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Looking for Perspectives! EU Energy Policy in Context

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Abstract Transitioning to less carbon-intensive energy systems involves making difficult choices and priorities. This chapter imagines three individuals who are affected in different ways by EU energy policy. Their fictional stories illustrate that energy policies are embedded in social, historical and cultural practices and need to take a broader perspective than either technological fixes or a narrowly defined goal of low or zero carbon emissions to be fair and effective. We argue that this is often not reflected in the EU's energy policy frameworks, and use the Energy Roadmap 2050 to demonstrate our point. Contrary to the impression

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given by the roadmap, a narrow technocratic empirical basis for a policy is not enough to define and solve an energy problem. Energy issues are societal problems and need to be addressed as such.

Keywords Energy poverty • Energy production • Climate change • Market liberalisation • Renewable energy

4.1   Introduction

For the European Union to transition to a less carbon-intensive energy system, difficult choices need to be made about different renewable energy sources and their effects on regions, nations and citizens of the EU and beyond. This chapter examines this simple yet complex point and argues that energy policy frameworks tend to disproportionally focus on technological aspects of possible energy futures while paying less attention to the social embeddedness of energy production and consumption. We demonstrate our argument through a close reading of the EU's Energy Roadmap 2050 (European Commission 2012). To ground our analysis, we begin by imagining three individuals who are affected in different ways by EU energy policy. Their stories, though fictional, are grounded in actual events and supported by relevant literature (as per this chapter's three endnotes). From these stories, we proceed to reflect on how the issues they attend to are—or are not—accounted for in EU energy policy frameworks.

4.2   Alva, Daniela and Ambika

The setting for our fictional stories is a citizen platform organised in collaboration with the European Commission a few years into the future, where three women have been invited to give their perspective on the EU's Energy Roadmap 2050.

"Welcome everyone! We, the organisers of this citizen-platform, are happy to see that so many of you have come to join us. This year, 2021, marks the tenth year after the launch of the Energy Roadmap 2050. Reason enough for the Commission to take stock and to review the ambitions set out in the roadmap. Importantly, the insights generated during this citizen-platform will inform the Commission's review process." (Box 4.1)

> **Box 4.1 Excerpt from the Citizens' summary of the Energy Roadmap 2050**
>
> - All citizens will benefit from lower greenhouse gas emissions, more secure and affordable energy if strategic decisions and investments are taken now to save energy, invest in low carbon energy sources and build intelligent and diversified energy networks.
> - The development of new energy alternatives will sustain Europe's competitiveness in growth and job-creating new industries.
> - Transforming the energy system will: empower consumers and make the energy bill more controllable and predictable; it will lead to more investment in the EU and lower bills for external fossil fuels; and it will increase energy security by more domestic supply.

'Even though the roadmap includes a summary for "citizens", we as citizens rarely get the opportunity to discuss in person in what ways these noble goals impact our local and national realities in practice.

The citizen platform has been organised to start such a discussion. We hope that it allows for perspectives to be heard that go deeper beneath the surface of the simplistic goals of the roadmap. For example: Will all citizens in fact benefit from the goals set out, or may some gain advantages at the expense of others? How do we make decisions when we need to choose between what is cheap and what is sustainable in our everyday lives? Where in the EU does growth take place? And in what ways is growth sustainable?

In order to explore at least some of these questions, we have invited three women to give their views on the roadmap. They represent groups whose voices are all too often peripheral in discussions on energy—but whose lives are centrally impacted by the decisions evolving from these discussions in which they did not take part.

So, let me introduce the three panellists sitting here next to me on the stage. They are Alva, from Sweden, Daniela from Bulgaria and Ambika from India.

Alva is a member of the Sami community, the indigenous people in northern Europe. The relationship between the Swedish government and the Sami people has a conflicted history, especially with regard to energy extraction and

use, and Alva will address how energy policies adopted on the national level in Sweden may affect her community. Also on the panel is Daniela from Bulgaria. For her, energy security is perhaps a more important topic than sustainable energy, at least in the short term. This might also be true for our third invitee on the panel, Ambika, who has been invited to recognise that the effects of EU energy policy are inextricably linked to what happens outside Europe. She will reflect on this with a view on and from India.

I would like to open the discussion by asking you the panellists in what ways your realities mirror the goals set, almost ten years after the Energy Roadmap 2050 was laid out?'

A silence follows as Alva adjusts her notes and switches on the microphone speaker standing on the table in front of her. Then she starts speaking:

'I live in northern Sweden, in the Swedish part of Sápmi, the traditional region of the Sami people. I am also a member of the Swedish Sami Parliament. A basic premise for me and for the Sami people is that for us, all questions are environmental questions. The natural environment is an integrated part of all aspects of our lives. There is no separation between our nature and our culture. This means that any destruction of the natural environment in Sápmi is a destruction of Sami culture as well.

The Sami community is very concerned about climate change. As inhabitants of the north, we are likely to experience serious harm to our environment as temperatures rise. Like many other indigenous peoples around the world, we are exposed to changes in the climate because our lives and livelihoods are so closely tied to the landscapes around us. The incremental damage that long-term rising temperatures would inflict on the Sápmi region would be detrimental to Sami culture. If the natural conditions in our home change too much, it will be impossible for many of us to maintain our way of life.

However, I am even more concerned about short-term exploitation and destruction of Sápmi. There is a long history of colonisation of Sami territories and resources by the Swedish state. The Swedish government refuses to recognise this, despite remarks from the United Nations. The colonisation is on-going and risks intensifying in the name of transitioning to renewable energy. This must be stopped.

An example is the case of Stekenjokk, located within Swedish Sápmi, close to the Norwegian border. Stekenjokk is a spiritually and culturally important place to the Sami. We use it for traditional reindeer herding, and the local Sami community have constitutional rights to use the area for this purpose. Despite this, the Swedish state has moved forward with plans to allow private companies to develop large wind power plants in Stekenjokk. The

Sami people have neither been consulted nor informed about these plans, which amount to nothing less than an attempt at land-grabbing. Large-scale development of wind power would significantly affect the traditional use of the area by the Sami. A wind power plant causes a major disruption in the landscape. The area of the plant itself would no longer be suitable for reindeer herding. In addition, there would be additional changes in the form of new roads and other infrastructure and an increased number of people moving around in the area. In effect, Stekenjokk would become unrecognisable to the Sami.

There are other similar examples. They show that the second point in the "Citizens' summary" of the roadmap—that development of renewable energy will result in job creation and growth—is not true at all. At least not for all people. It is a very simplistic and idealistic statement, in my view. In Stekenjokk and other areas of Sápmi identified as suitable for wind power by the Swedish government, it would have the opposite effects—Sami jobs would be rendered impossible, and our economies would die out, not grow. This goes against principles set out in other documents and agreed to by the EU, which emphasise that development needs to be sustainable not only environmentally but socially as well; no one should be left behind.

I think that renewable energy sources are too often idealised and their contexts not sufficiently addressed. The roadmap should recognise that there are existing and potential conflicts around these types of developments and protect groups that are at risk of suffering from unjust and inappropriate locations of new energy plants. It is the view of the Sami Parliament, for example, that energy production should be primarily local and that therefore energy production sites such as wind power plants should be located first and foremost in southern Sweden, where most energy is consumed, instead of outsourced to areas in the north that may seem unoccupied but are in fact home to Sami people and important to their cultural and economic activities. When the Swedish government targets and exploits people within its own borders in this way, the EU should help to protect the Sami and their rights'.[1]

Alva pauses for some seconds and looks at Daniela, who starts speaking after switching on her microphone:

'Thanks, Alva. My story takes us from the EU's far north to the EU's far east: to Bulgaria.

I would like to start by reflecting on the consumer-empowerment aspect. According to the energy roadmap, transforming the energy system will empower consumers and make energy bills more controllable and predictable for the European consumer, like me. This is a worthy goal, but how will it be

achieved in practice? And what does empowerment mean, when you do not have any good choices to make? As an example, in Bulgaria, a big part of the housing is not sufficiently insulated, and the energy intensity is the highest in all of the EU. This means that a large amount of energy is needed to heat these houses, leading to high costs for us. My family used to have central heating, but the system is so expensive and dysfunctional, so we decided to leave the system and get electric heating instead. It is cheaper, and we can control our own heat and turn it down when we cannot afford more. Our choice, then, is between financially controllable insufficient heating and expensive non-functional heating. The roadmap tells me that individual European households will need to make investments in their housing to heighten the energy efficiency, but where will we get the money to do that? We can get financial help to pay our energy bills during the winter, but not enough for repairs of our houses.

A couple of years ago, 64 per cent of the Bulgarian population reported that they were not able to keep their home sufficiently heated during winter, and 32 per cent that they had debts on their energy bills. According to the World Bank, 61 per cent of the population live in what they count as energy poverty. However, some say that this is due to the fact that the parameters are so different that they cannot be compared to other countries. This, of course, begs the question, if we are not like the other countries, why should we adhere to the same rules?

In the end, a big part of the population has gone back to firewood to be able to afford basic heating. Ironically, this is one of the reasons that Bulgaria reaches its Europe 2020 objectives for renewable energy, since firewood is counted as biomass, as opposed to fossil-fuel energy. Energy efficiency is quoted as one basic strategy to reach the EU energy goals. However, market liberalisation and more renewable energy have not helped us become more energy efficient. We need higher income levels and better infrastructure. Although housing quality has improved during the last couple of years, so far market liberalisation has only served to increase our energy bill, partly because of renewable energy which is more expensive. I have also heard that there has been a lot of corruption regarding the subsidies given to renewable energy projects, so I agree with Alva that there is an idealised view of renewables that does not fit my reality. And, speaking of market liberalisation, despite our so-called free market, I can only choose from one electric company anyway, since the old companies have a quasi-monopoly in the different regions of Bulgaria.

Part of the bigger problems that need to be overcome in Bulgaria in order to fight energy poverty are corruption and income levels. I do not see any solution to these problems in the EU roadmap. Instead, most of both the government policy and the EU-mandated energy market changes have meant a higher energy bill for my household, without addressing the underlying problems of Bulgaria's energy sector'.[2]

Ambika nods at Daniela and then faces the audience. After switching on her microphone, she says:

'Thanks for inviting me to this panel and thank you for sharing your views, Daniela and Alva.

In India, where I come from, the discourse on energy is almost always related to the imperative of the nation's economic growth. India needs economic development, considering that it is the country with the largest number of people living below the international poverty line. At the same time, India aims to become a global market player. Economic analysts, policymakers and business leaders dream about reaching double-digit growth rates and establishing India as the fastest growing major economy in the world market.

Indeed, it is a high-carbon development. Coal is clearly the main source of powering India's economy. And emissions keep increasing. But what is the alternative? Stop growing and stop lifting millions out of poverty? And just as an important side remark: A look back into history shows that India bears little responsibility for all the emissions that have built up over time and that went along with the carbon-intensive development of the Western world.

I know that the way I put it is a bit simplistic. If we consider current emissions, India is the third largest emitter and plays a crucial role in combatting climate change. There is indeed a sense of urgency: India is considered as one of the countries that will be most severely affected. Over time India has increasingly committed herself to taking an active stance in combatting climate change. But this, I feel, has not been met with similar engagement from developed countries. Sure, the EU and India have set up different programmes and issued joint declarations to combat climate change and engage in collaborative action plans. But are these engagements set up on equal grounds?

For example, the transfer of technology and funding from developed to less developed nations is essential for both mitigation and adaption to climate change. Just consider: India's population is projected to grow to 1.7 billion people in 2055. It really matters how India aims to power the life of her people. The transfer of technology, intellectual property rights and funding is needed to do this in a clean way.

But the EU has been reluctant to facilitate this transfer. Despite declarations, action plans and agreed obligations, the technology transfer is generally not offered at affordable prices, and developed countries do not provide the money they promised to finance climate change measures. I feel that these initiatives are just a way for the EU to open up a profitable outlet market for the EU's "green" products. I can also put it more bluntly: Is Europe again engaging in a form of neo-colonialism, where leaders pride themselves with "green" growth while keeping others dependent?

These are the thoughts which come to my mind when I read the second bullet point of the roadmap about Europe's aim to develop energy alternatives and stay competitive. I understand that EU policies are tailored towards issues directly relevant to the soon 27 member states. But the exclusive inward focus, or even selfishness, is irresponsible: historically, socially and ethically. And not least in the context of a changing climate—which will eventually affect us all, regardless where on earth we live'.[3]

4.3   REFLECTION

It is time to leave the citizen platform and turn towards the question of what can be learnt from the accounts of Alva, Daniela and Ambika.

To start with, their stories illustrate that whether a particular energy source is sustainable is context dependent. What is sustainable in one sense and for a certain group may not be so for another community, or on a different time horizon. While we do not argue against the need to transition to less carbon-intensive energy sources in order to mitigate climate changes, we do argue that complexities and perspectives surrounding the sustainability and desirability of different renewable energy sources are sometimes not sufficiently recognised in policy documents, for example, in the EU Energy Roadmap 2050. The roadmap paints a simplified picture of problems that are solvable through technical innovation and economic regulation 'for the benefit of all' ((European Commission 2012), p. 19). Our stories contradict this sweeping statement by bringing attention to the societal embeddedness of energy production and consumption 'on the ground' (also see Kerr et al., Chap. 3 in this book). Alva's account, for example, shows that plans for renewable energy tie in to histories of power relations and earlier resource exploitation in Sami territories. For her, development of wind power is a continuation of the internal colonisation of Sami lands practised by the Swedish state for centuries. In Ambika's account, too, histories of power relations emerge. Her story draws attention to how the

relationship between the EU and India in contemporary climate agreements is coloured by questions around historical responsibilities and current possibilities for climate action and development.

In order to understand and approach these problems, a historical point of view is necessary, which includes a discussion about previous path dependencies and the consequences of colonial organisation. These issues have been tackled extensively within Science and Technology Studies (STS) and History of Technology. As an example, our aim with showing that renewable energy can have negative sides in some contexts is not to argue against renewables but to point out that mistakes made in the past need to be avoided in the transition to renewable energy sources, in order for them to be both socially and environmentally sustainable over a long period of time. The way that renewable energy is described in the roadmap—as more or less the solution to everything—is sometimes reminiscent of what within STS and history of technology is referred to as the idea of the 'technological fix', which is when narrow technological solutions are prioritised and applied even though the problem often lies in a political, economic, social and cultural system, often leading to new problems and non-efficient use of the technology (Bijker et al. 1987). This is reflected in the roadmap's focus on increased energy efficiency and other technological developments along with improved access for those currently considered energy 'poor', while very little is said about the possibility of decreasing the energy consumption of groups with very high consumption rates.

Within the EU, energy poverty has become a central issue for policy, and it is now mandatory for member countries to monitor energy poverty and report to the commission. However, there has not until recently existed any common EU practice to fight it (Middlemiss et al. 2018—Chap. 2 in this book). There are different ways to look at energy poverty, and poverty more broadly. One side is income rate in relation to energy prices, which is the World Bank view. However, there is also the issue of access to energy and to which kinds of energy. This view is more related to prioritising infrastructure and market development (Kisyov 2014). We see from Daniela's account that new infrastructure is needed to achieve a transition to renewables and to heighten energy efficiency, but the question of responsibility is still largely unsolved, and the state has to prioritise in regard to where and how to build. In the end, in this example, a lot of costs tend to fall on the table of the individual. On the other hand, as Alva's story highlights, new infrastructure can also turn out to be problematic.

How do we prioritise between supporting one lifestyle or the other? This question is also urgent in India, where Ambika reminds us that development and access to energy are vital for the well-being of millions.

Prioritisations are also an issue on an individual level. According to the roadmap, energy efficiency and lower prices will go hand in hand with a more sustainable energy sector. This may be true in the long run, but currently this is not the case for many citizens of Europe. Every choice people like Daniela are forced to make in their everyday life regarding their consumption of goods and energy can be seen as an exercise in goal conflict on several levels. Should family economics be prioritised, when consumer prices of renewables are more expensive than alternatives, or the climate? Whose goals are more important? The EU-level goals for climate and development? National or local goals? Individual ones? Thus, the tension between energy consumption and climate mitigation can be followed from the institutional level of the EU all the way down to the lives of its citizens. Consumers may also have to juggle information which may be incorrect or contradictory to their experience. While the view of renewables among some consumer groups in Bulgaria is reflected in Daniela's account, in reality issues surrounding renewable energy are more complex than in her narrative. For Daniela, however, the choice may still boil down to choosing the cheapest energy. This is not necessarily a simple economic choice but one that is embedded in social practice connecting her to a network of other individuals and institutions. A broad social theory which captures the full complexity of contextual choice can help change social practices and priorities of both policymakers and consumers (Shove 2014).

By using the roadmap as an example, we want to show that the technology focus of this particular policy framework clashes with the historical and social contexts that it will be applied to, and this can hamper its intention and enactment. As stated in the document, the European Commission will discuss future energy policy 'with other EU institutions, Member States and stakeholders on the basis of this roadmap' ((European Commission 2012), p. 19). For those discussions to be as fair, inclusive and effective as possible, the roadmap needs to recognise the dilemmas and diverse priorities of different groups and thereby provide a baseline for ensuing negotiations. For this reason, it is important to pay attention to how the roadmap frames the challenge of transitioning to a decarbonised energy system. As literary studies and related fields have shown, framing

narratives shape ideas and discussions, for example, by recognising or neglecting certain groups and issues (e.g. Lakoff 2010). Acknowledging the complexity of an issue by inviting more than narrow techno-economic perspectives is a necessary step to make informed and inclusive decisions on what to prioritise and why. Ideally, energy policy frameworks such as the roadmap could enable policymaking that is based on 'contextualised prioritising' by weighing other-than-market considerations into the mix of decision variables. This would not take away the fact that hard decisions need to be made but expand and explicate the basis on which they are grounded.

4.4   Conclusion

This chapter started out with the accounts of Alva, Daniela and Ambika. While this is not the place to give final answers to the questions the women raise in their statements, their stories illustrate the complexity of energy policy and how the issues that face policymakers are not necessarily those that face energy consumers. When a narrow technocratic perspective is applied as an encompassing framework, a big part of the issue becomes invisible. This is also why the Energy Roadmap 2050 does not help our narrators; it only addresses a small part of the problem. Humanities and social sciences can make the whole map of complexities that lies behind an 'energy issue' more visible. This may lead to a broadening of what an 'energy problem' is, to encompass all the different social, political and cultural concerns that are often at the core of seemingly technical energy issues. Through such a redefinition, new relations and routes to problem solving can be envisioned.

Notes

1. References for Alva's account include European Commission (2001), Lawrence (2014), The Sami Parliament (2009a, b) and United Nations (2015).
2. References for Daniela's account include Kulinska (2017), Kisyov (2014), Martino (2015) and Pavlov (2018).
3. References for Ambika's account include Carrington and Safi (2017), Mohan (2017), European Commission (2011) and World Economic Forum (n.d.).

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