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A very public mess: Problematizing the “participative turn” in energy policy in Chile



Sebastián Ureta

Núcleo Milenio de Investigación en Energía y Sociedad (NUMIES), Departamento de Sociología, Universidad Alberto Hurtado, Chile

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays, a growing number of initiatives are being enacted to increase direct public participation on energy policymaking, a move that is seen as almost automatically granting more effectiveness and social acceptance to energy policy. Seeking to establish a counterpoint to such enthusiasm, this paper argues that there is nothing simple and automatically rewarding in the practical enactment of such “participative turn” in energy policy. As the current critical literature on the challenges of enacting public engagement shows, public participation is beset with all kind of risks and uncertainties, usually producing results that are quite different from the ones expected. In order to ground this point, this paper analyzes the case of a participative policy carried out by the Ministry of Energy in Chile. The rather messy results of such initiative will be used to show how the proper materialization of the “participative turn” in energy policy needs policymakers to radically change their notions about what public participation is, who are the ones participating, and what could be expected from them.

1. Introduction

In recent years, a growing group of experts and policymakers have taken an interest in the social issues surrounding energy policies. A common motto among these actors has been the belief that “one crucial difference in the coming [energy] transition will be the need to employ the tools of the social sciences in ways that were unnecessary in the past” ([1], p. 185). From the transition towards post-oil economies, to the political challenges represented by increasingly autarkic off-the-grid communities, most energy issues are seen as deeply intertwined with social aspects.

At the very center of such claims, there is a demand to increase public participation on energy policies, in order “to create energy policy processes that encompass the envisioning, designing, deliberating, choosing, and making of future socio-energy systems and render possible partnerships between the energy industry and communities at all of these stages” ([2], p. 37). Traditionally reserved mostly for highly controversial issues such as nuclear energy [3], participative schemes have been increasingly adopted in a growing number of policy initiatives worldwide.

These arguments and concrete initiatives can be seen as hoping to enact a “participative turn” in energy policy, or aiming to put participative schemes at the very center of the energy policy agenda. Such an exercise is usually associated with bringing all kinds of benefits to policymaking such as, according to Creighton ([4], p. 18–19) “improved quality of decisions, consensus building, increased ease of

implementation, avoiding worst-case confrontations”, among others. As summarized in a leaflet from a recent participative scheme set up by the European Commission, citizens “not only have ... the right to express their views on energy policy implementation, but they can bring practical, everyday knowledge to the debate and help policymakers in their decisions” [5]. From granting a voice to the concerns of the population, hence reducing the conflicts usually associated with new energy infrastructures, to increasing policy effectiveness through the incorporation of *lay* knowledge, participation has become an almost magical byword that would allow energy policy to surpass several of its current limitations. The usual way to materialize such turn is through the implementation of pre-designed participative schemes, ranging from traditional community hearings to quite sophisticated arrangements such as citizen juries.

However, as an ample literature on citizen participation in technological policy has explored, the practical implementation of participative schemes seldom follows this ideal path. Following the influential conceptualization proposed by Callon [6], the *framings* proposed by participative schemes are beset with multiple *overflowings*, as multiple entities are unable and/or unwilling to behave in the expected ways. As a consequence, the original aim of truly building trust between people and policymakers and/or obtaining valuable lay information is rarely achieved. This outcome is especially likely at the energy sector, where a lot of the issues are surrounded by high levels of social controversy [7], such as the environmental effects of new energy infrastructures or the resistance from off-the-grid communities to be regulated by the state.

E-mail address: sureta@uahurtado.cl.

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Given this scenario the growing “participative turn” in energy policy urgently needs, first, to better understand the complexities involved when truly enacting participative schemes, especially at the local level, in order to take distance from current fantasies of neat results and happy publics. In doing so, and second, it needs to face the issue of what the ultimate aim of participative schemes is, as such, or, to put it another way, what does “success” mean in participative energy policies. Does “success” mean a policy in which participation helps to achieve its stated original aims in a timely fashion? Or, as it is going to be suggested here, does such “success” lie on something more complex, murkier, than the mere complacency of publics and policymakers?

In order to further explore these issues, this paper will present an in-depth case study of one particular participative energy policy scheme carried out in Chile in 2015. First, it will introduce a conceptual framework, based on current critical scholarship on participative schemes. Second, it will briefly tell the story of energy policy and its publics in Chile since 1990, with a specific focus on the “participative turn” been experienced since 2014. Third, it will recount the challenges faced while trying to materialize such turn in a meeting with a small community from the Chilean Patagonia. Finally, the conclusion will explore the ways in which this paper could contribute towards moving energy policy in a direction to adopt more holistic viewpoint on the “participative turn” and the many challenges that are implied in properly materializing it.

2. Public participation between framing and overflowing

The argument about the existence of an undeniably virtuous relationship between public participation and technical policymaking is not new. As documented by Welsh and Wynne [8], at least since the 1970s multiple public participation schemes have been designed and applied as a mean to involve lay citizens in the design and implementation of different policies. The main reason provided for such a move has been the belief “that advances in research and innovation are challenging the standard forms and procedures of democracy, requiring new forums and opportunities in which complex technoscience issues can be addressed” ([9], p. 457). Public participation is subsequently presented as the best way to take into account and properly deal with the “social issues” emerging from technology-intense policies.

From this perspective, the participatory schemes are usually presented as exemplars of “rationality, reserve, cautiousness, quietude, community, selflessness, and universalism” ([10], p. 348), spaces “in which reasoned argument predominates over irrational emotion” ([11], p. 107). Such schemes are usually seen as populated by *lay citizens* or “a person who has not made up his/her mind on a given issue, who is not entrenched in any political movement, and could thus take an ‘innocent’ position on an issue” ([12], p. 58). Contrary to the usual (and despised) image of the protester, the successful engagement of lay citizens ends up producing “an ‘objective’, ‘distanced’, ‘value-free’ judgment about science and innovation issues” [12], usually in the form of a document summarizing a limited number of key points. With this document in hand, policymakers can tune-up their proposals, ending with policy constructs that better deal with the social concerns of the population and, hence, increasing the chances of being accepted by the citizenry.

Nonetheless, multiple studies of actual participative schemes, particularly those emerging from science and technology studies (STS), have challenged this reading. As Chilvers and Kearnes [13] argue on a recent appraisal of the field, “participation is not a fixed or external category, but is always being made and remade through the performance of situated participatory practices and experiments, through the standardisation of participation technologies and expertise, through controversies, and in relation to political power and culture” (p. xv). From this approach, “publics are never simply there, and just in need of being invited to participate, but are constructed and performed through the very process of involving them in one way or the other”

([12], p. 53). The same can be said of their positions regarding the issues at stake; they are never previously fully formed judgments that could be simply extracted at the scheme. On the contrary, such judgments are particular versions of “matters of concern” [14], objects of passion and attachment, which change all the time and, for better or worse, they are never completely separable from the particular time and location in which they are expressed.

Nowhere are such tensions and transformations more vivid than in the actual implementation of a participatory event. As most studies recognize, public participation schemes should always be seen as ultimately “contingent, exclusive, partially framed and subject to ‘overflows’” ([13], p. 15). Beyond their formal guidelines, participatory schemes need to be permanently assembled in practice, a process in which multiples agencies fleetingly emerge, usually in ways that are quite particular to each scheme. Following Callon [6], we could say that such schemes are embedded in a continual movement between framing and overflowing.

Framing is the set of practices and devices through which the actors, involved in planning and implementing a participatory scheme, try to establish “a boundary within which interactions... take place more or less independently of their surrounding context” ([6], p. 249). Then, through framing, these actors try to limit “the kinds of justifications that are admissible, the kinds of evidence that can be brought to bear ..., and the range of actors who can legitimately participate...” ([15], p. 832). These frames come from very different natures and characteristics (guidelines, mediators, enclosures, restricted invitations, regulatory discourses, etc.), but all of them, with more or less success, try to “capture the other actors’ interests and organize their behaviors in a predictable way” ([16], p. 6748), so the original aims of the scheme are achieved at the end.

Framing, however, is not only about setting up boundaries for action. Equally important, framing is about enacting multiples forms of *detachment*, or the processes through which the ties between the participating entities and other things and processes that are not directly considered within the frame are cut off. Only through its effective detachment from previous networks, can the entities involved in the participative scheme truly accept the new set of relations enclosed within the frame. On the contrary, “if the thing remains entangled, the one who receives it never quit and cannot escape from the web of relations, [and] the framing is never over” ([6], p. 19). As mentioned above, such process is particularly focused in enacting an “emotional detachment” [17] through which the participants “could distance themselves from immediate pains, needs, and dreads” ([17], p. 572), and could start enacting a dispassionate and rational lay citizen.

As it could be expected, any framing is beset with *overflows*. Especially in schemes involving human beings, “a certain number of unforeseen reactions have to be seen as unavoidable ..., because there is no way in which the actors in power could deal with all the multiple agencies emerging from the attempts to govern human beings in all their complexity and specificity” ([18], p. 10). As a consequence, participatory schemes always “entail a range of happenings which, in one way or another, ‘overspill’ ... [their] empirical, analytic, or political framing” ([19], p. 529). Such overflows can hold multiple triggers and characteristics, from human agencies, who reject enacting the role assigned to them, to unexpected parties who show up at the scheme. Some of these overflows could pass unnoticed, nonetheless, they could just as well, and in fact they commonly do, lead to open confrontations and, in certain cases, to the utter collapse of the participatory scheme. Then, and in stark contrast with framing, overflowing “represents the instability and uncertainty inherent to ... [participative schemes], which might break up at any moment, should any calculation prove wrong, materials depart from expectations, or should other actors set their own alternative scenarios and establish their own frames” ([16], p. 6748).

A central cause for different kinds of overflows is the open resistance, from the actors involved in the participatory scheme, to

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