

# Making the energy transition 'by the people for the people' across Europe

**KEYWORDS** Energy markets; Renewable energy communities; Social acceptance of renewable energy; Public engagement; Community-owned energy systems; Energy democracy

**TIMEFRAME** Fellowship meetings with Associates took place in May 2020

**ENERGY-SHIFTS RAPPORTEUR:** Tessa de Geus



## Energy-SHIFTS Policy Fellow

### Molly Walsh

Renewables Campaigner, Friends of the Earth Europe,  
Brussels, Belgium



This Energy-SHIFTS Policy Fellowship report is part of a wider collection published in November 2020 describing dialogue between 21 energy policyworkers and [86] social scientists and humanities scholars, available via [energy-shifts.eu](https://energy-shifts.eu).

## Policy context

---

Molly Walsh is a renewables campaigner at the NGO Friends of the Earth (FoE) Europe, specialising in advocacy and diplomacy. Currently, Molly is based in Brussels where she ‘infiltrates the Brussels bubble’ to advocate for climate and energy justice, and campaigns for a people and community-owned renewable energy system. FoE Europe recently received significant attention due to their success in pushing for the issue of ownership and community engagement in the *EU Clean Energy for all Europeans* package<sup>1</sup> negotiations, which gives citizens the right to sell and produce energy.

While the technology necessary to move to a 100% renewable energy system already exists, Molly thinks that most policy makers and mainstream society are not well-aware of it, or, for various reasons, still retain doubts. She has observed a decrease in the popularity of renewables demonstrated for example via pushback from policy makers, poor quality policy making, as well as an increase in local anti-renewable sentiment.

From her perspective, this local anti-renewable sentiment is a key reason for the pushback against renewables across Europe. In Germany for example, this contributed to a political proposal for such strict distance requirements that it would almost eliminate on-shore wind turbines. According to Molly, resistance against wind farms are caused when people do not feel involved in the energy transition, and don’t benefit from it. She argues for the urgency of making the energy transition ‘for the people, by the people’. She decided to join the Energy-SHIFTS Fellowship programme to seek academic support and evidence from the Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) on the effectiveness and cost-efficiency of alternative, decentralised, community-owned renewable systems. Through the programme, Molly hoped to gain a better understanding of these energy issues.

“ If the transition is not democratically owned, it will fail. ”

Molly Walsh

## Policy challenges

---

Based on the policy context above, Molly prepared the following Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) related questions to kick start her discussions with her matched Policy Associates. These questions were sent to the Policy Associates prior to their conversations.

- How does public engagement in energy transition projects affect the public perception of renewable energy?
- How can alternatives be promoted (such as decentralised community-owned systems), given a stage and pushed as alternatives to centralised solutions in EU policy making?
- What evidence is there that community participation makes the energy transition more popular?

---

1 See: [https://ec.europa.eu/energy/topics/energy-strategy/clean-energy-all-europeans\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/energy/topics/energy-strategy/clean-energy-all-europeans_en)



## Matched Policy Associates

Given the policy challenges addressed by Molly, the Energy-SHIFTS team aimed to involve academic views on dynamics of household energy consumption, fairness in energy systems and community transformation. Her three matched Associates were therefore:

**Grégoire Wallenborn** – Senior Researcher, Department of Sociology, University of Geneva, Geneva, Switzerland. Grégoire was invited to participate due to his research interests in Philosophy and Environmental Sciences, and experience in fieldwork on household energy consumption. He was also involved as a member of the Energy-SHIFTS Smart Consumption Working Group.

**Kirsten Jenkins** – Lecturer, Energy, Environment and Society, Department of Science, Technology and Innovation, University of Edinburgh, United Kingdom. Kirsten's research interests include energy justice, Just Transitions, fairness in energy systems more generally, alongside sustainable energy policy. Due to her involvement in sustainable development and Human Geography, and significant expertise in energy justice, Kirsten was matched as an Associate to Molly.

**Andreea Vornicu** – Researcher and PhD Candidate, Center for the Study of Democracy (CSD), Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania. Andreea has extensive experience in field work in remote communities and exploring the various dimensions of energy poverty in Central and Eastern European countries. Andreea was selected to provide insights from the perspective of International Development, community transforming mechanisms and Law.

## Discussion points and SSH insights

Each Policy Associate wrote a brief response to Molly's policy challenges, before bi-lateral calls took place between 6 May and 18 May 2020. Molly also took part in an online workshop on 8 June 2020 with other Fellows and Associates working on topics across the 'Just Transitions' thematic category. Quotes from Associates are shown in italics in the main text.

### Critically unpacking 'participation'

Associates offered several perspectives on how to understand 'participation' and public engagement in the face of renewable energy projects. Rather than assuming that any participation is good in and of itself, the way that it is designed and deployed must depend on how 'the public' is being defined. As one Associate proposed, currently many people do not have access to decision-making with regards to energy transition projects, as public engagement schemes often seem to cluster on rural and middle-class communities.

Several issues may therefore need to be addressed in order to be able to claim systemic engagement of the public for renewable energy projects. For instance, while the idea of implementing 'procedural justice', meaning to "*engage all stakeholders in a non-discriminatory way*", might be considered an inherent objective of public engagement, in fact it requires upfront work to specifically determine what it is exactly that people are allowed to affect during the engagement process. Unclear public engagement processes could risk slowing the pace of transitions since clarity over how to progress may be diminished. Another key issue to consider is how the party who leads the engagement process will affect power dynamics. Useful academic references were flagged up by Associates including work on tailoring engagement to the type of energy in question<sup>2</sup> and Helen Pallett's work on mapping participation<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> Ellis and Ferraro (2016), *The social acceptance of wind energy*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Available at: [https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/bitstream/JRC103743/jrc103743\\_2016.7095\\_src\\_en\\_social%20acceptance%20of%20wind\\_am%20-%20gf%20final.pdf](https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/bitstream/JRC103743/jrc103743_2016.7095_src_en_social%20acceptance%20of%20wind_am%20-%20gf%20final.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Helen was in fact an invited Associate for Energy-SHIFTS Fellowship team Andrea de Ruiter, Charlotte Koot, and Menno Ottens. See: Pallett, H.; Chilvers, J.; Hargreaves, T. (2019) Mapping participation: A systematic analysis of diverse public participation

Another Associate highlighted the importance of considering politics in energy studies, by analysing different viewpoints and power relations between actors. In this way, the Associate argued, there is a need to go beyond 'social acceptance' understandings, and truly engage in local co-creation of energy projects in order to reach citizens that are not convinced of the need for renewable energy projects.

### Understanding specific contexts

Molly discussed with Associates how successful participation strategies may be highly specific to respective (national) contexts. There may thus be a significant differentiation between Western European countries, where climate change is a widely acknowledged theme on the policy agenda, and former communist countries in Eastern Europe, where the topic appears to be not very well embedded yet with citizens.

Research has explored how local renewable energy projects that are transparent, supported by local leaders, and which simultaneously address tangible local problems, may help snowball broader public education about renewables in Eastern Europe. Examples of such local problems that might be simultaneously addressed include improving energy efficiency in residential buildings to reduce costs for residents. In contrast, Western Europe may already have ample examples of energy communities, and thus may primarily need to invest in disseminating success stories nationwide.

### Supporting decentralised energy

Associates suggested several measures that might support public engagement for the case of decentralised renewable energy projects. These include practically fostering long-term financing e.g. through subsidies and R&D, as well as developing long-term political commitment to the energy transition, planning and land policy reforms. In addition, community ambassadors can play an important role in transferring knowledge, including making legal documents accessible to the public, and attempting to change social norms. This point was underscored in more than one of Molly's Fellowship meetings, which highlighted the importance of local formal and informal champions in promoting projects, and the potential of participatory budgeting initiatives to involve citizens. Importantly, the transposition of EU directives on energy communities<sup>4</sup> can also build important momentum for supporting decentralised energy. What the stakes and power (im)balances are, and how the directives are interpreted in different countries, was also subject to discussion.

## Translation to policy impacts

---

As a result of the exchanges in the Fellowship, Molly deepened her knowledge of the discussion and debates around a democratic energy transition. Specifically, Molly aims to use her insights for the following purposes:

1. **Supporting the transposition of the *Clean Energy for all Europeans package*.** Molly will be using the ideas and perspectives from her Fellowship to support FoE Europe's current work supporting the process of transposition of the Renewable Energy Directive (RED II) and regulation on electricity market design to national law in all EU member states, which is currently ongoing.
2. **Writing an academic journal publication.** Molly has maintained ongoing contact with the Associates she met through the Fellowship, and aims to write an academic article together with one of them. The article would analyse the involvement of the coalition that FoE brought together around the creation of the *Clean Energy Package*.

---

in the UK energy system. *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 2 (3), pp.590-616.

4 See: [https://ec.europa.eu/energy/topics/renewable-energy/renewable-energy-directive\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/energy/topics/renewable-energy/renewable-energy-directive_en)

## Reflections from Associates

---

We asked the Policy Associates what they learned about on-the-ground energy policy challenges from their interactions, with key quotes as follows. The influence of groups like Friends of the Earth Europe upon policy particularly impressed upon Associates:

*“I went into the call very open-minded and without any assumptions of what we would discuss but did have pre-existing interests in the role of NGOs in shaping policy outcomes. It was a pleasure to hear about the extent of FoE’s [Friends of the Earth’s] ambition, engagement and feed-in. **The organisation appears more powerful than I would have assumed.**”*

*“[I learned about] what were **the stakes and power balances under the writing of the Directives**. How Friends of the Earth works to help their transposition in various countries, how the Directives are received and understood in different EU countries, and what is the NGO coalition supporting both Directives.”*

*“[I learned more about how] there are several **challenges about the availability of data and collecting them (local, regional and national level)** and then interpreting the data for grounding the policy proposals on evidence.”*