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Community Visioning: an approach to inclusive energy policy and decision-making



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SUMMARY FOR POLICYMAKERS

Community visioning, where people come together to imagine desired futures, improves public participation in energy policy and decision making. Through visioning, policymakers, public authorities, and industry and business leaders can better understand community needs, build relationships, and educate the public about energy, supporting the creation of new services that solve real community energy challenges.

KEY CONCERNS

To address the climate crisis, pollution, and environmental degradation, the European Green Deal plans to decarbonise the EU's economy by 2050. Energy transitions from inefficient, fossil-fuel-based systems to those that are more energy efficient and renewables-based require substantial changes to technology, but also to daily life.

Visions of future energy systems drive policy and investments in energy but are often informed by the priorities of energy-sector experts. Any community engagement efforts predominantly focus on securing public acceptance of projects already planned. This may be ineffective if communities perceive them as insufficient or insincere, and misses important community perspectives on energy that are needed for successful energy transitions.

Inclusive processes launched early in policymaking and planning can help incorporate a range of perspectives on energy in decision making, reducing contestation and supporting successful energy transitions.

What is Community Visioning?

Community visioning brings people together in a series of workshops to imagine desired futures, often with a theme in mind (such as clean energy). It can be adapted to incorporate different techniques, activities, and creative methods. We designed visioning with four workshops: one each with policymakers, businesses, and residents, followed by a joint workshop that brings everyone together. Visioning is guided by a question such as: 'Imagine our community uses only renewable energy in 2050. How does our community look? How would it feel to live there?' or 'What is possible if we all work together on energy?'

OUR RESEARCH

In the EU project SHARED GREEN DEAL, we collaborated with local authorities and non-governmental organisations in Bełchatów, Poland; Granada, Spain; and Jaywick, the United Kingdom to design and run community visioning workshops. Our goal was to foster and reveal visions that would support local energy transitions.

OUR RESEARCH CONTINUED

In each location, visioning fostered place-based understandings of and visions for energy and led to concrete outcomes.

- **Bełchatów, Poland:** Visioning supported women's participation in socio-economic development surrounding the impending closure of a coal plant. In creative arts and discussion-based workshops, women residents and leaders imagined the town without the coal plant as a great place to live, strengthened by their own increased economic and societal participation. Afterwards, regional authorities announced they would allocate the full amount of EU funding possible to support women and non-governmental organisations in the transition.

- **Granada, Spain:** In an area where renewable energy plants are rapidly increasing, visioning engaged policymakers, residents and energy industry representatives in discussions about community energy approaches. Through community-building workshops over a meal, they raised awareness about energy challenges like climate change, pollution, and rural poverty; discussed technical and legal solutions; and explored the benefits of collective ownership. Local authorities launched an office to support energy communities incorporating similar social forms of engagement.

- **Jaywick, the United Kingdom:** Visioning brought the public sector, businesses, and residents of this coastal town together to discuss the challenges of flood risk, poor housing stock, and difficult economic conditions. Through engaging, facilitated discussions, they explored what they could do if they all worked together on energy in two months', two years', and ten years' time. Their visions led to the establishment of a local authority-funded energy hub that helped residents apply for unclaimed benefits and connected them with community 'energy champions' who provided peer advice.

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POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Undertake community visioning early on to establish energy policymaking and planning as participatory and inclusive. An inclusive process from the start can help ensure later project proposals align with community perspectives and encounter less resistance.
- Design visioning with community partners to ensure it meets local needs. Methods and activities should be designed or adapted for those who will participate, and community partners can provide detailed insight on what will work best.
- Invest in communication with co-organisers and participants at every stage to build long-term trusting relationships. This helps build community ownership over the process and outcomes.
- Embrace the benefits of the entire visioning process, such as relationship building, networking, increased trust, and deliberation, alongside the final vision(s). Visioning may not result in a single vision or pathway forward but have a positive impact on energy transitions through more relational means.
- Design workshops that balance participants' comfort with trying something new, setting up a relaxed atmosphere but introducing creative methods to approach the topic in a new way. It can be difficult to discuss emotional or technical issues like the future of energy; engaging methods can enhance participation through inspiring confidence and creativity.
- Connect the workshop to clear, concrete outputs and regularly communicate follow-up actions taken with all participants. If visioning does not result in follow-up action or action that is not clearly communicated to participants, it may decrease trust and negatively impact future engagement.

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SHARED GREEN DEAL

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