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Local Governments as Facilitators in Energy Transitions: Lessons Learned in Citizen Action Labs

Deepening energy citizenship entails enabling, promoting, and incentivising various forms of active public engagement in energy systems and sustainable energy transitions as well as stronger internal commitment thereto. While energy citizens may have differing views on energy-related topics, including the very idea of a clean energy transition, there is an urgent need for policymakers to encourage a broad-based deployment of renewables and implementation of energy saving and energy efficiency measures. For the energy transition in Europe to succeed, people should be stimulated to perceive such and other forms of participation in the energy sector as an integral part of their public and private lives and their more general political, public and social roles as citizens.

The significance of the energy dimension in citizenship has to do with the central place the energy transition has assumed in European and national politics ever since the fight against climate change became a priority for a sustainable future. The EU's decision to become independent from Russian oil and gas has further intensified this exigency. As stakeholders got serious about executing fossil-free energy systems, it became evident that this transformation would involve not only technological but also profound economic, cultural and behavioural changes across all spheres of life.[1] Thus, the historical need arose to embed energy in the realm of citizenship. Policymaking solutions are required to encourage public perceptions of empowerment, agency and capacity to participate substantively and have an impact on energy transitions.

As the goal is to have a large share of European citizens keep informed and regard the handling of energy in their lives as an integral part of their citizenship, **local governments have a crucial role to play in bolstering energy citizenship**. Local policymakers have the most immediate access to people. For most citizens, especially those living in small urban settlements or rural areas, public authority is personified as the mayor of their town.

Accordingly, this policy brief focuses on policymakers in local government. Nonetheless, the proposed policy analysis and recommendations are also relevant to decision-makers at other governance levels. The policy brief is based on the findings of nine Citizen Action Labs conducted in eight countries: Bulgaria, Canada, Germany, Greece, Italy,[2] Norway, Switzerland and Türkiye.

KEY POINTS

- Local governments have a **crucial role to play in bolstering energy citizenship.**
- Energy citizenship poses a challenge to the traditional roles and capacities of local authorities. It requires a **shift away from 'governing' – which relies primarily on regulation – towards 'governance' in a broader sense.**
- Building energy citizenship and designing pathways to deepen it starts in public institutions and calls for **adjustments in administrative structures, provision of trainings to staff, and realisation of exemplary pilot projects.**
- There is a need for local administrations to execute **holistic and intersectoral approaches to energy citizenship initiatives.**
- Concerns about possible additional strain on human and financial resources could be addressed **by shifting the focus away from doing more to doing things differently.**
- Local governments should aim to **'translate' the goals and requirements of the European and national energy transition to the local context.**
- In order to ensure inclusivity, local authorities need to execute a comprehensive **evaluation of the situation of social groups which may be marginalised or hard-to-reach** when it comes to the energy system and the energy transition, such as women, ethnic minorities, migrants, and persons with a lower socio-economic status.

These are real-world laboratories based on a co-creation approach and a variety of data-collection methods, including brainstorming and brainwriting, focus groups, and surveys. The objective of the Citizen Action Labs was to look into the participants' present understandings of public involvement in energy transitions and experimentally develop pathways for strengthening energy citizenship in their household, community, town or region.

Opportunities and Challenges to Local Governments in Deepening Energy Citizenship in Their Town

Instruments and Possibilities for Action Available to Local Governments

Energy citizenship poses a challenge to the traditional roles and capacities of local authorities. It requires a **shift away from 'governing' – which relies primarily on regulation – towards 'governance' in a broader sense.** In addition, there is also a need to move beyond the provision of financial incentives as a way of motivating local stakeholders to proactively implement policies or adhere to sustainable norms and behaviours, for example, through the co-financing of energy efficiency in private homes and enterprises. While both regulation and financial support remain significant, a changing role of local government is observed across Europe, notwithstanding differences within and between countries. The financial capacities of local authorities have been drastically curtailed since the beginning of the century and, in turn, so have been their competences. A growing number of local governments have assumed governance functions, i.e. encouraging, facilitating and legitimating processes, and inspiring local actors by example. Importantly, energy citizenship is more readily stimulated by such means, rather than regulation, as it relates to self-empowerment, agency and participation. Those changes necessitate profound reorientations within local institutions, including in the professional identity of public servants.

Local Governments as Actors in Energy Transitions

In order to carry out the softer and more flexible functions and approaches involved in governance (as compared to governing), local officials may need capacity-building on subjects such as developing, coordinating and implementing projects, as well as mapping, gathering together, motivating and mentoring stakeholders. Building energy citizenship and designing pathways to deepen it starts in public institutions and requires **adjustments in administrative structures, provision of trainings to staff, and realisation of exemplary pilot projects** within the local government to render it more energy efficient and smart, also through new digital technologies.[3] What is feasible and realistic in a given municipal administration depends on the specific context, including enabling conditions, barriers and opportunities, and differs across towns and countries. However, solutions come in all sizes and levels of ambition, and to continue with 'business as usual' is not an option in times of rapid energy transitions.

Integrating the promotion of energy citizenship into local energy policy presupposes, first and foremost, a mentality shift on the part of local policymakers, particularly mayors, deputy mayors for energy, and heads of energy units.[4] Typically, such a shift does not take place in a vacuum but in an energy citizenship ecosystem of diverse local actors engaged in energy transition activities and driven by (a mixture of) ecological, social or economic motives and considerations. Stakeholders which should be considered by local administrations as partners include: grid operators, NGOs working on energy and climate issues (e.g. energy poverty, climate change mitigation), professionals and experts on renewable energy or energy efficiency installations, and citizens who want to save on their bills or reduce their climate impact. In fact, research shows that in many cases public administrations pick up on impulses and impetus coming from community-based innovation. It is important that local governments promoting civil engagement in energy transitions embed all relevant initiatives they support into a wider frame of reference centred on the notion of energy citizenship.[5]

There is a need for local administrations to execute **holistic and intersectoral approaches to energy citizenship initiatives**. For example, a photovoltaic installation set up in a quarter of public housing by an energy cooperative in which local authorities are involved would bring a series of benefits, inter alia, avoiding CO2 emissions and thus mitigating climate change, and alleviating energy poverty by lowering the electricity bills of the residents. In the local administration, such a project should involve not only the energy and the environmental departments, but also the social and urban planning services. Consequently, an initiative of this kind could serve as a stepping stone and point of departure for other energy-related activities related to reducing energy usage and promoting more energy efficient technologies. Additionally, it could provide a best practice case and inspire more local climate action.

Extending Energy Citizenship from the Administration into the Community

Energy citizenship takes root in the community and flourishes through the involvement of a wide array of actors. Involving various stakeholders as partners in local energy citizenship initiatives is an important task of the public administration. As a first step in project implementation, the municipality needs to bring together all relevant departments to be involved in a project, proposing well-defined roles and clear evidence as to why each department should dedicate time and working capacity to the project. Potential obstacles are silo-mentalities and narrowly-defined competences and duties. Concerns about possible additional strain on human and financial resources could be addressed by **shifting the focus away from doing more to doing things differently**. The Joint Research Centre of the European Commission in the context of the Covenant of Mayors has elaborated recommendations on possible governance structures within the municipal administration.[6]

Considering the above example of photovoltaic panels on public housing, in many European countries, the utility bills (electricity, heating) of economically vulnerable citizens living in public housing are paid or subsidised by the city or town. Lowering utility bills through photovoltaic panels on public housing roofs would reduce the need for provision of direct support to the residents, freeing resources and allowing for their reallocation to other tasks.

Moreover, the involvement of the residents in an energy community would strengthen their feeling of self-empowerment and agency which is essentially a primary goal of social policies. Hence, a social service department that collaborates in the creation of an energy community would effectively attain some of its core objectives.

What's Next: Policy Recommendations

- Conduct **an overview of the local state of the art in energy policy** to understand the current level of policy commitment to sustainable energy goals. Among those should be strategic documents, such as, if applicable, a Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plan (SECAP) developed in the context of the Covenant of Mayors.
- As a next step, carry out **locally representative data-collection activities to understand citizens' views** on the sustainable energy transition and climate change and measure their current level of awareness. In addition, needs-assessment exercises should be undertaken to map local needs and vulnerabilities in regard to energy issues and the energy transition (e.g. knowledge and capacity gaps). It is pivotal that all activities be inclusive and representative of diverse local groups.
- Execute a comprehensive **evaluation of the situation of social groups which may be marginalised or hard-to-reach** when it comes to the energy system and the energy transition, such as women, ethnic minorities, migrants, and persons with a lower socio-economic status. This evaluation should be underpinned by the collection of data disaggregated by various social characteristics (gender, age, ethnicity, disability etc.)
- The findings of these various analyses should be employed to help **'translate' the goals and requirements of the European and national energy transition to the local context.** The outcomes of the Citizen Action Lab in Norway suggest that making the idea of an energy transition relevant to the local population increases public understanding, trust and support for transition measures.
- **Develop an Energy Citizenship Action Plan** on the basis of existing local strategic and policy documents in the field of energy and other relevant areas, such as mobility, green areas, waste, social services, and education. [7] Decision-makers should consider co-designing the plan in partnership with local communities. The outlined goals and objectives should be quantified by means of measurable indicators, and pursued through clearly defined policy steps and measures. Furthermore, actions ought to be proposed to address relevant local concerns. For instance, citizens are often more worried about other sectors such as waste and water management, especially in challenging geographies (islands, mountainous regions). This ought to be taken into account and lead to prioritisation of sector coupling solutions, for example, electricity generation from waste valorisation.
- In the Energy Citizenship Action Plan, integrate a mapping of local stakeholders, including NGOs, schools, universities, and private sector actors, and **propose strategies and targeted measures to increase participation by marginalised groups.** Engaging educational institutions is essential owing to students' ability to act as multipliers, carrying newly acquired knowledge at home and activating households towards energy transition goals.
- Integrate activities aimed at improving energy literacy and enhancing capacities for engagement **in broader frameworks of concrete opportunities for substantive participation.** There is evidence that general awareness-raising campaigns have little effect.
- Prioritise a small number of key actions: A suitable starting point would be the creation of a renewable energy community which would be inclusive of different social groups in the settlement, and bring about environmental, economic and social benefits to the local people.[8] Additionally, local governments should strive to encourage the establishment of energy communities that also have political objectives, and simultaneously provide **channels for meaningful political participation of energy community representatives in local decision-making** on energy issues. Local administrations ought to consider entrusting the task of coordinating the establishment of an energy community to a hired or designated external expert or facilitator who would dedicate the necessary time and professional experience, and ensure predictability and continuity.[9]
- **Consider making a 'One Stop Shop' available to citizens.** A 'One Stop Shop' constitutes a contact point or designated entity offering a wide range of energy-related services and assistance to the public. Its main objective is to simplify and accelerate the process of participation in and management of renewable and energy efficiency initiatives, thus, supporting citizens' individual and collective self-efficacy.
- **Provide an easily accessible space at the disposal of citizens** who are interested in getting involved in the energy transformation. It is important to ensure accessibility to individuals who may have restricted mobility, such as older persons and people with disabilities, as well as a safe environment to enable participation by groups that may encounter social barriers to their participation, such as women being hindered by gendered divisions of social roles, and ethnic minorities experiencing social marginalisation.
- **Define an endpoint to the local administration's engagement**. Considering limitations in the local government's resources in terms of time, working capacity and finances, it should be made clear from the outset where its activities related to facilitating, coordinating, or incentivising come to a conclusion. The idea is that, by that point, the action in question would have evolved into a stable initiative (energy community, one-stop-shop etc.).
- In engaging citizens, **make use of digital tools and focus on the spatial dimension**. Lessons learned in the nine Citizen Action Labs point to the conclusion that an effective way to involve people is to have them look into specific questions and challenges related to the geographical areas with which they are familiar (rather than holding abstract discussions). For example, in the Citizen Action Lab in Greece, by means of interactive tools, citizens and local authority executives pinpointed and described aspects of climate change and provided recommendations for the siting and sizing of local RES projects. Respectively, the participants' level of engagement rose and local energy planning was upgraded from a listing of general objectives to a map of concrete interventions with which the local community can identify itself.

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[1] Robinson, R., Shifts in the smart research agenda? 100 priority questions to accelerate sustainable energy futures, Journal of Cleaner Production, Vol. 419, 2023.

[2] In Italy, two Citizen Action Labs were implemented, respectively, in the City of Rome and Città di Castello.

[3] There is an abundance of guidelines, handbooks and good practices on these topics. On how to adjust administrative structures, see the corresponding chapter in Bertoldi, P. (ed.), Guidebook 'How to Develop a Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plan (SECAP)', European Commission, Joint Research Centre, 2018.

[4] Haf, S. and Robison, R., How Local Authorities Can Encourage Citizen Participation in Energy Transitions. London, UK Energy Research Centre, 2020.

[5] Covenant of Mayors Office, How can cities support community energy? Useful resources on city-to-citizen collaboration and support models, 2021.

[6] There is an abundance of guidelines, handbooks and good practices on these topics. On how to adjust administrative structures, see the corresponding chapter in Bertoldi, P. (ed.),Guidebook 'How to Develop a Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plan (SECAP)', European Commission, Joint Research Centre, 2018.

[7] Schibel, K.-L., '"Green city" initiatives in Europe', in Tokar, B. (ed.), Climate Justice and Community Renewal, London, Routledge, 2021.

[8] Botha, D., Rozwadowska, M., Ryszawska, B., Ghezel Sefloo, N. and Szymański, P., Localised support for establishing & joining energy communities: How local and regional governments can help further energy citizenship, Policy Brief 5, EC2 Project, ICLEI Europe, 2023.

[9] Adriázola, P., Dellas, E., and Tänzle, D., Multi-level climate governance supporting local action, Deutsche Gesellschaft für internationale Zusammenarbeit, Bonn, 2018.

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