

European Energy Poverty: Agenda Co-Creation and Knowledge Innovation

Working Group 3 (WG3)

Dialogues – co-producing emancipatory research and practice

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New narratives and actors for citizen-led energy poverty dialogues

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1. Energy poverty in times of crisis

The unfolding COVID-19 health and economic crisis are enlarging the breadth and depth of energy poverty (EP) – a significant form of household material deprivation that affected tens of millions of Europeans before the emergency onset in March 2020. Lockdowns and mobility restrictions established by public authorities underline the importance of housing and domestic energy as structural determinants of health and well-being.

In this context, the third policy brief of the ENGAGER Working Group 3 (WG3) highlights the need for **enhanced stakeholder engagement around energy poverty** and for **renewed dialogue across the multiple sectors and actors involved**. With this policy brief, we also advocate for emancipatory narratives that reveal the unjust social provisioning of essential services that the pandemic is making even more evident. It builds on our two previous WG3 policy briefs on the [psycho-social dimensions of energy poverty](#) and the need for [qualitative research to amplify the voices and lived experiences of energy poverty](#). This brief also reflects the conclusions of the [ENGAGER call for action](#) in response to the COVID-19 crisis in Europe.

We put forward three key arguments in this policy brief:

- Emancipatory narratives for household energy poverty call for energy to be considered as a 'human right' and as social 'commons'.
- Citizen-led, community-oriented decision making creates opportunities for more just and inclusive policy outcomes, as long as barriers to participation, especially the ones related to gender inequalities, are considered.
- New actors with untapped capabilities for EP action (e.g., citizen energy communities and Ombudspersons) can act as 'engagement brokers' or champions of the rights and voices of affected persons.

2. Emancipatory framings and narratives

EP policy-making within the European Union has so far been dominated by social and economic narratives that have locked in certain policy approaches. One of such dominant narratives is the **economic framing of domestic energy as a market good**, of households as energy users or consumers of energy rather than human beings with rights and needs. In this view, energy is primarily an economic good traded in competitive markets with final prices indicating an equilibrium between demand and supply. A related **social framing** considers **energy poverty as a subset of general poverty** without acknowledging the underlying drivers and related structural inequalities. In practice, this narrative often leads to social welfare policies that focus on alleviation through income support and in some cases resort to energy price regulation rather than attention to the quality of homes, path-dependencies in energy infrastructures, the security of tenure, or people's (in)abilities to install solar PV or carry out retrofitting, to name but a few challenges. Where interventions in the built environment are concerned, the challenges are

often framed in technocratic terms, i.e., assuming that people's conditions may be largely solved by implementing better or more ambitious technological innovations. These narratives **fail to capture the dynamic, multi-dimensional nature of energy poverty** and the range of challenges, needs and abilities that households face in relation to their personal household energy uses. This brief posits that EP dialogues and engagement must leverage more ambitious, empowering framings centered on people's experiences and knowledge. Valuable new narratives emerging in EU policy practice, and from EU civil society, include the positioning of **household energy as a fundamental need, as a right, or as 'commons'**. A rights-based perspective was recently specifically affirmed in Principle 20 of the [EU Pillar of Social Rights](#).

New framing based around rights, commons or communities

A new emancipatory framing around household energy services access would help reinforce the idea that households are not mere stakeholders, beneficiaries or energy users or consumers. In contrast, a right to energy approach, which is closely related to the right to adequate housing, right to health, the right to a healthy environment or the right to the city, centers the **attention on persons as primary subjects with vital stakes** in access to good quality, affordable, continuous energy services up to a socially and materially necessary level for achieving decent living standards. It emphasizes **their full rights and interests in decision-making** processes concerning the energy systems affecting their lives. In essence, such narratives reinforce the idea that people are **entitled to proper governance of energy**, for themselves and their community's interest. Civil society actors are currently standing up around terms of [rights to energy](#), [energy democracy](#), or [energy communities](#).



The aim of such new narratives would be to help (re)shape power relations between dominant actors such as governments, landlords, housing agencies or service providers, and citizens or persons as holders of rights and members of a community. **New framings can skew or realign existing power balances** in favor of the latter, and thereby empower citizens to engage in their own and their communities' futures. Ultimately, rights- or commons-based understandings of domestic energy could **contribute to greater procedural (participatory) justice** thus leading to fairer and more inclusive decision-making procedures in energy poverty-related matters and to the recognition of all relevant rights and interests therein (recognition justice).

3. Citizen-led policy making and barriers to participation

The European Commission supports the vision of an [Energy Union "with citizens at its core"](#). From this perspective, citizens take ownership of the energy transition, participate actively in the supply of energy and gain protection when qualified as vulnerable consumers. Similarly, **energy citizenship is also being promoted as a social innovation tool** in [Horizon 2020 Clean Energy Transition calls](#) with the aim of going beyond "consumer involvement" as a public participation strategy. However, critics argue that this vision is still based on a "citizen-as-consumer" approach that [fails to recognise differences in people's capacity to act and access to](#)

[resources](#) or to take part in the transition in an equal way. A positive development is that the EU recognised that “[energy services are fundamental to safeguarding the well-being of the Union citizens](#)” in the new Electricity Directive 2019/944. Energy services are thus vital to guarantee a decent standard of living and citizens' health” and the Directive has to be implemented according to the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

Citizens are actively taking up civil space on energy poverty

In parallel to top-down institutional support for greater citizen-involvement, **individuals and organisations are actively challenging structural drivers of energy poverty** from the bottom-up, including poor quality, low energy-efficiency homes, (e.g., the [French Renovons network](#) or the [UK Fuel Poverty Action Network](#)) or energy tariff increases resulting from sector restructuring, privatisation or energy transition policies (e.g., the 2013 [protests against high electricity and hot water bills in Bulgaria](#), or the post-2018 [gilets jaunes movement in France](#) initially sparked by rising diesel prices and the government's announcement of the creation of a carbon tax that would have penalised those who use their cars the most, i.e., those living on the outskirts of large cities and in rural areas). **Waves of civil resistance and activism** after the 2008 financial crisis and austerity measures by grassroots movements in [Catalonia](#) or [Greece](#) led to legal reforms and recognition of the right to energy. Citizens have also begun to **actively take back control over energy systems** from private service providers via local citizen-led energy communities, [remunicipalisation](#) of energy activities by local governments and inspired ‘[energy democracy](#)’ activism, as seen in [Germany](#).

Civil society organisations **giving voice to disadvantaged segments of the population** stand out as key actors for leveraging attention to energy poverty in these processes. However, not all communities may possess sufficient energy literacy, social capital or grassroots activism to make their voices and interests heard, and to participate. In such cases, **community building, energy literacy campaigns, energy efficiency advice, and awareness-raising** on issues of energy poverty or energy justice may be prerequisites for empowering underrepresented groups and enhance citizen engagement and participation. Community interventions for **kick-starting engagement** may include innovative community art projects or technical installations (the [LaPile Project by CityMined](#)), paid energy internships for specific groups (e.g. [Local Youth Expert Internships by Brixton Energy](#)), and energy advice points in neighbourhoods, (e.g. the [Kyoto Mobile by Pajopower](#) in Belgium, or the [Energy Advice Points in Barcelona](#)).

Finally, barriers for engagement and participation may need to be broken or removed, including those as related to possible **feelings of shame and guilt**. Participation barriers can be **physical or economic in nature**: costs of engagement can be prohibitive (e.g., travel to meetings, contributing with volunteered, unpaid time), people may experience mobility challenges (e.g., elderly, children or persons with disabilities) or lack access to ICTs and therefore to increasingly common channels of virtual participation. **Barriers can also be social, cultural or stem from pre-existing social inequalities**: power hierarchies in social relations, cultural differences in participation, uneven communication skills, and educational or information asymmetries can all play a role.

A **gender perspective** is required in order to guarantee inclusive participation and stimulate engagement to promote equal access to energy for women and men. On top of the previously mentioned barriers for participation, women face two additional barriers. The first one is time poverty. The timing of meetings in mornings or evenings can easily conflict with care duties for children or with domestic tasks, and since participation is often unpaid, it can amount to another burden in the everyday life of women. Second, when communities are dominated by a certain social group or gender, underrepresented persons may feel less qualified or knowledgeable and thus discouraged to participate. Overcoming these barriers to accommodate women to participate in engagement activities might contribute to a better understanding and recognition of gender inequalities in access to energy. Using a gender perspective is also an argument for an intersectional approach that **looks beyond the household as a homogenous entity** by acknowledging their fluid composition and dynamic identity, e.g. single-headed households, multi-generational households, or co-parenting households.

Example 1:

Overcoming shame and empowering women: the Alliance against Energy Poverty (Catalonia)

The [Alliance against Energy Poverty](#) (*Aliança contra la Pobresa Energètica* or APE) was launched in Barcelona in February 2014 under the premise of fighting for [access to basic supplies](#) (i.e. energy and water) as a **fundamental human right**. Initially started as a coalition of social and environmental organizations, providing **critical mass for advocacy**, their most significant milestone is Catalan Law 24/2015 on urgent measures for the housing and energy poverty emergency which [forbids eviction and disconnection from basic supplies](#) of households defined as vulnerable by local social services.

A key activity of the Alliance is their so-called **collective advisory assemblies** in which twice a month people can share their concerns and grievances in a safe and trusted space, without feeling judged or examined. These meetings follow a collective intelligence methodology through which knowledge accumulates as new cases arrive and practical solutions are suggested by the participants. The assemblies have an **explicit gender dimension** as they are mostly attended by *afectadas* (i.e. 'affected' women reporting unpaid bills and utility debt, or at risk of disconnection and/or eviction). Even if assemblies are facilitated by non-affected activists, they purposely have **no explicit formal leadership** to ensure that everyone feels equally entitled to contribute with their knowledge and skills about, e.g. how to deal with utility companies, social services or on how to change a supply contract to reduce bills (but not consumption).

The individual household cases addressed in the collective advisory assemblies serve for advocacy purposes too. They allow **disseminating the right to energy approach among the media and the wider public** thus helping insert this perspective in social imaginaries. Currently, the Alliance is campaigning for a real 'second chance' to people indebted to utility service providers. APE has been demanding big utility companies to **cancel the accumulated energy debts of vulnerable families** since 2015. Debt write-off was achieved for households indebted with the dominant water company in the Metropolitan Area of Barcelona (Agbar) in 2018.

Example 2:

Material participation through renewables: The Lightbringers Foundation (Southern Hungary)

The [energy transition opens the door to new forms of energy citizenship through material participation](#). Material participation implies engagement on matters of political concern through technologies and

material objects. In Hungary, the Lightbringers Foundation (*Fényhozók Alapítvány*) is a grassroots initiative that facilitates the participation of poverty-stricken households in energy transitions. Starting as a crowd-funded project for the installation of solar PV panels in 12 vulnerable households living in the segregated Roma settlement of the *Baks* municipality (*Dél-Alföld* region), this modest material intervention **demonstrates the power of self-organization** among traditionally excluded populations. Together with the Roma Press Centre and the Polgár Foundation for Equal Opportunities, Lightbringers project leaders launched an **‘electricity poverty’ (*áramszégyenyiség*) campaign** in spring 2020 to denounce that hundreds of thousands of Hungarians rely on insecure, unreliable connections to electricity, have been disconnected from the supply, or have been put on a prepayment meter. The campaign **exposed the appalling living conditions** of vulnerable households in the first stages of the coronavirus outbreak, especially among children for whom lack of quality access to electricity jeopardized their possibilities for homeschooling and online education.

4. New actors for emancipatory engagement

This brief argues that effective development of energy poverty policies requires listening closely to affected persons and community or civil society organizations representing those living in energy poverty. Aside from direct engagement by and with these actors at grassroots levels, **there are stakeholders with untapped capabilities for energy poverty action**, but so far disregarded, that **can act as ‘engagement brokers’ or champions of the right to energy**.

These novel actors will play an important role in setting emancipatory agendas both in EU countries where dedicated energy poverty communities have existed for years (e.g. UK, France or Belgium) and in countries where such communities are nascent or non-existent.

Example 1: Social value-driven citizen (renewable) energy communities

According to the EU’s Clean Energy for All European package, **value-driven citizen (renewable) energy communities at the local levels can play an empowering role for energy-poor households** by including them in the transition and making their energy bills more affordable. While such communities may be driven by citizens, **remunicipalisation** can play a central role too. [Robin Hood Energy](#) was established by the [Nottingham City Council](#) as the first publicly owned, non-profit energy company in the UK. It “strongly believes that [energy is a basic human necessity, not a luxury](#)”, and aims to [tackle fuel poverty](#) by providing an alternative to the ‘big six’ private providers.

So far, it has **not proven easy to establish energy communities that involve vulnerable, low-income households from the bottom-up**, despite [several initiatives](#). Most energy communities do not explicitly champion energy poverty, and even fewer have been designed with EP alleviation explicitly in mind. In the Netherlands, the [Schakelwijken project](#) was recently established by [LSA Bewoners](#), a well-established national network of over 100 neighbourhood associations, initiatives, community centers and cooperatives. Their project identified [three ‘vulnerable’ neighbourhoods actively exploring and developing inclusive, grass-roots level projects for a social energy transition](#), e.g. on renewable district heating, solar panels or energy efficiency. Over the coming years, LSA aims to support a total of 10 neighbourhoods in large Dutch cities, with capacity building, knowledge-sharing, and support for (inclusive) citizen participation. One of the projects identified so far lies in Amsterdam’s Slotervaart neighbourhood, where residents claim that the [Slotervaart Lake is an energy resource of their neighbourhood](#). The local *Westerlicht Energy Cooperative* is now examining how collective energy systems for this neighbourhood can be established in a way that **includes and benefits those without resources to invest in them**.

Example 2: (Energy) Ombudspersons

The EU also actively supports Ombudspersons as new actors in energy poverty decision-making as indicated in Article 26 of the EU Electricity Directive 2019/944. Ombudspersons can play a powerful role in championing the rights and voices of the energy-poor through their powers of independent research, public participation, handling of complaints, and publishing (unsolicited) policy advice. European Energy Ombuds Offices affiliated to the **National Energy Ombudsperson Network (NEON)** support people's '[right to access energy services](#)'. Several examples of Ombuds offices actively working on energy poverty have been identified.

The **Catalan Ombuds Office (*Síndic de Greuges*)** has contributed to emerging policy debates through its first [major report](#) dedicated to EP in Catalonia in 2013 and has subsequently published *ex officio* reports on the [right to basic supplies](#) (electricity, gas and water) in 2014 and on the [right to access the electricity supply](#) in 2019. Its reports have supported the approval and implementation of new legislation, namely Law 24/2015 of the Parliament of Catalonia that bans the disconnection of vulnerable households. The *Síndic* also actively encourages [EP complaints](#) from the public. **In cooperation with NEON and UK, Belgian and French Energy Ombudspersons, the *Síndic*** published a further [report on good corporate practices in the private sector](#) in 2014, in light of concerns about the effects of liberalization of public services.

In France, [the National Energy Ombudsman \(*Médiateur National de l'énergie*\)](#) has been working closely with the French National Energy Poverty Observatory (ONPE) since its creation in 2011 and collects each year relevant data through its 'Energie-Info barometer', to [report on the state of energy poverty](#) in France. Its Annual activity reports are extremely rich in pointing out structural flaws in the energy market, complaints and case studies, and evaluating trends and developments in law and policy.

Excerpts from Activity Report 2018 in France:

« The ombudsman's role as a whistle-blower allows it to change bad practices, because it alone has the visibility that allows it to confirm that a malfunction is not an isolated case and serial disputes can be identified early enough. »

Alain Bazot, President of the UFC-Que Choisir on the morning of 9 January 2018

The **Belgian Energy Ombudsman Service (*Service de médiation pour l'énergie / Ombudsdienst voor energie*)** closely monitors complaints related to energy poverty and follows up with households. It cooperates with numerous bodies, such as the Platform for Combating Fuel Poverty of the King Baudouin Foundation or the permanent advisory group with regulators and other public services. It deals directly with the Public Centres for Social Welfare (CPAS), which can lodge complaints on behalf of their users and cooperates with the Consumer Ombudsman Service which can bring [class action suits](#) against groups of providers to achieve settlements and force structural changes in abusive practices. This Ombudsman grows in popularity [every year](#).

« Nice of you to forget to charge us for electricity for 1 year, then send us an invoice for €450, giving us 1 month in which to pay it. My mother is alone, sick, unemployed. The household income is no higher than 800 €/month. »

Mr. N. - Montpellier (34)

Excerpt from North Macedonian Ombudsperson Activity Report 2019:

The **North Macedonian Ombudsperson** handles and highlights many different complaints and issues on energy vulnerability (see example of several actions from its 2019 Annual Report on the right), as related to [energy bills, connections and disconnections](#), [lack of heating](#), for different [vulnerable persons](#), or [non-payment of energy subsidies](#) to persons at social risk. It also advises on the content of laws, including the [Energy Law](#).

Finally, the **Croatian Ombudswoman** has been actively [championing energy poverty based on human rights principles](#) since 2015, and in doing so, actively amplifies voices of marginalized people across Croatia, e.g., in rural areas, war-affected areas, or irregular settlements. The office conducts [field visits](#) to understand “what living in energy poverty looks like, and how energy poverty affects healthy and socio-culturally acceptable living conditions”. People’s voices shine through in Annual reports through excerpts from complaints (see below). [Annual reports](#) include yearly assessments of policies and lists of recommendations. In 2017, the Croatian office organized a [public conference](#) on energy poverty policies with a wide range of stakeholders.

People’s voices: excerpt from Annual Report of the Croatian Ombudswoman (2017):

“I am 59 years old and retired. Eight years ago, my husband died, and things went wrong. My family pension is HRK 1988. My bank accounts have been frozen for more than 6 years. Since January 2014, my gas was cut off, and this is the fourth winter that I have been freezing. I sleep and live in the cold. I have no warm water and I wash from a plastic bowl, I wrote to the gas company and asked to pay my debt in instalments, but they refused. I receive HRK 1400, which I use to pay my loans and manage to keep electricity and water. I have two daughters who help me not to starve. Last winter, everything broke from the cold, I really do not know how I managed to survive. I dress warmly and when it gets cold I endure, I fear the winter. I know that all of us living on the edge of existence seem equally miserable, but we have stepped over that edge a long time ago, we sank much deeper. Because of all that I ended up on medication. This all affected my nerves. One can endure a lot, but hunger and cold are too much. “

NP no. 1117/19

The Ombudsman, after receiving information from the media that a 70-year-old woman from Skopje lived alone, without electricity, and in very bad conditions, without means of subsistence, opened a case on his own initiative. After providing information and data about the mentioned person, the Ombudsman immediately inspected the home of the above-mentioned person and determined that it was a woman who lives without water and electricity in the flat, there were no conditions for maintaining personal hygiene and hygiene in the flat. The Ombudsman found a violation of the right, due to which he submitted an indication to the PI Inter-Municipal Centre for Social Work of the City of Skopje, to undertake measures so as to provide assistance, support, security and protection of the respective person, from any aspect.

In that context, he pointed out the need to involve all competent services at the PI Inter-Municipal Centre for Social Work, and everyone within the scope of their work to undertake measures, to consider the possibility of appointing a guardian for this person, the person’s appropriate accommodation in an institution, where she will receive the necessary care and protection, as well as measures for appropriate support of the respective person. As a result of the intervention of the Ombudsman, all necessary measures were undertaken by the Centre for Social Work to protect this person.