.

More specifically, local governments can undertake the following measures to support collective forms of energy citizenship:

- To the extent allowed by their mandated scope of action, **address administrative and institutional barriers to citizen-driven collective initiatives**, such as energy networks and energy communities. Additionally, local administrations should take part in capacity-building activities on the principles and requirements of the citizen-centred energy transition to enable local officials to more effectively assist citizens. Such training should involve representatives of all municipal departments to foster coordination across policy areas.
- **Establish one-stop shops to raise public awareness** about collective opportunities for civil participation in the energy transition and how these relate to individual actions.
- **Build social trust and community consciousness through accessible and inclusive local initiatives** and events, such as practice-oriented town hall meetings, and volunteering opportunities in support of RES projects and energy-saving/ efficiency measures.
- Support collective political action, also by providing **channels for civil participation in the making of locally-relevant decisions on energy questions**. Among other things, local authorities ought to establish mechanisms for public consultation and surveillance as well as opportunities for co-creation of solutions through deliberative processes with representatives of various social groups, for instance through replicating or adapting the methodology of the Citizen Action Labs.
- Recognise diversity in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, disability, migrant status etc. in the energy field and the energy transition. Local governance actions need to be devised and implemented **in consideration to social groups within the municipality which may be underrepresented** in collective citizen-driven initiatives. Additionally, actions need to be informed by regular data-based evaluations and needs assessments of the situation of such groups.
- In tackling social inequalities and discrimination within the municipality, **execute holistic approaches which address socio-economic barriers and power dynamics** hindering the participation of certain social groups in collective citizen endeavours. In particular, municipalities need to consider the relevance of factors such as availability of time and financial resources, the gendered division of care work and work-time requirements, social marginalisation, mobility etc.
- In designing policy measures, take into account **possible distinctions between citizen cohorts with differing attitudes on energy**, climate and environmental issues. For example, as experts in Switzerland point out, it may be effective to further the engagement of people who already have higher levels of concern about and commitment to climate and energy transition goals through measures such as large-scale public conferences, communication campaigns, and cultural products (e.g. the film 'Don't look up'). By contrast, citizens who are less convinced about the energy transition may feel that its targets are hardly relevant or even contradictory to their daily lives, habits and lifestyles (e.g. people experiencing energy poverty, but also upper and upper-middle-class households). Corresponding policy efforts ought to focus on linking energy usage to human need satisfaction and understanding of what is a good life to successfully target such groups of citizens.

Policies that encourage collective forms of energy citizenship should focus on striving for inclusivity and fairness and eschewing the reproduction of injustices inherent in traditional energy systems (e.g. gender inequality, and unequal distribution of environmental ills). Concerted efforts at all governance levels are needed to empower diverse socio-economic groups to meaningfully participate in collective citizen undertakings.

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@dialoguesh2020