

Setting the scene for a critical exploration of the roles of citizens in the European energy transition

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EnergyPROSPECTS conceptual framework



Synthesis brief 1

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This autumn and winter 2021-2022, EU citizens are facing soaring energy prices caused by a fossil fuel crisis. While international climate negotiations at COP26 in Glasgow left much to be desired¹, the EU needs to speed up its transition away from fossil fuels. An increasingly decentralized energy mix offers new opportunities for greater citizen participation in the energy system. At the same time, public participation and social acceptability of energy and climate policy will determine the success of EU ambitions to become the world's first climate neutral continent by 2050².

EnergyPROSPECTS is a Horizon 2020 project (2021-2024) that contributes to an increased understanding of citizens' role in the European energy transition and draws policy recommendations, from the local to the EU level, to promote active energy citizenship. The transition is becoming everyone's business. What does this mean for citizens' roles in the European energy transition?

This synthesis brief summarises EnergyPROSPECTS first publication, the conceptual framework, that maps the landscape of energy citizenship today, both theoretically and politically. It lays the foundations for the project and opens the concept for a more realistic and nuanced view of energy citizenship.

Changing perspectives - from passive consumers to (pro) - active citizens?

Asking about citizens' roles in the energy transition is more crucial than ever. The concept of 'energy citizenship' has been coined to assert the importance of active involvement of citizens in energy systems - as citizens rather than consumers. The first formulations of energy citizenship have challenged the common portrayal of individuals and households as passive and deficient publics. The figure of the energy citizen has been portrayed as the neglected counterpart of the passive public.

Energy citizenship is a social construction. It is not something that we can simply observe. We cannot count how many energy citizens are living in our street or in our apartment block. However, we can consider how citizens, households, and organisations (public and private) are enacting and practising energy citizenship in different ways.

Energy citizenship is also an emerging set of political ideals that feeds the social construction of the concept. Just as citizenship more generally, it comprises radical and moderate versions. Across the different interpretations, it refers to somehow more active, engaged, sustainability-oriented, democratic or more desirable ways of participating in energy systems. Importantly, the societal landscape for this energy citizenship is changing. Ongoing technological, social, infrastructural, institutional, and market changes are creating a particularly turbulent era of energy system changes. Against this backdrop, EnergyPROSPECTS will explore how energy citizenship is taking shape across the European continent today. Whilst keeping our eyes open to the less active, empowered, enlightened forms of it, we analyse the societal conditions that allow for sustainable, democratic, just or otherwise desirable forms of energy citizenship to thrive.

¹ Carbon Brief. 2021. Analysis: Do COP26 promises keep global warming below 2C? - Carbon Brief. [online] Available at: <https://www.carbonbrief.org/analysis-do-cop26-promises-keep-global-warming-below-2c> [Accessed 23 December 2021].

² European Commission (2019) The European Green Deal, COM(2019) 640 final, 11 December. https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/european-green-deal-communication_en.pdf.

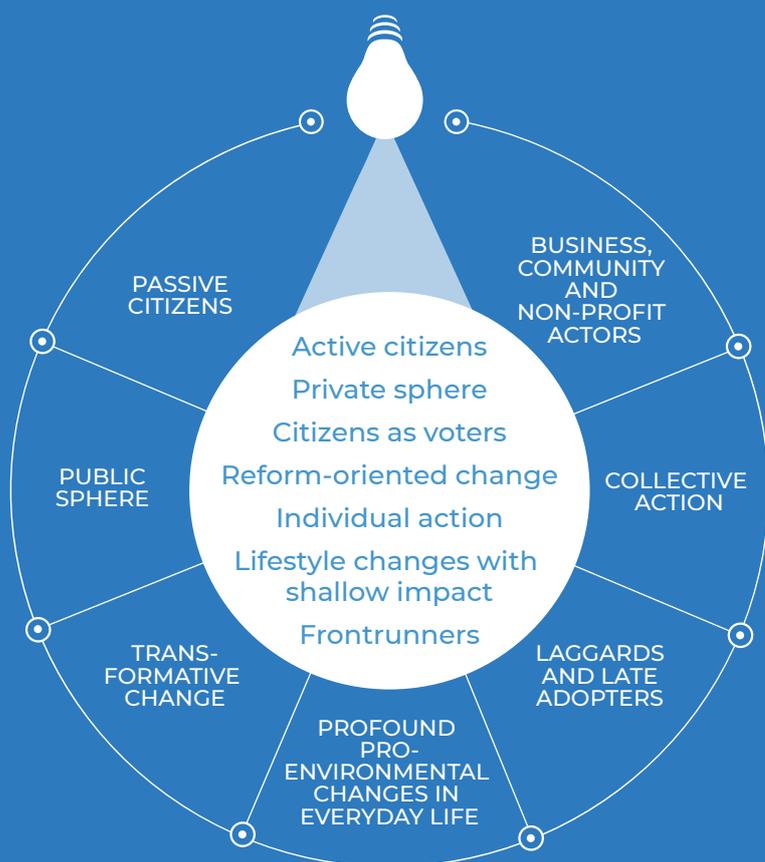
Energy citizenship as a way to rethink the governance of the energy system

The energy transition requires transformative changes, including on the governance of energy systems. Examining energy citizenship could give some direction for the kinds of social and institutional changes needed for citizen involvement that goes beyond the role as consumers on the energy market or as recipients of an energy efficiency campaigns. From this perspective, the concept of energy citizenship could set the stage for renewed political decision-making and democratic settings.

Getting a more comprehensive picture of energy citizenship practices today

In the current political debate and within academic research, there is an over-exposure of certain forms of energy citizenship^{3,4} - the celebrated exemplar cases, such as frontrunners within clean energy technology, pioneering community energy projects, and other such 'best practices' exchanged across member states. These 'manifest', visible and exposed, types of 'active', 'engaged', 'sustainable' or desirable energy citizenship are arguably only showing a one-sided image of the actual practices enacted across Europe today. By using a broad range of social and innovation theory insights, EnergyPROSPECTS opens up the concept of energy citizenship by including multiple 'latent', less visible, forms of energy citizenship that also form part of the energy transition (see illustration).

EU policy makers' current vision of energy citizenship, 'manifest' forms of energy citizenship



EnergyPROSPECTS conceptual framework opens up the concept to include 'latent' forms of energy citizenship

- **Passive citizens and 'late adopters'.** Beyond passive consumers and non-energy citizens, there are disempowered citizens, alienated citizens, and overwhelmed citizens. Likewise, there is a broader spectrum of followers to find after the 'frontrunners' and the 'early adopters'⁵.

- **Collective action.** Energy citizenship is often depicted as the active engagement of dynamic individuals. Less is known about the role of households, organisations, and energy citizenship developed in the social relations between individuals.

- **Energy citizenship in the public sphere, within businesses and organisations.** The public sphere as a fertile ground for energy citizenship is less explored and underestimated. Various forms of energy citizenship are practised for example in schools, businesses, sports clubs and associations.

- **Citizenship for transformative change.** Beyond solar panels, wind farms, heat pumps, and smart meters, there is a broader, and less exposed, range of energy citizenship that is expressed for example through struggles for greater citizen influence and participation in the energy system and the promotion of alternative lifestyles with minimum environmental impact.

³ Ekman, J., & Amnå, E. (2012). Political participation and civic engagement: Towards a new typology. *Human affairs*, 22 (3), 283-300.

⁴ Pel, B., Kemp, R., (2020). Between Innovation and Restoration: Towards a critical-historicizing understanding of Social Innovation Niches, *Technology Analysis and Strategic Management*, 32 (10), 1182-1194

⁵ Geels, F. W. (2021). From leadership to followership: A suggestion for interdisciplinary theorising of mainstream actor reorientation in sustainability transitions. *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions*.

Why should we care about less visible types of energy citizenship?

1. Realism. The circulation of visions of emblematic, idealised energy citizens easily narrows down our vision and consequently that of any evidence-based policy-making.

2. Nuance. Exposing nuances of energy citizenship (what exists between ‘frontrunners’ and ‘laggards’, ‘active’ and ‘passive’ citizens, ‘shallow’ and ‘profound’ pro-environmental lifestyle changes) also allows us to account for different local contexts that enable or hinder the development of energy citizenship and different understandings of its meaning.

3. Paying attention to the processes that make up the energy transition. Looking beyond the already visible forms of energy citizenship opens our eyes to the processes of empowerment that people, organisations, and regions are undergoing. It will help us to understand what policies are required to promote active energy citizenship for a socially just and climate-neutral energy transition in Europe.

Coming up from EnergyPROSPECTS

- A typology of energy citizenship
- A database of 500 cases of energy citizenship
- 40 in-depth case studies
- An empowerment toolkit for citizens and practitioners
- An exploration of the roles of ICT, business and social innovation models
- An analysis of political, economic, social, technological, ecological and legal conditions that enable or hinder energy citizenship at the local, national and EU-level

Deliverable 2.1 - Conceptual framework energy citizenship

Pel, Bonno; Debourdeau, Ariane; Kemp, Rene; Dumitru, Adina; Schäfer, Martina; Vadovics, Edina; Fahy, Frances; Fransolet, Aude; and Pellerin-Carlin, Thomas. 2021. Conceptual framework energy citizenship, EnergyPROSPECTS Deliverable 2.1, European Commission Grant Agreement No. 101022492.

