



## Perspective

## The value of social conflicts. Critiquing invited participation in energy projects

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## ABSTRACT

With this paper, I want to raise attention to the value of social conflict in energy policy and planning, and the limitations of participatory processes for including different normative appraisals in energy policy and planning. I first discuss three perspectives on the value of social conflict. Although invited participation is generally considered as a way to ameliorate, or anticipate social conflict on energy projects, this 'participatory reflex' goes past the fact that social conflict can itself be considered a form of participation, i.e. self-organized participation. Second, I discuss two basic characteristics of social conflict that show the limitations of invited participation in identifying and including divergent normative appraisals: 1) social conflict challenges institutions, and 2) social conflict involves emergent positions and groups. I propose to see social conflict as self-organized participation that serves as a source for identification and inclusion of normative appraisals in energy policy and planning. This not only necessitates the study of these phenomena as such, but also suggests a different approach to deal with such phenomena in research and practice. I will lay out three directions for further research.

## 1. Introduction

Social conflict is ubiquitous in energy policy and planning. Across the full range of technological options in the energy transition, both fossil and renewable, we observe public protesting to new energy projects: wind energy, biogas installations, transmission lines, carbon capture and storage, shale gas, natural gas, gas storage, solar fields and so on. As a consequence of the conflicting normative appraisals that are inherent to the energy transition and planning of energy projects, there just are no unequivocal solutions in energy planning. The energy transition involves choices, under (scientific and moral) uncertainty, for particular technologies that create path dependency and lock-in, which gives rise to conflicts over means, speed and direction of change in the energy system [1].

Social conflict occurs when groups of citizens, civil society groups, governments and/or companies manifest the belief that they have incompatible objectives with regard to a technology or policy option (based on [2]). I focus here in particular on social conflicts surrounding the development of a specific energy project at a specific location (e.g. a wind park, a geothermal well, a transformation station), where local communities organize advocacy and opposition. Such social conflict may be rooted in e.g. conflicting interests, expectations, or values [3,4].

Social conflicts are highly complex and dynamic: new action groups may emerge over time, that put new issues or concerns on the agenda, support may be mobilized from (environmental) NGOs and often also

from local government or influential individuals. A social conflict surrounding a local energy project is generally not just a *local* conflict nor just an *energy* conflict. Such conflicts involve wider issues regarding the long term regional, national or global energy transition, as well as issues pertaining to local democracy, social cohesion, trust in institutions, etcetera.

Social conflict poses a significant challenge for the energy transition. Energy systems are becoming more and more decentralized, relying on technology with a significant spatial impact (e.g. wind parks, solar parks). This will continue to raise conflicts, for instance related to what can be considered fair distribution of burdens and benefits, fair decision-making procedures, and fair representation of individuals and their viewpoints (i.e. claims over energy justice, e.g. [5]). This, together with the normative diversity inherent to the energy transition [1], makes that social conflict is, and will be a given, no matter how well it is anticipated.

Policy makers and developers also recognize this challenge. As an attempt to avoid the messy social conflicts surrounding energy projects, policy makers tend to shift towards a greater emphasis on participation in policy and planning of energy projects. In the Netherlands for instance, the wind energy sector and environmental NGOs signed a code of conduct that prescribes (early) involvement of stakeholders and financial participation of local communities so as to increase social support for wind energy projects [6]. The Dutch gas sector recently followed that example [7]. Also, a new Environmental Law has been

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passed that obliges energy developers to implement participation procedures in the planning of energy projects [8]. These attempts reflect the idea that participation is desirable and an effective means for avoiding or anticipating conflict.

In itself, the effort that is put in developing and organizing participatory processes is laudable. Energy policy and planning involve normative choices that need to be deliberated in democratic decision-making [1]. Invited participation [9] is a mechanism for organizing such deliberation. However, as I will argue in this paper, invited participation – even when done with the best purposes and according to state of the art insights on participatory approaches – is not sufficient for ensuring the inclusion of different normative appraisals in decision-making on energy. With that, the value of social conflict for energy policy and planning tends to be overlooked. With this paper, therefore, I want to raise attention to the *value* of conflict. I will discuss three reasons why social conflict is of value in Section 2.

The value of conflict follows from an understanding of social conflict –not as something to be ‘solved’ through participation- but as *itself being a form of participation* (cf. [10]). Social conflict involves the mobilization of collective action and advocacy, including contestation of existing power-relations [11]. As such, social conflict can be considered self-organized participation.

Social conflict as self-organized participation can be contrasted to *invited* participation [9]. Invited participation refers to all processes and procedures that are set up by e.g. governments, companies, academia or consultancies to engage in some form of dialogue with stakeholders. Invited participation can be legally prescribed or organized as dedicated and ad hoc processes within the context of a particular project.

This definition leaves open the question whether this dialogue indeed leads to empowerment, learning or legitimacy. In fact, invited participation has often been critiqued for not being *true* participation (see e.g. [12–14]).

In Section 3, I will discuss two characteristics of social conflict that show the limitations of invited participation for the inclusion of divergent normative appraisals in decision-making on energy. Considering social conflict as self-organized participation means that social conflict deserves more attention, both from scholars studying it as a process of participation (including its deficits, limitations, challenges, opportunities), and from policymakers and planners, as an important source of knowing what is at stake for whom. This may facilitate agile participatory governance in the energy transition. Seeing social conflict as a source for the inclusion of divergent normative appraisals in energy policy and planning comes with a number of challenges. Based on these, I will lay out three directions for further research in Section 4.

## 2. The value of social conflict (as self-organized participation)

The participatory approach emerged over the past decades as a critique to the prevailing expert-analytic approach, which was perceived to be too linear, deterministic and exclusive [15,16]. The literature on participation generally assumes three arguments for participation: empowerment, learning and legitimacy [17], or, in the words of Fiorino [18]: a normative, substantive and instrumental argument. The normative argument pertains to democracy; according to this argument participation is a goal in itself because every citizen has the right to speak and be heard. The substantive argument focuses on the function of participation in knowledge production and, thereby, creating more integrated decisions. The instrumental argument for participation is that a policy plan is more likely to be accepted if stakeholders are involved in the decision-making process.

As part of the participatory approach, many participatory tools have been developed and applied. For a more detailed elaboration of the development of tools and the participatory wave, see Ref. [17]. Although participatory tools range from consensual to agonistic, a majority of these tools are inspired by Habermas’ notion of the ideal speech situation. This refers to a safe and egalitarian situation where

people can express their viewpoint without interference of power asymmetries [19], and where “actors seek to reach common understanding and to coordinate actions by reasoned argument, consensus and cooperation rather than strategic action strictly in pursuit of their own goals” [20, p. 86]. The assumption underlying such participatory tools is that consensus is required to achieve progress in decision-making processes (cf [21]).

Conflict is thus something many participatory tools seek to steer way from. Social conflict takes place in a real-world setting where people pursue their own interests and perform strategic behavior, and is far from an ideal speech situation. Interestingly though, the arguments that are used to advocate participation also apply to social conflict. In other words, social conflict on energy projects can be of value for normative, substantive and instrumental reasons.

First, the **normative** perspective on the value of social conflict pertains to the democratic value of conflict. Following this perspective, social conflict on energy technology, enacted e.g. through social movements but also through more improvised acts of contention, is a form of political engagement and therefore welcomed in a plural democratic society [22]. This perspective can be found in social movement literature, which considers social movements a claim for political representation [23, p. 16]. Social conflicts in planning of energy projects not only play out inside, but also and even more so, *outside* formal arenas and institutionalized democratic procedures. It plays out in informal arenas, on social media, and in street-level interactions between e.g. local civil servants, ‘stakeholder managers’ of energy companies, and citizens (following [24]). Verloo [24] argues that these street-level interactions in social conflicts provide opportunity for (local) democracy. At this local level, citizens put forward their concerns and values; however, these concerns and values do not always reach the (local) government or involved companies. This may have to do with the gap between what are considered legitimate claims by planners or project developers on the one hand, and the ways in which citizens express their preferences and concerns in social conflict on the other [25].

Second, the **substantive** perspective on the value of social conflict pertains to knowledge production. Social conflicts are sites of knowledge production. Social conflict can lead to better (i.e. richer, more creative, more integrated) knowledge, and often results in policy learning (e.g. [26]). The high level of (scientific) uncertainties and the lack of consensus on both the ‘facts’ as well as the ‘values’ that should be prioritized, can lead to “wrong” or limited problem definition. In that sense, conflict can help problem structuring and avoiding type III errors (i.e. solving the ‘wrong’ problem [27,28]). Rip [29] states that “it is possible to profit from controversies. In many cases, controversies provide partly conflicting assessments of new technologies or of the impacts of actual or proposed projects, that are further articulated and consolidated in the course of controversy. Thus, informal technology assessment occurs.” The substantive perspective can also be found in management science, where it is shown that conflict can increase performance, creativity and innovation in organizations and teams (see e.g. [30–34]).

Third, the **instrumental** perspective on the value of social conflict reflects a management perspective. It focuses on constructively dealing with conflict rather than trying to avoid it in policy and planning. According to this perspective, social conflict should be seriously considered and addressed in order to avoid backfiring or “unproductive outcomes” [35]. Unproductive outcomes may refer to “outcomes in which neither the parties in conflict nor society in general is better off with the outcome. Examples of unproductive conflicts are those conflicts that end up in lengthy juridical battles between the project promoters and its challengers, or those projects that remain unimplemented and fail to address the societal or spatial problem for which they have been set up.” [35, p. 96]. Another example comes from Wolf [36], who conducted in-depth analysis of how policymakers deal with conflict in a highly contested policy-making process over a multibillion highway in Antwerp (Belgium). She shows how policy-makers tried to

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