



**Call for Papers "The European Green Deal: moving to action  
Opportunities and challenges for the European citizens"**

**FROM OPPRESSION TO EMANCIPATION. ENERGY COMMUNITIES TO LEAP TOWARDS EQUALITY**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Energy communities are a public policy that open new frames within the liberal democracies by putting individuals and civil society in the centre to overcome chronic poverty in the cities that in some cases is caused by distributive policies. This way, applying a different approach through the works of Iris Marion Young, allows to widen the realities of structural inequality and that in this case (cities) we can see are reproduced in very specific areas. This brings us to a position to open new frames to solve both social and ecological challenges through democracy and civil society.

### **Social Media summary**

Energy communities as an answer to the ecological and social challenge of the urban agenda. Participation and democracy as a guide from the public powers.

### **Keywords**

#energycommunities #distributiveparadigme #justiceofdifference #urbanagenda  
#publicspace

### **Short bio**

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## Introduction

Ecology has entered policy making in the European Union (EU) as an important element. It has been present as a long-term goal for some decades now, but the creation of the European Green Deal as a corpus of policies to promote advances in the ecological transition will be key in the upcoming years.

Within this context, it is relevant to see other collateral benefits that may arise from the application of these policies. This may include not only the protection of biodiversity and halting the rising temperature levels in the planet, but also learning new sustainable habits, changing consumption patterns, creating new jobs and developing new technologies, to name a few. Specifically, here, we will propose the benefits of engaging society as a main actor in the implementation of these policies, taking the case of energy communities and the more impoverished areas of European cities.

The theoretical framework we will be using will be Iris Marion Young's (1990) analysis on structural oppressions and her studies on certain limitations of institutions that reproduce those inequalities. As an answer, the use of democratic participative projects where the civil society is listened to in deliberative spaces can lead to an enhancement of public policies and become the beginning of the end of structural inequalities in the political agenda. The Green Deal could be applied in this manner in most of its policies.

As a summary, this frame of thought puts in first place civil society as one of the main actors in cooperation with public administrations to solve those inequalities with an active role.

One of the distinctive traits of structural inequality is energy poverty, affordability and efficiency. Many studies show that in the more developed countries of the EU, districts with lower income rates share this aspect. Focusing policies to develop energy communities, as well as the EU funds destined towards implementing this type of project, in the poorer areas of cities should have the double benefit of

- fulfilling the primary objective of energy communities of energy transition;
- and enhancing social engagement within the communities and between them and public institutions, to tackle other structural deficiencies.

## Distribution paradigm and critique from the justice of difference

One of the main consensus regarding liberal societies in the Welfare States is the acceptance of a new social contract, the one that marks the limits of the democratic political communities and that guarantees the intervention of the State in the life of its citizens. This school of thought from a contemporary perspective can be represented in the works of John Rawls, who collects the traditional liberalist thought in its positive version (like previously had done by John Stuart Mill), where State interference is allowed in the name of individual development.

The contemporary social contract is built through the metaphor of the 'veil of ignorance' that creates a fiction of the limits for a dignified social coexistence. The conclusion we can draw from Rawls answers to minimum social basic necessities covered by a protective State that can guarantee the minimum elements of human dignity. For that it is necessary to apply a distributive paradigm that allows the democratic State the interference in the sacred private sphere (Rawls, 1999).

However, the harsh reality makes in a way that this ideal though held by John Rawls to fall down, since as we are reminded by the critique from the school of thought of the justice of difference those inequalities still exist and shape our societies, even though Rawl's theory in application should have corrected them. As Iris Marion Young puts it in *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (1990) the redistributive paradigm is not enough for the correction of structural inequalities. The author states that the criteria of justice has to be expanded, in other words, we must be capable of understanding the dynamics of oppression from a wider perspective.

Young creates a theoretical architecture that she calls the 'five faces of oppression', which are present and affect certain social groups in a systematic way. For example, descendants of migrants in the European context where their parents come from the Middle East and North Africa Region, usually are placed socially in a level of lower incomes and general discrimination (access to higher education, better jobs, etc.). Race and class converge intersectionally to affect them as particular social groups (Palmer & Kenway, 2007; Yann, Dustmann, Glitz & Manning, 2010).

Therefore there is an interaction between race and class and so we can observe how the distributive paradigm has to take into account different realities that Young manages to categorise in the 'five faces of oppression' (which are exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence). She manages to introduce elements from the perspective of distributive justice while at the same time including cultural and acknowledgement elements. She shows a wider approach to reality capable of better understanding the real inequalities between peoples. This allows to create and constitute new subjects to understand these kinds of oppressions, which was the case of the social group as a category.

If we bring back the example of descendants of migrants and add social housing policies in cities, i.e. in France, we find that from the exclusively distributive perspective (again, in the case of the descendants of migrants in France) the outcome has been the ghettoization of that social group in certain parts of the city (certain *banlieues*) (Molotoch, 2005; Couppié, Giret & Moullet, 2010). Since the French Government does not take into consideration other elements linked to cultural and difference logics, they foster a concentration of inequality.

The second big critique related to the distributive paradigm's simplification of reality is how the models of liberal democracy exclusively based on this paradigm end up reproducing inequality. Since they only take into account income and salary parameters, they turn the social democratic model into a system of perpetuation of those same inequalities. In contrast, Young denounces the danger posed by this approach and the need of new democratic spaces of deliberation where the political communities and the citizens become part of the decision-making processes (Young, 1990). Hence, the proposal of energy communities allows us to talk about those new deliberative frames that allow the participation of the citizens, businesses, civil society and public powers to solve the situations of structural inequality that are happening in cities and that the distributive paradigm can only reproduce.

## **Cities as structural subjects of inequality**

As we have pointed out above, cities become fundamental scenarios to understand the materialization of different social problems. According to the European Union, one of the main challenges of cities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the overcoming of the phenomenon known as energy poverty. If we take into consideration some cases regarding structural inequality, we can observe how they concentrate in specific territories or parts of the city (European Union, 2011).

According to the EU Energy Poverty Observatory, "energy poverty is a distinct form of poverty associated with a range of adverse consequences for people's health and wellbeing – with

respiratory and cardiac illnesses, and mental health, exacerbated due to low temperatures and stress associated with unaffordable energy bills. In fact, energy poverty has an indirect effect on many policy areas - including health, environment and productivity” (Energy Poverty Observatory, 2021).

According to Thomson, Bouzarovski and Snell (2017) energy vulnerability is determined by several factors which include:

- Appropriate access to electricity networks.
- Affordability as a relation between household income and energy expenditure. This also deals with the incapacity to invest in better infrastructure.
- Flexibility to change to more efficient energy types and sources.
- High loss of efficiency. Inability to match energy needs and provision.
- Lack of political will to understand and fix energy vulnerability as a phenomenon suffered by many households.

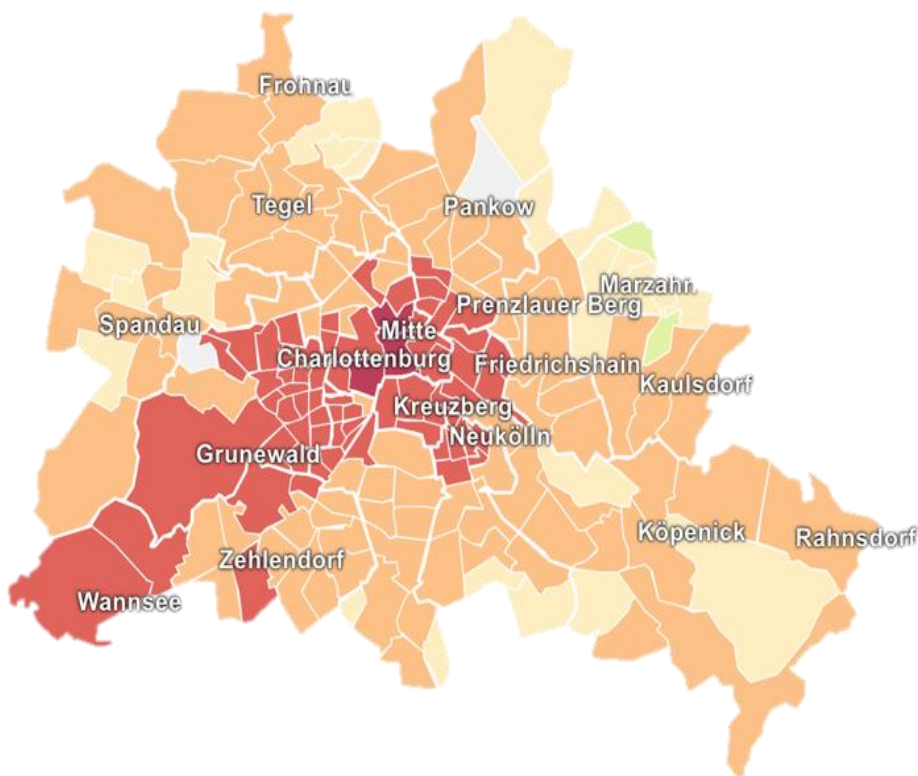
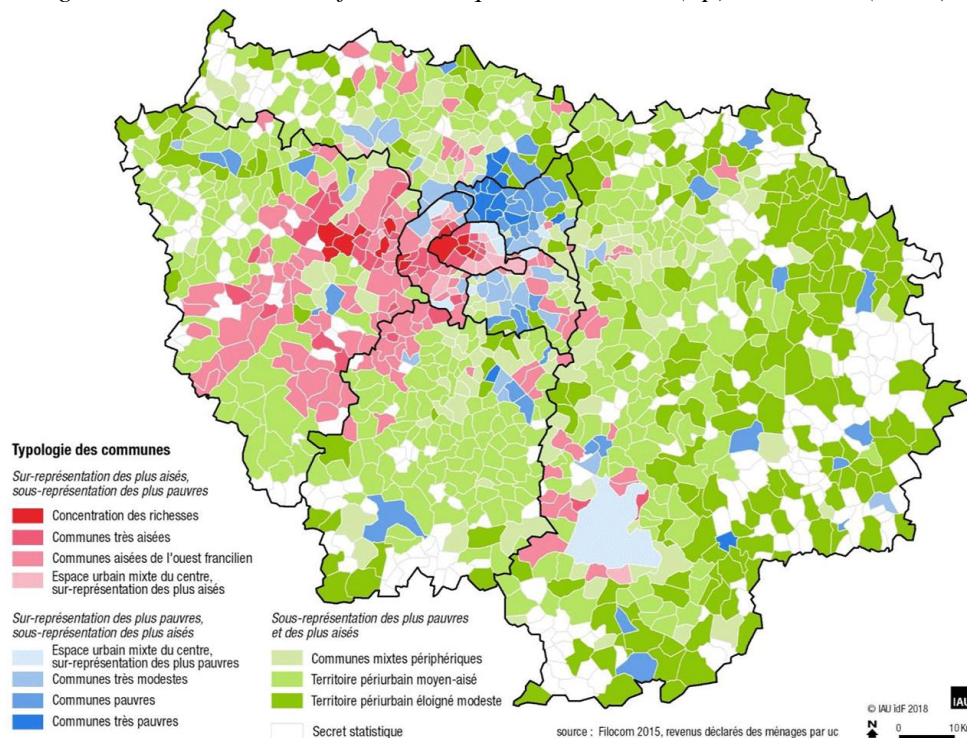
According to the Energy Poverty Observatory (2021) in 2020 around 8% of households in the EU “were unable to keep their home adequately warm”. This relates to a combination of elements that directly affect the factors stated above that determine energy vulnerability. Those elements involve low income, high expenditure in energy and loss of efficiency due to several lacks in infrastructure. In turn, this affects the ability of citizens to protect themselves from heat and cold waves, among other effects derived from climate change. Once again, the poorer citizens are more vulnerable in terms of energy and therefore more exposed to hard conditions, worse health problems and higher mortality. All related issues that connect to energy poverty.

Following, we will see how this applies in cities, more specifically on three European capitals. Cities are an interesting subject of analysis from this point of view as in one space we can see how borders are created between the higher and lower income neighbourhoods where inequalities tend to set and become chronic. Observing where these neighbourhoods are located we can appreciate how they tend to be concentrated all together.

To illustrate this, we take two of the biggest capital cities in Europe (Paris and Berlin), where even if there have been projects to redistribute wealth and avoid this chronification of poverty, while at the same time including green policies to make the cities more eco-friendly, none of the policies have managed to avoid the rising inequalities between areas.



Figure 1. Concentration of urban inequalities in Paris (up) and Berlin (down)



Source: Banque des territoires, 2019 & Berliner Morgenpost, 2018

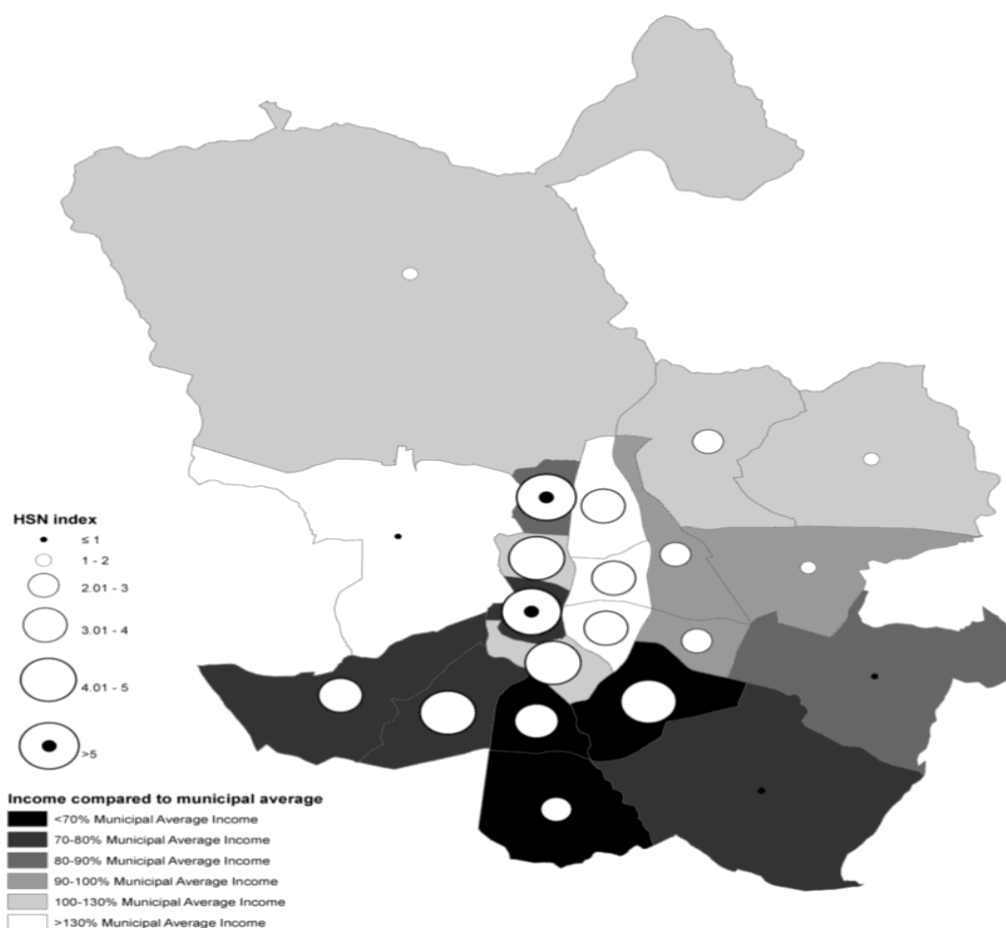


This phenomenon can be appreciated in all of the EU’s bigger cities and answers to a logic of ghettoization where oppressions as put by Young, are reproduced and even institutionalized when public powers are unable to redistribute wealth.

How is this relevant to energy poverty? There is a correlation between energy poverty and lower income neighborhoods, which can be associated to the factors explained above: lower efficiency, older buildings and worse access to energy, lower incomes and higher expenditure. Taking the example of Madrid we can appreciate this correlation in certain neighbourhoods of the city (the south west).

Further, we had said that energy poverty affects life expectancy too, which is also demonstrated in those areas where the higher income neighbourhoods have an average expectancy of around 86 years, and the lower income-energy poverty communities have an average 84 years of life expectancy (Calvo, 2021).

Figure 2. High Energy Requirements index and household disposable income in Madrid



Source: Sánchez, Sanz-Fernández, Núñez Peiró & Muñoz (2020)

Energy poverty is an issue not only from the economic perspective, it also has severe effects on social vulnerability, household budgets and the ecological impact of maintaining old buildings with the consequent loss of energy efficiency. However, fostering energy communities within the frame of the European Green Deal, may be an answer to more than one problem caused by inequality.

## **Energy Communities as a public policy to advance in the ecological and social issue**

“Energy communities organise collective and citizen-driven energy actions that will help pave the way for a clean energy transition, while moving citizens to the fore. They contribute to increase public acceptance of renewable energy projects and make it easier to attract private investments in the clean energy transition. At the same time, they have the potential to provide direct benefits to citizens by advancing energy efficiency and lowering their electricity bills” (European Commission, 2020).

Fostering the establishment of energy communities through public policies as a part of a more comprehensive ecological approach can help overcome the cleavage of the technological gap in the cities through the interaction between the civil society and the public powers.

These types of policies allow the enhancement of energetic efficiency, as new spaces would appear to favour self-consumption and self-management of the neighbourhood communities. This would permit that areas less energetically efficient (due to the old age of buildings, cheaper materials used, etc.) that hinder consumption (houses that take more to heat and that retain their temperature for less time, for example), which are usually inhabited by the lower rents due to the concentration on certain urban areas (as we saw above), would get a chance to change existing inequalities thanks to the technology that energy communities offer, as well as the public-private cooperation.

Therefore, new frames of participation would open up, where citizens through democratic processes (like their participation in energy communities) would become participants of their self-management through associations and businesses, being democracy and new deliberative spaces the overcoming of social inequalities by empowering individuals and making them take conscience of climate matters while they fix social inequalities.

### **Policy recommendations**

- The establishment of cooperation between the EU and neighbourhood associations for the establishment of energy communities, so that they will be able to share technical knowledge on how to implement these policies.
- The participation and creation of energy communities to foster the appearance of new deliberative and democratic frames for the overcoming of social challenges and their awareness of the ecological challenge. Creating management committees for the energy communities will mean engaging society and the immediate beneficiaries of the policies with an active role in decision making and implementation.
- Cooperation between public powers and the civil society to create a new social contract that favours an agreement against energy poverty in big cities. Citizens would have a say as stakeholders in the creation of energy policies, and in a more comprehensive frame in green policies, as any other actor with interests in the future of their community.
- The transformation of the citizens and civil society into direct participants and leaders of public policies. It would be a way of creating community leaders and foster the creation of networks within neighbourhoods. Which connects with...

- ...the creation of a social contract wider than the distributive logics that allow citizens to become an active part of public policy not being mere recipients of social aid, but in subjects of change. Trying to topple oppression and inequality from public institutions has not achieved the desired effects. Ideally, engaging the affected communities in the solutions to their vulnerabilities should achieve longer lasting effects.

## **Conclusion**

Energy Communities as a public policy are an opportunity to overcome the big challenges of the urban agenda and the social and ecological issue. If sometimes the distributive paradigm reproduces inequalities that become chronic and structural, applying a criteria of the justice of difference that takes into account other kinds of matters other than the distributive logic, allows us to create a critical thought and new public spaces to favour that suffer those inequalities take the floor to overcome discrimination.

In the case of one of the main ecological challenges of the urban agenda, the public policy of energy communities favours the interaction between businesses, civil society and public powers, giving protagonism to neighbours, making them leaders of change and empowering them by creating local projects inside the new public spaces of deliberation. This could help overcome the social gap and guarantee energy self-sustainability. The EU and other public powers should foster these types of societies that turn citizens into subjects of change of their own lives and the enhancement of the planet.

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