



## **ENGAGER Podcast Series, November 2020**

### **SERIES INTRO**

**Marilyn Smith:** As a journalist who has been following the 'energy access' story for several years, I'm often struck how hard it is to find the right words to describe 'what' it is I'm reporting on.

First, there is the challenge of describing situations in which lack of access to energy undermines people's health, well-being and ability to participate fully in society. The collective impact is stunted economic and social development in communities, countries and even continents.

Second, in academic and policy circles, debate around definitions sometimes seems to stall putting pen to paper in a way that would ensure 'someone' will do 'something' to fix the problem.

While reporting for EnAct, I've woken up coughing heavily as Nepalese women fan the flames of an open fire inside their tiny huts – windows closed to block the cold mountain air.

In Liberia, I've stood in shock, watching nurses calmly do night rounds by the light of their cell phones -- because their hospital can't afford to run its diesel generators 24/7.

Our cameras were running as Katia – a pensioner who lives year-long in her summer dascha in Ukraine – put the equivalent of 65 euros on the counter to pay her gas and electricity bills. During an earlier interview, she had told us her monthly pension is 73 euros.

While lack of reliable energy is central to all of those scenarios, I struggle to with the term 'energy poverty' as the 'catch-all' for situations ranging from 'zero' access to modern energy to contexts where diverse types of energy are available, but unaffordable. It risks putting a desperately poor woman who spends hours collecting wood every week in the same 'basket' as her counterpart who has to 'budget' turning on the heat in relation to available income. There is, in fact, no comparison.

Even though we all use it every minute of every day, for most people 'energy' itself remains a vague, complex and poorly understood term.

'Poverty' is loaded with the idea that if one just had more income, it would be possible to acquire basic needs like food, clothing and – indeed – energy for cooking, heating, lighting and other services. But then energy poverty is not just about low incomes. Other factors such as a household's specific needs, the availability of energy sources in the area, the quality and energy efficiency of homes, or domestic energy prices greatly influence people's ability to access domestic energy services.

Increasingly, layered on to those complexities is a growing call for access to energy to be recognized as a 'basic human right' – even as we acknowledge that 'someone' needs to pay for the systems that deliver energy to people's doorsteps.

While most people support the idea that all 8 billion people on our Planet should have the same basic rights, I suspect that, like myself, relatively few of us have thought much about the practicalities of adopting and upholding such rights.

All things considered, the concept of 'the right to energy' might seem at once absolutely imperative, rather nebulous and paralyzingly complex.

From the starting point of a conference entitled '**Co-creating the Right to Energy in Theory and Practice**', this podcast series digs into different aspects of taking concrete steps towards establishing energy as a basic human right. Over two days, more than 50 participants engaged in dialogue about the meaning, purpose rights, and duties associated with this end goal. The event was organized by the ENGAGER network, which seeks to bring about transformational change in the investigation and amelioration of household-level energy poverty in Europe.

ENGAGER stands for European Energy Poverty: Agenda Co-Creation and Knowledge Innovation. It is funded by COST – European Cooperation in Science & Technology – a funding agency for research and innovation networks that aims to enable scientists to grow their ideas by sharing them with peers.

To reflect a key element of the conference, throughout the podcast series into each interview we intersperse the voices of diverse actors in the energy access sector speaking about what terms – energy poverty, energy vulnerability, energy access, energy justice, et cetera – resonate with them and why.

As you listen to the series, I hope you will contemplate the importance of words when speaking about people who are disadvantaged by societal structures. And commit to using bold language when calling on relevant actors to eliminate such injustices.

## **SERIES EXTRO**

This podcast series was made possible through financial support from the ENGAGER network, which in turn is funded by COST – European Cooperation in Science and Technology.

The ENGAGER programme facilitates the development of comprehensive, innovative and evidence-based policy frameworks. Considering that energy poverty affects tens of millions of Europeans, ENGAGER addresses a major societal challenge by seeking to answer three inter-related questions:

1. How can energy poverty be understood and eradicated via multidimensional research and policy?
2. What are the conceptual and methodological complexities that underpin energy poverty?
3. What is the best way of overcoming limited knowledge on energy poverty in Europe?

For more information about ENGAGER, visit: [www.engager-energy.net](http://www.engager-energy.net)

The COST initiative is described at: [www.cost.eu](http://www.cost.eu)

For wide range of additional reporting on energy poverty in Europe by The Energy Action Project, visit the website 'COLD AT HOME; -- [www.coldathome.today](http://www.coldathome.today)

For Engager and EnAct, I'm Marilyn Smith.