

The Future of the EU's Energy Project

Democratic dimension

Benjamin Denis, Joanna Maćkowiak-Pandera,
Antoine Oger, Jesse Scott, Edouard Gaudot,
Taube Van Melkebeke

Policy Brief
May 2024

This policy brief considers the democratic dimension of the EU's energy project. It looks at the links between political systems, energy sources and technological systems, as well as the democratic challenges and opportunities created by the need to drastically change our energy production and patterns of consumption. To move forward, we propose a framework based on various governance levels at which the democratic dimension of energy can be implemented and strengthened. It is the last of four briefs exploring the various dimensions of the EU's energy project, all based on expert input and discussions among the GEF Knowledge Communities. The other three deal with energy security, the social dimension, and climate and sustainability.

Introduction

Energy and democracy – inherently connected

What does democracy have to do with energy? Here in Europe, at least, we are used to a world in which we just need to flick a switch to turn on a light or a turn a key to start the car. We get our energy on demand – provided we have paid the bills, of course. But these simple gestures mask an inconvenient truth: everything about the energy we use – the security of our supply, the way it is produced and distributed to our homes and vehicles, its origins, and the technologies and other factors involved – is basically out of our hands. If the provider raises their prices, or production or distribution are disrupted for whatever reason, we are left stranded. Literally powerless.

While energy is often put into a technocratic and market-focused box, it is on the contrary essentially a democratic and political project that is also closely linked to the three dimensions we addressed in previous policy briefs (energy security, social and climate).

Aldo Leopold (1949, 1987) put it well: “There are two spiritual dangers in not owning a farm. One is the danger of supposing that breakfast comes from the grocery, and the other that heat comes from the furnace.” Indeed, if you did not fell the oak tree yourself, who did? And how? Which tree did they select, and why? And how was the log brought to you? These questions are easy to answer when you own the farm and ride the horse. But when they depend on someone else's choices, they can become questions of democracy. What if I would like a green energy provider for my home but there isn't one?

Democracy and energy have always been interconnected, due to the issues involved in meeting our energy

needs. The historian Arnold Toynbee (1934) argued that a civilisation is primarily defined by the kinds of technology and energy systems it develops to overcome the challenges of its natural environment. For much of human history, and even now in many parts of the world, a farmer's or village's energy supply would come from a waterwheel on the river, or the miller's windmill, or from a pair of bulls harnessed to a yoke, or from a hot spring. This meant that decisions about energy supply and production were taken very close to the final consumer and were therefore inherently democratic.

In Europe, however, this changed with the industrial revolution, which greatly increased energy production and usage while also concentrating the means of its production in fewer and fewer hands¹. Massive steel plants, enormous coal-powered steamers, gaslit towns and cities and, later, high-speed trains powered by nuclear-generated electricity all changed our relationship with energy.

Since then, demand and supply as well as production and consumption have been far more complex, and the associated power structures have become more centralised and more concentrated.

Timothy Mitchell (2011) argues that in some instances the rule of fossil fuels created a kind of democracy. He contends that carbon-based energy sources facilitated the emergence of democratic governance due to their ability to distribute power and wealth: he cites examples such as the coal miners' strikes in Britain, where labour movements pushed for political representation².

Despite this limited positive note, however, the European fossil fuel energy system has overall remained far from democratically sound and instead paved the way for a technocratic and top-down approach. This erosion of energy's democratic dimension was accelerated in the 1970s, not least because of neoliberal policies that had a dire impact on social relations, resulting in increased inequality and concentration of power³. This left the European energy system into a highly centralised and free market focused straitjacket⁴.

Furthermore, both corporate power and geopolitical conflicts over resources have also spawned undemocratic regimes. Oil wealth has influenced authoritarian regimes in a number of Gulf countries, as well as in Latin America and the United States, where it can shape political careers and presidential destinies. The link between energy, democracy and politics is thus key to understanding global power dynamics, which in turn has a significant impact on the EU's energy project.

Despite the many connections, energy democracy is a relatively recent concept and there is still no universally accepted definition of it. Indeed, it may be understood differently, depending on the concept of democracy prevailing in a given political culture. The centralised definition found in many orthodox Marxist theories of the state (Bittel, 1923) differs substantially from the more decentralised, looser version based on citizen empowerment, energy cooperatives and community ownership (World Future Council, 2021). However, the fundamental concepts of energy democracy are transversal: sovereignty, citizen participation, public ownership, common good.

State of play

As discussed in our earlier policy briefs⁵, European energy systems have historically been highly centralised, extractivist and largely undemocratic. The energy transition provides huge opportunities to move away from these unequitable and often undemocratic power dynamics. A new energy system based on renewables can

¹ See <https://www.rescoop.eu/uploads/rescoop/downloads/REScoop-Energy-Transition-to-Energy-Democracy-English.pdf>

² However, even this limited degree of democracy was weakened by the shift from coal to oil, which reduced workers' ability to influence energy production.

³ See Davies, Jackson, and Sutcliffe-Braithwaite (ed.), *The neoliberal age? Britain since the 1970s*, 2021.

⁴ Albeit that some policies, including subsidies for the fossil fuel and nuclear power industries, have nothing to do with free market principles.

⁵ For global aspects see especially our brief on Energy Security; for energy poverty see our brief on the Social Dimension.

bring decision-making and production closer to citizens, and put social and environmental sustainability at its core. At the same time, however, it also gives rise to new dynamics and challenges – access to the grid or to scarce resources, for example. In what follows, we take a closer look at the democratic dimension of the EU's project for a green energy future.

Citizen initiatives showing the way

Driven by growing awareness of the climate emergency and the need to act decisively, citizens are increasingly demanding action⁶. Faced with the inertia of governmental processes and stalled by the pressure exerted by influential energy corporations determined to preserve their power, communities have increasingly sought to take matters into their own hands⁷.

This movement has been spearheaded by communities and individuals in countries with a strong tradition of self-organisation. In 1997, the small island of Samsø set out to become Denmark's first community entirely powered by renewable energy within ten years. At the time, the island's electricity was mostly coal-generated and came via an undersea cable from mainland Denmark. Oil was the primary energy source for heating and transportation. Through the "installation of on-shore and off-shore wind turbines, the substitution of heating oil with biomass and electricity, the construction of new district heating plants, solar panels [and] investments in energy efficiency in households and electric vehicles", the people of Samsø radically transformed their energy supply (UNFCCC, n.d.). This example also shows how energy democracy can be achieved using a decentralised, localised business model: unlike the big energy corporations, it is based on citizen and stakeholder participation and local ownership of the renewable energy infrastructure. This brought significant benefits for the local community and economy and created new jobs. By 2007, the island had greatly reduced its fossil fuel consumption and was producing enough renewable electricity to meet its own needs and export the surplus to the mainland.

Another interesting example is the small district of Feldheim in the German state of Brandenburg. In the early 2000s it was facing rising energy costs and concerns about its energy security. Rather than relying on state aid, it decided to act independently and pursue a community-driven approach to energy production. Its residents formed a cooperative and invested in renewable energy infrastructure, including wind turbines, solar panels and a biogas plant. They collectively own and manage these assets, which provide the town's electricity and heat (Neue Energien Forum Feldheim, n.d.). One of the most impressive aspects of Feldheim's energy transition is that it has achieved full energy self-sufficiency. Generating its own renewable energy locally has enabled it to become independent from the external energy suppliers and even to export its surplus energy to the grid.

The Belgian municipality of Eeklo also invested in wind turbines and now not only meets 130% of its own energy needs but has also set up Ecopower, a cooperative supplying energy at prices 40% below the market rate; with 60,000 members, it is now one of the biggest in Europe (Zickler, 2022).

There are numerous other examples from all over the EU. Shaken by the Chernobyl disaster, the Baden-Württemberg town of Schönaich set up a cooperative to allow citizens to take control of their grid; Ecopower supplies almost 2% of households in Flanders, Belgium; and Prato allo Stelvio in South Tyrol, Italy, is home to a century-old energy cooperative, E-Werk Prad.

These success stories are concrete examples of ways in which local communities can take control of their energy future, reduce their reliance on fossil fuels, contribute to the transition to a more sustainable energy

⁶ Other factors have contributed to this, too. Neoliberal policies since the 1990s have liberalised EU energy markets, with interesting results: while they have failed to meet their target of lowering prices for consumers, they have helped loosen the monopolies' grip on the market, creating opportunities for numerous locally driven, decentralised, community-owned energy cooperatives. https://www.foeeurope.org/sites/default/files/climate_justice/2019/community_energy_booklet_final.pdf

⁷ This is not an entirely new phenomenon: the first energy cooperatives were set up in the 19th century, in the first wave of electrification in Europe, when rural and mountainous areas were being left behind.

system and even, in some cases, make a profit from doing so⁸. At a bigger scale, we have also seen citizen movements playing a role in public energy debates in several EU Member States. In Germany, Bündnis Bürgerenergie or buergerwerke.de are good examples of the many grassroots movements that have been campaigning for citizen participation and ownership in the country's energy transition and promoting decentralised renewable energy production in the form of citizen-owned wind farms and solar cooperatives, as well as energy efficiency projects. These groups of citizens engage in energy-related decision making processes, mobilising support for renewable energy policies and empowering communities to take control of their energy future.

Indeed, cooperatives, community microgrids and community-owned renewable energy projects are shaking up the economic landscape and energy market right across the EU. The European Commission has sought to encourage this growing movement by means of rural initiatives and dedicated programmes such as Citizen-led Renovation and the Energy Community Repository, all backed by specific legislation. Other stakeholders including trade unions and REScoop.eu (the European federation of citizen energy cooperatives) have also taken action to support, encourage and help develop these citizen initiatives⁹.

In this way, “energy democracy” – once just a slogan for activists demanding a greater say in energy-related decision-making – has evolved into a term that can now be found in policy documents and the academic literature on energy governance and energy transitions (Szulecki & Overland, 2020).

A school for democracy

A REScoop survey of citizen energy initiatives in Southeast Europe (European Citizen Energy Academy, 2022) showed that enabling communities to make their own decisions about their energy needs and how to meet them is an effective way of empowering them. Those involved say it has given them a renewed sense of community and made them more proactive in addressing other local issues too. From resolving conflicts to finding common solutions, energy democracy is both a learning process and a way of deepening democracy in practice. Paradoxically, however, a lack of education combined with long experience of being patronised, abused or silenced by institutions and corporations means that the people most affected by energy policies are often also the least engaged.

It is also important to note that empowering communities does not necessarily translate into enthusiastic support for local energy projects. There may be fierce local opposition, sometimes expressed antagonistically, obstructing the very purpose of the energy transition. The fact that many onshore wind farm projects in the EU have stalled is a testament to the vitality of local communities – and the challenges of local democracy. One-fifth of Dutch municipalities were affected by protests against projects of this kind in 2022, for example (van Halm, 2022). The situation then often becomes politicised, with radical parties fanning the flames of local opposition in the hope of electoral gain (Reuters, 2021). Right-wing and far-right movements campaign on the basis of “preserving our way of life”, be that in food or energy or transport, and have successfully framed green policies as the root of all evil. The resulting culture wars have left societies riddled with hostile and reactionary NIMBY attitudes, making the exercise of democracy very much more difficult (Carley et al., 2020).

Both these factors must be taken into account when strengthening the democratic dimension of energy policy. The first, indispensable step in getting as many people as possible involved is to raise awareness and present clear pathways towards shared local energy initiatives; the second is to provide transparent, accessible information. Public participation is a complex and thorny process that can provoke a backlash. It needs to be thoroughly thought through at every step: defining the challenge, selecting the appropriate solution, democratising expertise, and grassroots campaigning (Nowotny, 2003). Context is key: a small, poor

⁸ Each wind turbine in service in Eeklo generates about €250,000 profit per year: <https://goodmenproject.com/featured-content/green-energy-cooperative-citizens-in-eeklo-belgium-pay-40-less-for-electricity/>

⁹ See Trade Unions for Energy Democracy (tuedglobal.org) and REScoop.eu programmes such as the Energy Community Facility, which provides technical assistance and project funding for energy communities.

town in Romania will require a different approach from a farming village in the Netherlands or a tourist city in Spain. The role played by public bodies, and the way they handle public participation, is another important part of the equation.

Democratic gaps at the national level

For an example of how not to treat public participation processes, we need only look at the Citizens' Convention on Climate in France¹⁰. Its 149 proposals were ultimately reduced and watered down by the National Assembly and the French President, despite his solemn pledge not to do so. National and local bodies too often go through the motions of seeking the public's views only to then fail to properly reflect those views in their policy-making. Empowerment requires a different approach, less patronising and more active. For the real benefits of public participation go way beyond mere project implementation: it improves the quality of the decisions taken, gives them both legitimacy and accountability, and also helps the community mature and take on more responsibility.

Another example of worst practice can be found in Hungary. Ever since he was first elected in 2010 with a constitutional supermajority, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has hollowed out all democratic checks and balances in the country, remodelling the electoral system so as to consolidate his party's grip on power, controlling the media and curtailing the rule of law. His uncooperative attitude has been an enduring source of concern for his partners and the EU, while his close ties with authoritarian regimes and his deeply conservative rants against liberal and green values have made him a rallying point for radical right movements in Europe and beyond. These concerns also extend to energy and energy democracy. The Hungarian nuclear sector is highly dependent on Russian technology and resources, making it a worry in terms of both democracy and security¹¹.

The right of each EU Member State to make its own energy choices is enshrined in the European treaties. But how democratic are these national choices? The Italian public were asked whether the country should go nuclear in referendums in 1987 and 2011 (each time in the wake of major nuclear disasters), and rejected the idea both times (Catanzaro, 2023). Now, though, the current government under Giorgia Meloni claims to have a mandate to revive the country's nuclear industry, and so another public debate is taking place on the matter. France, by contrast, has never even considered putting the question of its nuclear capacity to the public. Moreover, it could be argued that in the case of nuclear energy the democratic dimension should not stop at a country's own borders, since in the event of an accident neighbouring countries will also be affected.

Reflections on the state of play

As argued in our previous policy briefs, the EU's energy project requires nothing less than a complete transformation of the systems we have become accustomed to. The democratic dimension will be key to making this a success. The switch away from fossil fuels brings with it the potential for a much higher level of democracy and more equal distribution of energy and power. Consciously implementing the transformation will mean using this potential and incorporating more citizen involvement and ownership into energy-related decision-making. The local energy democracy initiatives discussed above are inspiring, but critical mass will be required if we are to achieve systemic change. How can these initiatives become a widespread movement throughout Europe, and how can they be better reflected in decision-making at higher governance levels?

¹⁰ See Nicolaidis-Lefrançois, <https://books.openedition.org/dice/10615?lang=en>

¹¹ See <https://www.statista.com/statistics/814212/cumulative-wind-power-capacity-european-union-eu-28/>

The EU as a lever

In addition to the general lack of strong democratic governance and citizen involvement in energy policymaking at the national level¹², there is also a lack of collaboration in energy matters across the EU Member States. As we saw with the highly counterproductive tensions between Germany and France at decision-making forums on topics such as combustion engines and nuclear power, countries often prioritise their own major industries (Euractiv, 2023). Both these tendencies result in centralised national decision-making, limiting the potential for the EU energy project to become a flagship for positive transformation and to inspire public support. In this policy brief we therefore argue that Europe should take a stronger lead in driving the democratic dimension of energy.

Despite often lacking depth or a whole-of-governance approach, and still not having been fully implemented, the EU does have a track record in terms of the democracy dimension of energy, and this can serve as a strong starting point for further action. The EU's Clean energy for all Europeans package included the concept of energy communities, most importantly in the form of citizen energy communities and renewable energy communities. It introduced new rules to allow individuals and citizen energy communities to actively participate in all markets, whether as generators, consumers, sharers or sellers of electricity, or as providers of flexibility services in the form of demand response and storage. In addition, the Renewable Energy Directive (RED II) created unprecedented rights, giving individuals and communities more ways of participating in and benefitting from the energy transition.

The EU has also taken steps to strengthen its public participation processes with regard to the energy acquis more generally. Its Conference on the Future of Europe was a democratic exercise that gave citizens the opportunity to discuss key priorities and challenges and to make recommendations across a range of policy domains, including climate and energy. While neither the outcomes of this input nor the way this kind of engagement could become standard practice in future are clear yet, it did at least set an important precedent for the democratic involvement of citizens.

Finally, the EU Governance Regulation obliges Member States to hold early, meaningful public consultations before submitting either their draft or final National Energy and Climate Plans; similar provisions are in place for the Just Transition Plans, and these will apply to the Social Climate Plans in due course too. In addition, countries must also implement Multilevel Climate and Energy Dialogues to discuss energy and climate policies¹³. Despite their shortcomings, not least in the area of implementation (the 2023 annual report from the Climate Action Network Europe revealed widespread deficiencies in the application of these public participation rules), these provisions are another institutional starting point that can be built on.

Inspired by and building on the various citizen and community-led initiatives at the local level, the EU institutions are well placed to lead, or at least facilitate, the way to greater democracy in energy policymaking and delivery, which will in turn greatly strengthen the European energy project. Energy democracy initiatives by citizens, local entities and cooperatives have successfully developed best practices that truly merge democracy and energy. The EU needs to not only learn from these initiatives, but also double down on further empowering them.

Consumption, distribution, production

Turning to specifics, how can the EU fulfil its leveraging potential? There are three main components in our energy systems – production, distribution and storage, consumption – and each will require a different approach to democracy, with different means of strengthening it and a different governance level.

¹² An example of best practice at the national level can be found in Ireland: <https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/government-in-ireland/irish-constitution-1/citizens-assembly/>

¹³ See <https://www.ecologic.eu/19390>

- Consumption

This may be where the democratic dimension is most obvious and most direct. Citizen involvement in energy planning and decision-making can turn people from consumers heavily dependent on the big energy corporations into active energy citizens with access to data and knowledge, and therefore having a far greater degree of autonomy. Our earlier policy briefs, especially the one on the social dimension, referred to the need for a democratic conversation to establish basic needs, affordability and a universal right to energy.

At the same time, we also discussed overconsumption, sufficiency and demand reduction. If Europe's energy usage is to be brought within planetary boundaries, our levels of consumption will need to be tackled, even in a fully decarbonised system. Moreover, the current tension between those whose basic needs ("having enough") are not being met and those with an over abundance and wasteful behaviours is itself a democratic issue, since it cements power imbalances and is an obstacle to equal participation in decision-making. If the EU were to structure its energy policy on the basis of sufficiency, this would have a highly positive impact on equality and democracy in European society.

- Distribution

Investment in infrastructure, including grids and networks, is absolutely crucial here and cannot be entirely decentralised, firstly due to the risk of creating inequality between the regions, and secondly because of the sheer scale of the need. Our policy briefs on the energy security and climate dimensions discuss the huge challenges posed by the need to upscale grids right across the EU.

Even in the desirable scenario of an increasingly decentralised system, investments in the grid will still be necessary in order to connect and distribute the locally produced energy. This will be a task for public players, or publicly driven players, at least: state-owned companies or citizen-owned grid operators, perhaps. This raises at least two democratic issues: first, the possibility of resistance from local communities, and second, data and privacy: what kind of data and algorithms will be used to decide supply priorities, and who will design them? Our policy brief on the social dimension makes the case for a Just Transition Observatory, and this could be an important safeguard here, too. The Observatory could strengthen policymaking on energy distribution by ensuring that it is informed, socially sensitive and transparent; it would need to be accompanied by the introduction of stronger, legally mandated citizen involvement and empowerment in the form of public participation processes.

- Production

Strengthening the democratic dimension of production can give people ownership over their energy, bolster their negotiating positions and ultimately increase the resilience and well-being of European societies. In our complex and largely centralised energy production system, local communities and citizen-owned cooperatives play an important but limited role. In most cases they are not yet able to power entire cities, meet the needs of a fully electrified transport system, or single-handedly rise to the immense challenge of making buildings more energy efficient through renovation and retrofitting and certainly not in the very short time that the IPCC says is left to us for decisive climate action. Policymakers must therefore find answers to the important question of how to facilitate more of these initiatives while also strengthening their voice in more centralised energy production processes.

A democratic approach to energy needs to cover all three of these components, and we will provide some proposals for this below, focusing on the different governance levels. All these proposals are based on the same key principle: the importance of involving and empowering citizens in policy development and implementation. Proper public participation is not just a box-ticking exercise or a way of legitimising decisions that have already been taken. On the contrary, it is critical for public support, better decision-making and informed policy. This is all the more important given the current highly visible loss of public trust in institutions, and is therefore absolutely essential if the EU is to have a sustainable future.

Political proposals

Both the goal and a pathway

As argued in a number of GEF publications and, more especially, in a study carried out in association with OIKOS¹⁴, energy democracy needs to be based on four overarching principles: 1) 100 % renewable energy production, with sun, wind and water treated as commons; 2) universal access to clean energy, regardless of price fluctuations; 3) public-civil management of energy production and distribution; and 4) an emphasis on demand reduction.

Most of these principles are also touched on in our other policy briefs and lead naturally to this one, since energy democracy is a state of mind, a goal of the energy transition, not just a route to achieving it. It is where all the different dimensions of the transition converge to create a different, better, greener future. Our proposals in this policy brief therefore focus on the characteristics of a democratic energy future in the EU. What might it look like?

It would be based on the principles for the governance of common goods set out by Economic Science Nobel Prize awarded Elinor Ostrom (1990). The democratic governance of energy will require the rejection of a one-size-fits-all approach, and the creation of clearly defined rules and boundaries with regard to resource appropriation and provision. These will need to do a number of things: guarantee collective rights, including the right to a basic volume of energy; provide choice, including for stakeholders; ensure appropriate monitoring; and define a sliding scale of sanctions. Ostrom's models combine market instruments, state intervention and self-organisation, and this flexibility would be ideal for dealing with the constraints arising from the various scales and levels of the EU's energy project.

Energy democracy at five levels of governance

From local to global, each level of governance requires a different understanding of democracy. While the political effects and desired level of EU involvement are different at each level, all have one thing in common: there is a great deal of room for improvement.

At the **first level – everything from homes to neighbourhoods** – people should be empowered to produce and consume the safe and healthy energy of their choice, preferably in collaboration with their neighbours. The legal structures and governance arrangements must be clear, transparent and guaranteed throughout the EU by a single overarching legal framework protecting citizens' initiatives from potential corporate or state-driven interference. At this level of energy democracy, we identify plenty of opportunities for debate and discussion, and all decisions relating to the community's energy supply being taken democratically.

Strengthening the democratic dimension of the EU's energy project means strengthening this empowerment. Transparent, accessible information about the various options for energy consumption and production is essential, as is access to financial support where needed. Both of these are essential in order to ensure that this kind of ownership is not only available to richer, better informed Europeans. Lifting the many citizens who are either experiencing or at risk of energy poverty out of this precarious situation must be the number one priority. Unless basic energy needs are secured, broader engagement and empowerment with regard to energy issues is impossible.

The key lever available to European policymakers is the ability to create funding streams and steer them in the right direction. They have already started to do this with the Just Transition Fund and the Social Climate Fund, for example, but these are way too small to cover the needs. As already stated in our social dimension brief, one of our key proposals is that all Europeans should be entitled to a basic amount of clean energy free of charge. Another is that there should be a permanent fund to help finance the green transition.

¹⁴ See https://gef.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/GEF_Oikos_Citizens-Energy_Print.pdf

The second level consists of local authorities, municipalities, regions and inter communalities. These are the bodies that deal with the initial planning stages and connect local communities in a democratic and publicly accountable way. They already play an important role in managing the various aspects of local energy systems. Indeed, local authorities have the most detailed information and understanding of issues such as energy poverty and are well placed to understand the needs and issues, as well as the opportunities that the transition to a clean energy system can bring to their area. The EU's programme for collaboration between cities and municipalities is therefore extremely important. The local level needs to be an important partner in informing and planning European financial support and the energy project as a whole.

Some important components of the energy system cannot be handled at the two lower levels. This is especially the case for highly energy-intensive industries such as aluminium. Although challenging, it will be necessary to include the views and needs of these kinds of activity in the democratic processes of the region concerned. This level of infrastructure, capital and investment often requires **a third geographical level:** the state. Energy democracy at this level should be safeguarded by legal entities, ideally publicly owned and democratically controlled, entrusted with an active role in managing the energy system. It also involves energy governance across multiple cities, and the strategic planning required for it.

From an EU policy perspective, making an impact at this level while also making it more democratic means strengthening the requirements for public participation in the various governance cycles. A greater focus on the role of citizens in the National Energy, Climate, Social Climate and Just Transition plans can bring quick wins here. Monitoring committees like those used for the Cohesion Fund should be set up in order to ensure transparency and accountability in the design and implementation of these plans. The ongoing revision of the Governance Regulation in that sense presents a good opportunity to both strengthen and widen measures ensuring social participation. The Multilevel Climate and Energy Dialogues must be more strictly enforced, and potentially combined with similar forums set up under Member States' own climate laws. Moving beyond this concrete action, and recognising the democratic and political implications of energy, a logical next step is the replication of the social dialogue model into an institutionalised energy dialogue that democratises decision-making.

The fourth level is the EU, whose role in this respect is to guarantee both the legal frameworks and the democratic aspects of the governance systems, and also to coordinate the actors at the third level. Energy-intensive industries, as well as clean (tech) businesses compete at both the EU and global levels, which means that the EU's current industrial policies must be strengthened and that it is not enough to plan energy infrastructure solely at the national level, either technically, economically or politically. This fourth level is also required for regulating market prices, maintaining grids, providing strategic insight and setting common targets.

The EU has already introduced public participation into its energy policymaking, but can still do a lot to improve these provisions and create a stronger offering – giving citizens a real seat at the table. The European Environment Agency (2023) has clearly stated that if citizens are to become the driving force of the transition – one of the aims of the European Green Deal – they need to be “truly empower[ed]” and given “the power to not only shape top-down initiatives and proposals but also to express disagreement and propose alternatives.” The EEA further argues that “cultural, educational, institutional and even legal constraints (e.g. the compatibility of EU legislation) need to be considered, including the privileged position of conventional scientific inputs to the knowledge base.”

Finally, there is the global level. Since we import most of the commodities and resources required for our energy security and climate targets (see our other policy briefs), Europe's energy project will also have an impact on the rest of the world. There is a need to develop thoughtful policies and avoid repeating the harmful practices of the past – in terms of democracy too. Europeans must not build their energy democracy and sovereignty at the expense of the Majority World countries.

As already discussed, the EU should therefore focus on building partnerships rather than reproducing the

extractivist policies of the fossil fuel era. This means facilitating mutual learning, including in terms of democratic practices, as well as providing support to partners where needed. If the democratic dimension of the EU's energy project is to be strengthened on a global scale, it needs to apply the same principles abroad as it does at home.

By supporting renewable energy projects across Majority World countries with non-debt-based measures such as grants, for example, as well as prioritising those that have a demonstrable level of local community involvement (including the promotion of gender justice), the EU can strengthen democratic actors and positive projects in other countries. Additional positive impacts can be achieved by incorporating public participation requirements and social conditionalities into its international agreements and partnerships. Energy is a key factor in current geopolitical contexts and conflicts. A case-by-case approach that consciously puts democracy at its heart will be essential if the EU is to avoid a repeat of scenarios such as its dependency on Russian gas – and also, more broadly, if it is to be a positive actor and enabler of a global democratic energy transformation.

Conclusion

Democratising our energy systems will require a drastic change in our attitude towards energy. We may have to re-learn what energy is – its nature, its origins and its value. Whether it is the little gestures for saving energy taught in the home or a broader programme in schools and universities, there is a profound need to educate ourselves. It is no coincidence that citizens' initiatives – functioning as schools of democracy – are flourishing. Empowerment always comes from better, transparent and accessible information.

In conclusion, then, the challenge of energy democracy is to reverse the priorities and values of the current energy system, which are based on power, profit and coercion. It is about a total redesign of our production systems, distribution grids and consumption patterns, from the bottom up. A complete rewiring. And an end to the power games.



References

- Bittel, K. (1923).** Communism and the Co-Operative Societies. The Communist Review. Retrieved from https://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/sections/britain/periodicals/communist_review/1923/12/com_coop_soc.htm
- Bouttes, J.-P. (2023).** Énergie. PUF. Carley, S., Konisky, D., Atiq, Z., & Land, N. (2020). Energy infrastructure, NIMBYism, and public opinion: a systematic literature review of three decades of empirical survey literature. Environmental Research Letters, 15(9). doi:10.1088/1748-9326/ab875d
- Catanzaro, M. (2023).** Italian nuclear industry revival on the table. Nature Italy. Retrieved from <https://www.nature.com/articles/d43978-023-00130-8>
- Climate Action Network (CAN) Europe. (2023).** Time to step up national climate action, An assessment of the draft National Energy and Climate Plans updates. Retrieved from <https://caneurope.org/new-report-calls-for-drastic-improvement-of-europes-national-energy-and-climate-plans/>
- Euractiv. (2023).** France-Germany energy tensions loom over EU summit. Euractiv. Retrieved from <https://www.euractiv.com/section/energy-environment/news/france-germany-energy-tensions-loom-over-eu-summit/>
- European Citizen Energy Academy. (2022).** Best Practice Guide for Southeast Europe: Inspiring community energy initiatives. Retrieved from https://www.rescoop.eu/uploads/rescoop/downloads/2023_EUCENA-Balkan-Best-Practice-Guide-EN.pdf
- European Commission. (n.d.).** Energy communities. Retrieved from https://energy.ec.europa.eu/topics/markets-and-consumers/energy-consumers-and-prosumers/energy-communities_en
- European Commission. (n.d.).** Energy Communities Repository. Retrieved from https://wayback.archive-it.org/12090/20240807065540/https://energy-communities-repository.ec.europa.eu/index_en
- European Environment Agency. (2023).** The case for public participation in sustainability transitions. Retrieved from <https://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/the-case-for-public-participation>
- Leopold, A. (1949).** A Sand County Almanac, and Sketches Here and There. Oxford University Press.
- Mitchell, T. (2011).** Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil.
- Neue Energien Forum Feldheim. (n.d.).** Energy supply to the energy self-sufficient village of Feldheim via private local heating and electricity grids. Retrieved from <https://nef-feldheim.info/the-energy-self-sufficient-village/?lang=en>
- Nowotny, H. (2003).** Democratising expertise and socially robust knowledge. Science and Public Policy, 30(3). doi:<https://doi.org/10.3152/147154303781780461>
- Ostrom, E. (1990).** Governing The Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action. Retrieved from https://www.academia.edu/40740853/Elinor_Ostrom_Governing_the_Commons_The_Evolution_of_Institutions_for_Collective_Action_Political_Economy_of_Institutions_and_Decisions_1990
- Reuters. (2021).** With eye on far right, French conservatives take aim at wind power. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/with-eye-far-right-french-conservatives-take-aim-wind-power-2021-11-08/>
- Szulecki, K., & Overland, I. (2020).** Energy democracy as a process, an outcome and a goal: A conceptual review. Energy Research & Social Science, 69. Retrieved from

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2214629620303431>

Toynbee, A. (1934). A Study Of History.

UNFCCC. (n.d.). Samsø: An Island Community Pointing to the Future | Denmark. Retrieved from <https://unfccc.int/climate-action/un-global-climate-action-awards/climate-leaders/samsø>

Van Halm, I. (2022). Weekly data: Onshore wind plans in one-fifth of Dutch municipalities affected by protests. Energy Monitor. Retrieved from <https://www.energymonitor.ai/tech/renewables/weekly-data-onshore-wind-plans-in-one-fifth-of-dutch-municipalities-affected-by-protests/>

World Future Council. (2021). Energy Democracy – Power to the People! Retrieved from: <https://www.worldfuturecouncil.org/de/energy-democracy-power-to-the-people/>

Zickler, F. (2022). Green energy cooperative: Citizens in Eeklo, Belgium, pay 40% less for electricity. The Better. Retrieved from <https://thebetter.news/belgium-green-energy-cooperative/>

About GEF's Policy Hub

The Green European Foundation (GEF) is a European-level political foundation whose mission is to contribute to a lively European sphere of debate and to foster greater citizen involvement in European politics. GEF strives to mainstream discussions on European policies and politics both within and beyond the Green political family. The foundation acts as a laboratory for new ideas and offers cross-border political education and a platform for cooperation and exchange at the European level.

GEF's Policy Hub is centred on a Knowledge Communities methodology, fostering networks for knowledge production, exchange, and dissemination. It tackles key European issues, particularly related to the intersecting domains of energy, climate, social, and economic affairs. Ultimately, our Policy Hub aims to deliver ideas and proposals that can inform and incentivise policies for an equitable and systemic green transition.

About the authors

Benjamin Denis, Senior Policy Advisor and Head of industrial policy coordination at IndustriAll Europe.

Joanna Maćkowiak-Pandera, Founder and head of Forum Energii.

Antoine Oger, Research Director, Global Challenges and SDGs at the Institute for European Environmental Policy (IEEP).

Jesse Scott, Adjunct at Hertie School Berlin and Visiting Fellow at DIW Berlin.

Edouard Gaudot is a teacher, consultant and writer who has worked with GEF as a penholder of this policy brief.

Taube Van Melkebeke is GEF's Policy Manager. She leads the Foundation's Policy Hub and its Knowledge Communities.

Acknowledgements

We would like to wholeheartedly thank all participants of the Knowledge Community meetings that were held (on 10 January 2024 and on 21 March 2024 in Brussels), during which earlier versions of this policy brief were discussed. Your generous and insightful input and the lively discussions allowed us to further develop our thinking, and deepened the final political proposals. We are also grateful for the support of Open Society Foundations, and the thoughtful project coordination of Donald Blondin. We would also like to thank GEF's Yasemin Arpag, for her support, as well as the Foundation's Director, Laurent Standaert, and Board Member, Benedek Jávör, for their contributions to this work.

Proofreading by Paula Kirby

Layout and design by Klär.graphics

This policy brief is published by the Green European Foundation with the financial support of the Open Society Foundations and the European Parliament to the Green European Foundation. The European Parliament is not responsible for the content of this publication. The views expressed in this publication are solely those of the authors and contributors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Parliament or the Green European Foundation.