



Intermediating energy justice? The role of intermediaries in the civic energy sector in a time of austerity



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Civic energy actors work to benefit local populations in low-carbon transitions.
- Intermediaries engage in activities that strongly support aspects of energy justice.
- A commonly understood framework for energy justice within civic energy is needed.
- A multi-scalar approach strengthens the applicability of energy justice theory.
- Local activity can help advance energy justice into policy and action on the ground.

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ABSTRACT

This paper contributes to emerging local perspectives on energy justice. Examining the critical influence of intermediary organisations, we draw on the nascent concept of a ‘civic energy sector’ to frame ‘local’ engagement in low-carbon energy systems. Applying the three core tenets of energy justice - distributional, procedural and recognition justice - to organisations in the UK city of Bristol’s growing civic energy sector, we demonstrate the explanatory power and real-world applicability of energy justice at the local level.

The paper draws on a set of rich qualitative data collected over 18 months during 2015–2017, using methods from the Participatory Action Research methodology. This includes both in-depth interviews ($n = 12$) and a focus group ($n = 7$) with key civic energy actors in Bristol, alongside embedded activist researcher approaches and document analysis of important outputs and publications from civic energy actors. Using the three tenets, the paper shows how intermediaries act as a critical bridge between local low-carbon energy initiatives and deprived communities; raise awareness of funding opportunities to otherwise excluded community groups, and, where possible, seek to localise the emerging economic benefits of low-carbon transitions.

The paper finishes with a call for energy justice researchers to collaborate more closely with organisations facilitating local low-carbon transitions, alongside suggesting efforts are needed to push for a commonly understood framework of energy justice within civic energy networks. It also offers critical reflections on the dominant theoretical framing of energy justice and the limitations of intermediaries under austerity, while providing policy-relevant recommendations to facilitate energy justice.

1. Introduction

Energy justice is a dynamic, diverse and continuously evolving research field that effectively navigates the interplay between conceptions of justice and policy-relevant, practical research on energy systems [1]. It has emerged as an analytical framework, a conceptual tool and a guide to decision-making, to critically analyse energy policy and aid energy deployment processes [2,3]. In a broad normative sense, it calls for the recognition of principles of *justice* and *social equity* in both

energy systems and energy system transitions, particularly in a transformative time in which the world transitions to low-carbon energy sources and technologies to combat anthropogenic climate change [4].

At the heart of the *analytical* framework of energy justice lies the triumvirate of tenets: procedural, distributional and recognition justice. *Procedural justice* is concerned with the ways in which people can be involved in decision-making procedures in energy systems, enhancing participation and ensuring transparent decision-making [3]. *Distributional justice* focuses on both locational issues concerning the

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geographical siting of energy infrastructure, the economic and other benefits and burdens embedded in energy systems, and how they are distributed across society [5]. *Recognition justice* looks at how marginalised or deprived communities can achieve greater recognition in energy systems, to address social inequalities that reflect forms of injustice and inequity within wider society [6,7]. These three tenets can be used to understand where injustices occur within energy systems, and critically, to understand how justice can be achieved [3,5,6]. The tenets are also applicable at a variety of scales; they can be global, national, regional and local in their application. However, their application at the ‘local’ level has received comparatively little attention, with a lack of research into how energy justice is enacted through bottom-up approaches [8].

While remedying this lack of local explorations of energy justice, this paper also connects energy justice with recent work on *Transition Pathways* in the UK [9]. This research maps out different institutional and technological configurations for meeting the UK’s legally binding commitment to the terms set out in the Climate Change Act 2008; namely, to reduce GHG emissions by 80% by 2050 against a 1990 baseline. Three different transition ‘pathways’ are suggested: *Market Rules*, *Central Co-ordination* and *Thousand Flowers* with the different governance dominances of market, state and civil society respectively [9–12]. This paper focuses on empirical examples of the *Thousand Flowers* pathway in action [13]. The dominance of civil society governance suggested by this pathway leads to a greater diversity of bottom-up solutions for energy conservation and local generation [12 p. 60]. One natural outcome of this pathway, is the development of a ‘civic energy sector’ [14]. Indeed, it is important to recognise the *Thousand Flowers* pathway as the conceptual precursor to the civic energy sector.

Civic energy can include ‘local’, ‘community’ and ‘municipal’ organisations, and, while ‘community energy’ has been the subject of much research and theorising, very few analyses of the social equity and justice implications of a civic energy sector in the UK exist [14,15]. Similarly, while research exploring the equity and justice implications of local energy projects has recently risen to prominence [16,17], few publications explicitly locate research in the context of austerity and juxtapose it to ‘green growth’ [18–19] alongside the relatively recent increase in the application of energy justice perspectives to local energy scenarios [8,20,21]. Johnson & Hall [22] considered the distributional and equity implications of a decentralised energy system in the UK, drawing on the *Thousand Flowers* transition pathway, but very few studies have used an *energy justice* perspective to analyse this or similar pathways to date.

Building on Bird & Barnes [23] work on the importance of intermediary activity for scaling-up local energy activity in Bristol, this paper demonstrates the importance of intermediary organisations not just for scaling up local energy activity, but for local energy justice in Bristol’s civic energy sector. Using methods within the Participatory Action Research (PAR) tradition, reviewed below, and drawing on a set of rich qualitative data including in-depth interviews, a focus group, embedded activist researcher approaches, and document analysis, we explore how local energy intermediaries approach issues of energy justice in Bristol. The paper contributes to local approaches to energy justice by applying the three tenets to the activities of intermediaries in Bristol’s civic energy sector, analysing their critical roles and limitations in times of austerity. It then draws out wider implications for the sector as a whole and thus implications for local and national policy to address energy injustices and support changes that will move towards greater equity in future energy systems.

2. Theory & context

In this section we present the rationale for why building a ‘local’ approach to energy justice is important to the development of energy justice as a field, before moving on to frame our understanding of ‘local’ in the context of what constitutes the *Thousand Flowers* transition

pathway and the civic energy sector. We also clearly define intermediaries and their associated features, identifying them as crucial to supporting the civic energy sector. We then turn to a brief description of relevant low-carbon activity in Bristol and its growing civic energy sector, before highlighting the rise of inequality and simultaneous growth of the ‘green’ economy in Bristol as an important contextual backdrop for energy justice research.

2.1. Energy justice – building a local approach

As a burgeoning research field, energy justice has taken on a momentum of its own, with many researchers now engaging with energy justice in contexts and institutions beyond its largely western academic foundations [20,24–26]. Yet, as energy justice becomes more ‘global’, it still lacks a large body of research drawing upon empirical evidence from ‘local’ energy scenarios in which low-carbon transitions are occurring.

As previously noted, the three central tenets are applicable at a variety of scales – from local to global. However, the prominence of ‘whole systems approaches’, the application of energy justice to global supply chains in energy markets, and conceptual frameworks of ‘global energy justice’ that are seemingly universal in application, have given prominence to an analytical framework that appears somewhat biased towards these larger scales of analysis [5,27–28]. Furthermore, energy justice scholars have sought to promote the application of the three tenets primarily across global energy systems, normalising their theoretical embeddedness within global scales of analysis [3,27]. This not only risks impeding the development of energy justice’s analytical framework towards an inherently *multi-scalar* field of research, rich in empirical diversity, but – as this paper aims to show – may neglect the practical and theoretical value of ‘local’ approaches to energy justice.

Locally-led approaches to energy justice have recently been shown to highlight core spatial, contextual and power-oriented concerns in emerging low-carbon energy transition processes. Research integrating spatial justice approaches into energy justice found that local and ‘area-based’ policy solutions have the potential to remedy geographically uneven patterns of energy injustice [29. P. 646]. Research into local community energy schemes in Wales, UK, showed that there are diverse approaches to energy justice which depend on local contexts [8]. In an energy justice-led analysis of decentralised, small-scale biogas deployment, it was found that small-scale energy solutions have the potential to change power dynamics and empower local communities [20 P. 13], differing substantially from the potential justice implications of centralised, large-scale energy deployment. These studies conclude that these emerging, unique power dynamics between actors within a ‘local’ and ‘community’ context centre around new forms of low-carbon activity. This new activity, in turn, can however produce new forms of energy injustice, where low-carbon energy systems and transition processes pose the risk of leading to fundamentally unjust outcomes for vulnerable, disempowered and marginalised groups [4,24]. Helping to build this local approach, Reames [30] notes in his energy justice-led study of socioeconomic disparities in residential energy efficiency, that local and area-based approaches are key to targeting appropriate low carbon interventions to different locations [30].

These findings have important implications for the three core tenets and for re-scaling energy justice to ‘local’ level analyses. It is thus vital for energy justice to integrate analyses of different local contexts into its continuing expansion as a research field and to recognise the potential for locally-led approaches to address new forms of social, political, economic and spatial inequalities in local low-carbon transition contexts [8,29–31]. In amongst efforts towards theorising local low-carbon transitions on the ground, the emergence of a civic energy sector is useful in identifying concepts that support contributions to local approaches to energy justice. Influenced by work on socio-technical transitions and the multi-level perspective [32,33], core Transition Pathway research outputs sought to ‘bring social structures, institutions

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