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COST Action 16232<sup>1</sup>  
**European Energy Poverty:  
Agenda Co-Creation and Knowledge Innovation  
(ENGAGER 2017-2022)**

**Report from WG2 Workshop: Reshaping norms in energy poverty: the capabilities approach in practice  
April 14<sup>th</sup>, 2021, online**

Prevailing frameworks for measuring and understanding energy poverty are heavily influenced by Western (European) thinking concerning energy usage and thermal comfort norms, which has led to outcomes such as the silencing of indoor cooling in metrics, the exclusion of important energy services for home businesses, and the flattening of cultural diversity in energy practices. Ensuing processes of path dependency have led to these norms being ingrained within statistical metrics for quantifying the prevalence and depth of energy deprivation, with a dominant focus on the ratio of energy expenditure to household income, which further limits our understanding of energy inequalities. In the recent years, the Capability Approach (CA) of Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2011) has attracted the attention of numerous researchers given the opportunities it offers to extend our knowledge of energy poverty. However, the complexity and under specification of this approach poses numerous challenges at the time of its application, in particular when we want to apply it to the issue of energy poverty.

This workshop aimed to open new debates on the limits of current energy poverty measures, present solutions to some of these methodological challenges, and create a common understanding on how the CA could be usefully applied in practice to the issue of energy poverty in Europe and other settings. The event was coordinated by Harriet Thomson of the University of Birmingham, Chiara Grazini from Università degli Studi della Tuscia, and Karla Ricalde, an independent consultant with óol CIC. Overall, more than sixty participants joined from all over the world, for a two-part workshop. The first part was dedicated to theoretical

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framings, starting with Rosie Day (University of Birmingham) in “The appeal and challenges of a capabilities-based approach to energy poverty”, which focused on two key related challenges for operationalising the CA in practice. The first relates to selecting the capabilities (or functionings) which should be considered as essential. The second challenge relates to the relationship between energy services and capabilities. The CA to energy poverty emphasises that energy services underpin essential capabilities, but in decoupling the resource (energy, or energy services) from the outcome (capabilities) it also leaves open the possibility that capabilities can be realised by other means; this is an important consideration for energy justice in an era of climate change. This however complicates the situation further regarding metrics, especially those based around energy access and energy services.

Neil Simcock (Liverpool John Moores University) in “Energy justice and the capabilities approach” discussed connections between the CA and the ‘energy justice’ framework. The talk began with a brief outline and definition of energy justice and its relation to energy poverty, before reflecting on how the CA might ‘fit’ with or connect to energy justice. He then considered two alternative theories through which the CA could be used to make normative judgements about energy poverty: (i) Nussbaum’s theory of ‘Central Capabilities’; (ii) an alternative formulation of justice developed by Wolff and De-Shalit in their book *Disadvantage*. After briefly considering the complexities and challenges of each of these approaches, Neil finished with some questions for further discussion.

Marlies Hesselman (University of Groningen) in “Capabilities and the Right to Energy in International Law” provided a brief description of current international legislative frameworks for human rights, before discussing some of the challenges associated with calling for a specific right to energy, including challenges around understanding what energy and energy services are for, and how to determine equitable minimum ‘essential’ levels. Next, Marlies focused on existing precedents for a right to water, before ending with a final reflection on existing international benchmarks for energy.

Siddharth Sareen (University of Stavanger) in “The capabilities approach is where energy poverty meets development research” highlighted that some strengths of the CA are that it recognises intrinsic value and individual agency among marginalised actors and highlights structural constraints to the actualisation of inherent capabilities. On the one hand, the engagement with such a grounded approach by energy poverty scholars is natural, given that this epistemic community is concerned about marginalised groups, deprivation, and



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possibilities to improve energy access with all that this can enable. This makes for a charged entanglement between the CA and energy poverty research. At its worst, it risks transposing situated agency and contextualised violence to a reductive, metricised agenda, setting the conditions for the proclamation of gains while multidimensional vulnerabilities are left unaddressed. At its most promising, it represents a major advance for constructive engagement, where scholars transcend the domain of societal critique and develop reflexive data infrastructures to unlock human capabilities in targeted and nuanced ways. The current moment is definitive in shaping this crucial trajectory.

Presentations in the second part aimed to respond to some of the practical and methodological challenges posed by the application of the CA to the issue of energy poverty through the presentation of four empirical studies by:

Chiara Grazini (Tuscia University) in “Energy poverty as a capability deprivation: empirical evidence for Italian households” who highlighted that the current Italian measure based on energy expenditure is not able to provide a complete vision of a multidimensional phenomenon such as energy poverty. However, the CA recognises this characteristic, imposing four methodological problems: the between the capability metrics and the functionings ones, the selection of the relevant capabilities, weighting, and aggregation issues. Using the Italian EU\_SILC data, she tried to resolve these problems and applied the Multidimensional Energy Poverty Index developed by Nussbaumer et al. (2012) to estimate the incidence and the severity of this multidimensional phenomenon. In the last part, she presented a survey related to the social housing sector of the Province of Viterbo (Italy). This sector is the second most vulnerable to energy poverty, but there are few in-depth studies on the real diffusion of this phenomenon.

Karla Ricalde (óol) in “Energy poverty measurement and the Capability Approach: ongoing conversation” outlined a pilot project that has been taking place across Cuba, Mexico and the UK, which has experimented with practically applying the CA to measuring and understanding energy poverty, via participatory action research workshops and collaboratively derived weights for index construction from national surveys. During the presentation, Karla outlined the steps taken during the workshops, including asking participants to list their household energy uses and then link each energy use with the primary



capabilities it supported, followed by a ranking exercise. Karla then reflected on ‘the good, the bad and the ugly’, in terms of the benefits and challenges offered by this approach.

Françoise Bartiaux (Université catholique de Louvain) in “Unequal capability deployment and unequal access to affordable warmth: A mixed-method research” summarized a two-step mixed-method research project on energy justice and energy poverty in Belgium, using the CA. The first step was quantitative analysis that aimed to underline the differences in capability deployment between different categories of households according to their access to affordable energy; by showing these differences between energy poor and energy (much) richer households, this study enhanced the recognition of the energy poor people’s problematic situations, which is one dimension of the energy justice paradigm. The second step of this mixed-method research was qualitative, drawing on 60 in-depth interviews realised in Belgium with people in energy poverty. Through participant quotes, Françoise illustrated how people in energy poverty experience restricted capabilities for the first five capabilities defined by Nussbaum. Furthermore, it was shown that these restricted capabilities often work in conjunction in vicious circles, or what Wolff and de-Shalit (2007) call a ‘corrosive disadvantage’.

Lucie Middlemiss (University of Leeds) in “Energy poverty, capabilities and social relations” explained how people’s social relations shape their energy consumption, and their ability to cope with energy poverty. Social relations include intimate relationships with friends and family, relationships with agencies that provide services, and more abstract relationships of identity (e.g. gender, class, disability status). In the context of the CA, social relations amount to a set of capabilities (capability to make meaningful relationships; capability for dignity; capability to participate in society), which in turn can result in people being able to access adequate energy services. These capabilities are also shaped relationally by people’s social context: the resources people have access to, the way they understand their situation socially, the social roles they play (e.g. mum, tenant etc.) and the larger groupings they belong to (e.g. disabled, ethnic minority, working class).

At the end of the presentations, an interactive discussion between all participants started to highlight the possible advantages deriving from the application of the CA to studying energy poverty and the problems that still must be faced. The issues raised

Thinking about applying CA to energy poverty, what are the biggest...



What hasn't been resolved - i.e. if you could ask more questions, what would they be?



Reflecting on the presentations, what potential pathways do you see for your own work?



What are the barriers to applying CA, and what resources would help to resolve these?



during the workshop will be used as the basis for a joint article that aims to pose key questions for researchers and practitioners to address in their own work and create a common methodological framework. A call for authors will be launched later in the year.