

Navigating the energy transition: A call to consider the citizen perspective

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Credit: Pixabay from Pexels

A wind turbine near your home? The energy transition is not seen as just by all parties concerned. It's essential to involve local residents, argues Emma ter Mors, social psychologist. As a researcher, she focuses on

identifying factors that influence public acceptance of energy technologies. Isn't participation sometimes an empty formality?

To combat [climate change](#), it is imperative to deploy technologies with low CO₂ emissions. The [Dutch Climate Agreement](#) encompasses various of such technologies, including onshore and [offshore wind](#), solar photovoltaic, geothermal, green hydrogen, and carbon capture utilization and storage (CCUS).

A successful [energy transition](#) hinges not only on the technological, economic, and political feasibility of technologies and projects, but also on their social feasibility ([IPCC, 2018](#)). The acceptance of onshore wind energy projects or the construction of hydrogen and CO₂ pipelines by stakeholders and [local communities](#) is pivotal for the implementation of these technologies. However, such acceptance is not guaranteed, and technologies implemented at the community level may face local opposition, as witnessed with different technologies in the Netherlands.

Fairness toward the community

So why do communities resist the implementation of these technologies and projects? Psychological research demonstrates that fairness principles are crucial for the acceptance of the energy transition and technology projects. Citizens may question the fairness of distributions, pondering how the costs and benefits are distributed. Are [negative impacts](#), like noise from windfarms, concentrated locally, while gains such as meeting CO₂ emission targets or financial revenues are elsewhere?

Equally significant is the perceived fairness of decision-making procedures. Is wind farm siting imposed top-down with limited community consultation and decision power, or are communities integral stakeholders with the power to influence and participate in projects?

Voice in decision-making

For the energy transition to succeed, it is imperative that the citizen perspective is acknowledged and heard in the design and implementation of policies and projects (see e.g., [PBL, 2023](#)).

Providing society and citizens with a voice in decision-making offers a sense of control over outcomes and signals that decision-makers care about their concerns. The belief that decision-making is fair and considers the citizen perspective fosters trust in decision-making institutions, which, in turn, can lead to greater acceptance of the energy transition and technology projects.

Pseudo voice procedures

In this context, the quality of participatory processes and practices is crucial (see e.g., PBL, 2023; [Ter Mors & Van Leeuwen, 2023](#)). For positive effects of citizens participation to occur, citizens must perceive that their perspective is not only acknowledged but valued enough to potentially impact policy or implementation decisions.

However, this is not always the case in practice. Communities often feel that their input is merely sought as act of window-dressing, with decision-makers already set on project design and implementation before public consultation. Research ([Ter Mors & Van Leeuwen, 2023](#)) shows that such "pseudo voice" procedures, providing a voice opportunity while seemingly disregarding local communities' input, can be as detrimental as having no voice opportunity at all.

When citizens perceive [decision-makers](#) as having no intention to consider their input, they view the [decision-making](#) process as unfair, decreasing their trust in the decision-maker and their willingness to

accept technologies and projects.

Let's step it up

In conclusion, policymakers and project developers should provide genuine participation opportunities and avoid scenarios where citizens' input is seemingly ignored. While traditional public participation practices have been prevalent until now, they offer limited influence to local communities, hindering positive participation effects.

Overcoming this challenge requires more collaborative and empowering forms of citizen engagement, involving meaningful dialogue and interaction, with transparency on how citizens' input was considered. Constant feedback provides evidence of impact, assuring citizens that they are being heard and taken seriously.

Provided by Leiden University

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