

# Empowering citizens for successful energy transitions

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The terms "co-creation" and "co-production," which denote the possibility for laypeople to participate in decision-making processes that affect their lives, have been gaining popularity. A new IIASA-led study

explored options for empowering citizens as a driver for moving from awareness about the need to transform energy systems to action and participation.

The European Union's climate and [energy policies](#) for 2020-2030 require decarbonization of the energy sector. To this end, EU member countries are working on a number of key goals including greater energy efficiency, greater use of renewable energy, and increased [energy security](#) across the EU. The successful implementation of policies that support the achievement of these goals might lead not only to a transformation of [energy systems](#), but also to socioeconomic transitions, and will depend on economic and technical factors, as well as behavioral aspects such as people's attitudes towards such a transition.

In their study published in the journal *Energy Policy*, IIASA Cooperation and Transformative Governance Research Group Leader, Nadejda Komendantova and colleagues, explored the potential for polycentric governance—a system that comprises multiple centers of decision making and co-production at different levels. In such a system, energy becomes a common good rather than a private or a public one. Polycentric governance presents opportunities for the co-production of energy policy by various stakeholder groups. The study specifically considered existing attitudes towards renewable energy sources among the residents of two so-called Climate and Energy Model (KEM) regions in Austria, their level of awareness about policy interventions for an energy transition, and their willingness to participate in decision-making processes.

"Emerging technologies and changing attitudes towards energy generation, transmission, and distribution create various options that facilitate participation in energy transitions. The emergence of distributed energy systems, which might lead to polycentricity in the governance of such a transition, also creates a need to reframe the

discourse from social acceptance of certain technologies, towards engagement, and from focusing on particular technologies, to a focus on social innovations and new forms of governance," explains Komendantova. "This approach is not about providing information and educating the public; it is about listening to people and providing them with a variety of options and alternatives to make choices about services that affect their communities."

While both KEM regions (Freistadt and Amstetten) have committed to including a high degree of renewable energies (up to 100%) in their energy mix and have set ambitious goals to achieve this, one region already had a system in place that allowed citizens to participate in decisions concerning the energy transition in their region, while the other did not. The researchers conducted a large-scale survey that included around 2,000 respondents, who were representative of all social groups in these two regions, and found that the ability to participate in decision-making processes actually increased trust in both the process and decision makers among the respondents. The findings further indicate an increase in the level of awareness about energy transitions and a willingness to pay up to 10% more for electricity from renewable energy sources when they have the option to get involved in decisions around this. Interestingly, having the option to participate did not increase the number of people who actually participated in decision-making processes on energy transition, but having the option to participate increased the level of trust towards policymakers who implement energy transition.

According to the researchers, the willingness of respondents to use renewable energy sources is driven to an equal extent by concerns about climate change and the consideration that [renewable energy sources](#) can help them to become less dependent on energy providers. In this regard, the researchers point out that this would not necessarily mean that people produce their own energy, for instance, using residential solar panels, but

rather that renewable energy is produced in their own region, which avoids the need to import it from elsewhere.

The study also found that the majority of people who would like to participate in decision-making processes would also like to participate in the process of selecting the technology or the site for the renewable energy project, while participating in financing the projects is the least desirable option.

"When people indicated that they were not willing to participate in decision-making processes, this was mainly because they felt they didn't have adequate information or time. The number of people who didn't want to participate because they thought that participation is not important was minor. Overall our results confirmed the willingness of people to participate, but conditions for participation should be created," Komendantova notes.

To facilitate participation among citizens in regions aiming to transition to sustainable energy systems, the researchers recommend that targeted information campaigns are created and communicated via trusted media channels to inform residents about projects that affect them. There is also a need to better understand the role of emerging information channels such as social media in energy transition, as well as other digital options that are emerging to increase the willingness of stakeholders to actively take part in the [energy](#) transition and address concerns about existing conditions.

**More information:** Nadejda Komendantova et al, Public attitudes, co-production and polycentric governance in energy policy, *Energy Policy* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.enpol.2021.112241](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.enpol.2021.112241)

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