

Incorporating deeper understanding of social acceptance challenges into the Spanish Renewable Energy Strategy

KEYWORDS Decarbonisation; Large-scale renewables; Social movements; Protest movements

TIMEFRAME Fellowship meetings with Associates took place in April 2020

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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.

Policy context

Energy-SHIFTS Fellow Víctor Marcos is an energy professional working on the Spanish National Energy and Climate Plan 2021-2030 (NECP), as well as the country's Long Term Energy Strategy¹. Every EU member state is now required to produce an NECP², which is a 10 year plan outlining national targets and implementation plans regarding energy efficiency, renewables, greenhouse gas, emissions reductions, interconnections, research and innovation. The first version of the Spanish NECP was released in January 2020³. It will be reviewed every two years to better meet changing environment, societal and economics conditions. Large-scale renewables deployment is seen as an essential part of Spain's (and Europe's) decarbonisation aims, and is thus a core component of their NECP, for example with a target of 42% of energy coming from renewables by 2030.

Victor's own background and expertise is techno-economical (for example working with costings, energy consumption or CO₂ emission data) and he works across both micro (regional) and macro (Spain) level. Victor has experience with types of quantitative and qualitative data, and has sought to include a social perspective in his work to date. Victor's role in the development of the NECP involves management of the modelling team, checking assumptions, holding meetings with authorities to explain the content of the NECP, among other tasks.

The main policy challenge Victor wished to discuss during his Fellowship was connected to social acceptance. He felt this was of crucial importance to the NECP implementation, for several reasons:

- (1) to ensure investment in the energy sector, especially for large-scale renewables implementation;
- (2) because a lack of social acceptance, and/or social protest, can significantly affect projects' viability.

He saw these as interconnected since if citizens do not support technological projects then protests may occur and, as a consequence, investment may be stopped. He hoped to bring more in-depth understanding of the latest Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) research on social acceptance issues into his work (see quote) and highlighted that bringing in 'bottom-up perspectives' is important for him.

“*Social analysis is a key part of a successful implementation of the energy transition. Social acceptance of an ambitious objective [i.e. large-scale renewables deployment] is crucial for its fulfilment. Participating in this Fellowship program, [my expectation is that] researchers [will] help me consider the social view in my planning work. I would like to get first-hand information on the topics I am studying for the deployment of the energy transition ahead.*”

Victor Marcus Morell

Policy challenges

Given the policy context above, the overall challenge Victor was interested in discussing was thus how to better incorporate consideration of social acceptance issues in the implementation of large-scale renewables, as part of Spain's NECP. Within this context, he was interested in the following sub-questions:

- How can the NECP approach issues of lack of social acceptance and/or social protest?
- What is the latest research relating to relevant communication strategies, as well as involving citizens in deliberation and participation process?
- What could be done locally, and what on the national level, before implementation of projects, to increase social acceptability of projects?
- What recommendations and good practices from other countries may be helpful for the Spanish context?

¹ The strategy has just finished its public consultation period, see: <https://energia.gob.es/es-es/Participacion/Paginas/DetalleParticipacionPublica.aspx?k=336>

² https://ec.europa.eu/energy/topics/energy-strategy/national-energy-climate-plans_en

³ An English translation of Spain's NECP is available here: https://ec.europa.eu/energy/sites/ener/files/documents/ec_courtesy_translation_es_necp.pdf



Matched Policy Associates

Following contact with Victor, the Energy-SHIFTS team sought SSH expertise in social movements, social acceptance, and public policy. We looked for some experts familiar with the Spanish policy context but also those with experience in other national contexts. We were also mindful of gender balance. The five Associates who participated in Victor's Fellowship were thus as follows:

Alena Bleicher - Researcher, Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research - UFZ, Leipzig, Germany. Alena is a geographer, but with a background which also encompasses training in sociology and history. Her research interests include: framing and role of publics in technology development, governing technology development in the context of exploitation of energy or mineral resources, technological development and experimental practices within energy use (particularly geothermal), the concept of non-knowledge in environmental management and technology development.

Katarzyna Iwińska - Adjunct Professor at Collegium Civitas, Warsaw, and Research Fellow at Adam Mickiewicz University (Poland). Katarzyna is a sociologist interested in the energy just transition, activities of NGOs, local communities and social aspects of environmental protection. Her research focuses on social perception of energy transition. She is the author of numerous publications related to public engagement, environment perception, and environmental conflicts at a local and national (Polish) level. She also collaborates with consultancy companies engaged in public decision-making processes.

Xaquín Pérez-Sindin López - Marie Curie Postdoctoral Fellow, Department of Geosciences and Natural Resource Management University of Copenhagen, Denmark. Xaquín works across Social/Economic Geography, Environmental and Development Sociology and Globalization Studies. His projects have included mixed-method analysis of public opinion about the exploitation of a large-scale mine in Spain and the adjacent power plant. He has also analysed changes of socio-economic and public health indicators, as well as engaging in academic debates related to regional planning.

Sylwia Mrozowska - Professor of Political Science, Department of Political Thought and Recent History, University of Gdańsk, Poland. Sylwia is a political scientist and specialist in international affairs. She is interested in European integration and social participation, especially participatory technology assessment. She is the author of works on the roles of lobbying and participation in EU Energy Policy.

Daniel Wuebben - Marie Curie Cofund Fellow, Ciberimaginario Group, Department of Communication and Sociology, University of Rey Juan Carlos, Madrid, Spain. Daniel works across Communication Studies, Energy Humanities, and Science and Technology Studies, with a background in English Literature. His book, *Power-lined*, offers a cultural history of overhead electric infrastructure in the United States. He has specific expertise on the Spanish policy context and his research interests are related to social acceptance, community energy, and digital rhetoric.

Discussion points and SSH insights

Victor had a one-to-one call with each of his matched Policy Associates over 8-12 April. The calls were preceded by exchanging written responses on the policy challenges Victor had raised. In this section we highlight key discussion points and insights from across the interactions.

Defining social acceptance and introducing new concepts

Victor discussed the definition of social acceptance with Associates. One Associate proposed a useful definition as being *“a positive attitude towards a technology that leads to supporting actions when needed or requested and counteracting other people’s resistance”*. Associates presented projects and outputs which have previously sought to bring together understandings of social acceptance of wind energy specifically. The concept of social acceptance in energy has been widely discussed among SSH scholars, with some arguing that it should be understood through a critical perspective, since *“acceptance seems to be more related with a passive reception of those infrastructures, with people tolerating but not actually supporting them.”* (Batel et al., 2013, p. 4) This distinction between tolerance and support is an important one when considering wider (and potentially long term) citizen engagement programmes.

Importantly, Associates also introduced other relevant theoretical concepts through the discussions, including: (energy) communities, participatory approaches, social dialogue, deliberative processes, environmental education, values, social norms.

Understanding local contexts and communities

Victor was introduced to various models of social acceptance developed by researchers, and accompanying ideas of how to analyse situations of potential conflict. As one example, an Associate presented one model of social acceptance factors as follows: *“[There are] seven ... important factors of acceptance of wind energy, according to the literature on this topic: four related to the site of the development and three to the management of the project itself.”*

This linked into discussion about how, for local communities, their territory may be connected with tradition, habits and culture and thus the importance of policyworkers to be aware of local context, ownership and former use of territory. This also included conversation about how specific, local, contextual knowledge was sometimes difficult to get hold of, and the challenges in obtaining it.

Environmental awareness and going further

The role of environmental awareness, or environmental education, was highlighted by some Associates. *“Social acceptance is influenced both by environmental awareness and its consequences, and by the knowledge of the renewable energy technologies involved. There’s a positive connection between people’s understanding of climate change and its consequences, and their willingness to act.”* The role of policy in developing citizens’ environmental awareness was seen as highly relevant and there was discussion of the phenomenon of ‘fake news’, and questions about the responsibility of policymakers and local leaders for action on education.

Whilst if people understand climate change and have knowledge about renewables energy technology they may have more willingness to act, there are other crucial factors (beyond awareness) that were also highlighted in discussion. These include fairness of the decision-making process and trust in decision-makers.

Communication principles and participatory approaches

There are many communication strategies which could be applied in this context. As highlighted above, policyworkers may need to develop or apply tools for learning about the local context and also be sensitive to social values and norms in carrying this out. Associates flagged up several relevant projects and, as one example, Victor was introduced to communication guidelines developed by the project WISEPower - see Box 2.

Box 2. Example communication guidelines

“1. **Openness** means the sharing of relevant information about the developer’s decisions and activities. Such information should be presented to the community and other stakeholders in a clear, accurate, timely, and honest manner.

2. **Inclusiveness** means identifying and interacting with all project stakeholders, to ensure their perspectives are understood and taken into consideration.

3. **Responsiveness** means listening and responding to community and stakeholder concerns and needs were relevant to the wind farm.

4. **Accountability** involves the ongoing process of monitoring, evaluating, and sharing information about the wind farm throughout its lifecycle, including the positive and negative impacts of the development.

5. **Flexibility** (Impuls) means preparing for local requests and required amendments to the development. This includes being open to e.g. shifting the location of the turbines or grid connection lines.”

Quoted from Dütschke and Wesche, 2014, Wind-Acceptance: A Userguide for Developers and Municipalities, WISEPower, p.15, available here: http://wisepower-project.eu/wp-content/uploads/2014_08_Deliverable_2_1_final_version.pdf

SSH research often emphasises and explores processes such as deliberation and different types of (citizen) participation. In this context, the concept of social dialogue – seen as all types of negotiation and consultation between (representatives of) government and citizens – and the ways social dialogue may interlink with social acceptance, was discussed. Ways that SSH findings can feed into the design of project management were explored, including how local communities may be involved in decision making within different structures.

Associates discussed the ways that bringing specific social science expertise into projects may be necessary to ensure appropriate application of participatory approaches: “It is always good to cooperate with experts in social sciences and within interdisciplinary groups tackle the issue of social acceptance as well as conflict management around the new investments”.

Translations to policy impacts

Victor is looking to now develop learnings from the Energy-SHIFTS Fellowship in two ways:

1. **Sharing relevant knowledge with local authorities and developing local contextual knowledge**

A key area which was identified through the Fellowship was the challenges of gathering and applying local, contextual, knowledge rather than general national-scale strategies, however it is necessary to develop this national wide strategies in a documents such as the NECP. It will be during the Environmental Impact Assessment when local considerations will be introduced in each one of the projects. The Spanish process of Environmental Impact Assessment allows the local communities to express themselves before the development of each one of the projects. This, along with improvements in regulation to increase the involvement of the citizenship in the renewable energy development, are intended to increase overall acceptance of energy policy measures.

2. **Future interactions with SSH researchers**

Victor evaluated his interactions with researchers as part of the Energy-SHIFTS Fellowship very positively and found their contributions interesting and useful for the policy challenges he is working on. It has laid the foundations for further future interactions with SSH researchers, such as related to renewable energy communities and the development of citizenship energy communities in Spanish regulation. The improvement of flexibility and aggregation in order to put the citizen at the centre of the energy system will be a core area where this policy-SSH research dialogue will be of value.

Reflections from Associates

The Associates evaluated positively their interactions with Victor, in particular highlighting the value in learning more about the local context of Spain's energy landscape, and thus comparing it to their own countries experiences. We share some of their reflections on what they learnt about on-the-ground policy challenges here:

"We discuss[ed] the NECP for Spain that was released last month [and] Victor answered some of my questions about the public participation ... **I learned about the process of the NECP, how it is composed in teams and about how different companies and NGOs comment upon these plans.**"

"[I learnt] that the social acceptance issue is a real problem because **there is little knowledge [relating to] specific locations, people's values and their place attachment.**.. to build an international platform for this kind of virtual shared knowledge [demands] time for better connections, collecting specific data and discussion on real-based problems."

"[I learnt about] **practical challenges** of energy transition in Spain."

"I learned ... about the situation of **renewable energy policy in Spain** and the institution with which Victor is affiliated."

"I [learnt] that policy makers are there and welcome feedbacks from outside. They are, particularly in this time of Covid, there like us, academics, sitting in front of the computer and we should [strengthen] our interactions. I think **I will now have a more proactive attitude ... [and] just write those policy makers who might be potentially interested in what I do.**"