Editorial: critical perspectives on community energy

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The pressures caused by a need to radically reduce carbon emissions and ensure a secure energy supply have prompted moves to re-scale the production and distribution of energy while also opening up the energy system to new actors and institutions. Growth in renewable energy systems means that, at the supra-national scale, new interconnections are being made to even out energy surpluses and deficits that will result from a more intermittent energy supply system. And the move towards more distributed energy sources in the form of wind, solar, geothermal and water power has re-opened debate around the role of sub-national organisations and less formal groupings of people in the supply and distribution of energy. The inherent efficiency of monopolistic or oligarchic national energy systems is being challenged, exacerbated by increasing fuel costs and high levels of mistrust about the operations of energy suppliers among energy consumers.

In this context 'community energy' as practice, as well as policy and academic discourse, has grown rapidly in the last decade. Typically this refers to community mobilisation, broadly conceived, around issues relating to energy supply and demand. This special issue pulls together contributions from researchers concerned with community energy in a range of different ways, including energy production, distribution and consumption, with diverse insights drawn from empirical research in the UK, Germany, Spain and – by way of contrast – Mozambique. The common purpose is to sharpen conceptualisations of community energy, and critically interrogate both the concept and its deployment in policy. In the process of exploring the many facets of community energy, contributors encountered its conceptual limits. First, as well attested in numerous arenas, the term community in itself is nebulous and also potentially contentious (Levitas, 2000). Community energy has become stretched by usage, and the field it seeks to capture has grown and diversified. It is also Anglocentric, bound by British politics and inbuilt popular normative connotations, holding less traction in the rest of Europe for example, as Becker and Kunze note. They seek instead to develop an expanded conceptualisation, preferring 'collective and politically motivated' energy (CPE) as a means to capture the broad array of projects that have arisen. Community energy as 'local and non-commercial' projects, as outlined by Burchell et al., might also sit within this framing.

Alternatively, Johnson and Hall use the term 'civic energy'. This has a slightly different set of connotations, and in particular appears to invoke local authorities as important actors in the development of decentralised energy systems. The UK government's Community Energy Strategy (2014) is ambivalent on the role of local authorities in community energy, marking them out as partners to those seeking to

deliver projects rather than as drivers. But as many of the contributors outline here, the potential for local authority engagement stretches beyond this, be it as crucial intermediaries, helping to navigate complex planning and financial systems or as producers, distributors and suppliers of energy. Tweed underlines this point through a range of examples including an emerging role for local authorities offering energy supply products in partnership with smaller energy companies such as OVO and Good Energy.

More generally, supporting the role of non-state local energy projects requires a stronger network of intermediaries. Bird and Barnes draw on empirical work in Bristol to demonstrate the importance of both dedicated specialist intermediary organisations and broader networks of support including key local institutions such as local authorities and universities. These organisations can play a key role in ensuring that community energy practice spreads beyond those that already have sufficient capacities and capabilities in organisational, financial, social and cultural terms. Van Der Horst approaches this issue from another angle, considering the possibilities for 'transitional justice' for areas where new community energy projects are sited.

The lingering equity concerns raised by a move to a decentralised energy system are addressed by Johnson and Hall, who argue that there is potential for existing inequalities to be reproduced or exacerbated by such a transition. They argue that, under current governance arrangements: *"there is nothing stopping a well-resourced, well-meaning middle class, in areas with healthy municipal finances, from capturing much of the value offered by community energy schemes"*. Beyond these broader discussions regarding community energy as concept and phenomenon, an equally pertinent question is the extent to which government-led strategy is rooted in realistic understandings and expectations of community-led action. To what extent is policy informed by the actual experiences and capabilities of communities and their specific engagements with energy? On this front, there is already a well-established evidence base on the experiences of community involvement in local governance, raising now familiar issues around capacity, representation, decision making, legitimacy and delivery (e.g. Taylor, 2003; Lowndes and Sullivan, 2008; Connelly, 2011). Added to this are growing literatures on the role of energy in everyday life: how energy use is accommodated in and structures day-to-day routines, both in domestic and working environments (Hargreaves *et al.*, 2010; Hargreaves, 2011; Butler *et al.*, 2014); and existing accounts of collective mobilisation around the consumption, and especially provision, of energy (Walker, 2008; Seyfang *et al.*, 2013). It is vital that strategy to encourage continued growth in such mobilisation learns from this rich base of existing evidence.

The contributions in this special issue have the potential to further build on that rich evidence base. In their article on energy landscapes in Mozambique, Castán Broto *et al*. take considerations of community energy to first principles: what role do particular forms of energy provision play in the lives of a given group of people and, indeed, in sustaining their communal lives? This reminds us, first, of the need to consider not just how (pre-existing or purposively formed) 'communities' can mobilise around 'energy provision' (understood straightforwardly as access to electricity or heat), but how broad energy landscapes already shape, and are shaped by, the routines, understandings and material arrangements underpinning ordinary people's lives both individually and collectively. Furthermore, considering the context in Mozambique in which energy landscapes are changing rapidly can shed light on the similar, but perhaps taken for granted, co-constitutive relationship between everyday practices, community and energy in a comparatively established Western European energy context.

Other contributions are more directly concerned with on the ground experiences of community mobilisation around energy. Burchell *et al.* explore this question from the perspective of demand-side interventions by researching a project focusing on reducing domestic energy use through behaviour change and energy efficiency measures. Radtke's article, meanwhile, seeks to expand the evidence base on citizen involvement in supply-side community energy initiatives. By conducting a broad, quantitative survey across the sector in Germany, he provides a snapshot of the characteristics of participants, their reasons for engagement, the level of their involvement and ability to influence decision making.

The papers in this issue each offer important perspectives in their own right. We feel, however, that collectively they generate a number of critical debates and questions regarding community energy in the UK, Europe and indeed across the world. One key contribution is a broadening of the focus of community energy as a domain, drawing in a wide range of types of initiative. This leads into the collective exploration of the inherently fuzzy and potentially exclusionary nature of community energy conceptually and in practice, which is then mapped against emerging policy. The work here (most explicitly in Johnson and Hall's article) begins to sketch out the equity challenges for decentralised energy systems. This is an agenda that clearly needs to be developed further. Further empirical investigation into the role of such projects in addressing the needs of deprived urban communities is one area of pressing concern as community energy begins to take on a more urban dimension, This recognises that community energy is not an esoteric or technical issue but one which clearly resonates with wider debates about how to revitalised disadvantaged areas. The growing expectation, at least within the UK, that regeneration should be community-led rather than delivered through top-down area-based initiatives further emphasises the salience of debates on community energy.

To conclude, we'd like to express our thanks to all that have contributed to this special issue and helped to produce a high quality collection of papers in an unreasonably short time frame, especially to the authors, reviewers and editorial assistants. We eagerly anticipate the debates their efforts open up and, as a multi-disciplinary policy journal, look forward to publishing future research on the cusp of social, political, economic and technical innovation.

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