

RIFS-Blogpost

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Autor*innen: Radtke, Jörg
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[Dachzeile]

Resolving Conflicts Around the Energy Transition

Running over three years, the research project "Demokon - A Democratic Conflict Culture for the Energy Transition" studied the characteristics of energy transition conflicts, explored their interactions with political populism, and considered options to improve their resolution. The project was funded by the Mercator Foundation and carried out by researchers from the Research Institute for Sustainability (RIFS), Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research (PIK), Niederrhein University of Applied Sciences, Göttingen Institute for Democracy Research, the University of Siegen and the communications agency Institut für Raum und Energie.

1 Getting to grips with the complexities of energy transition conflicts

The energy transition is the subject of heated debate in Germany: The federal government's recent proposal to overhaul the Building Energy Act proved controversial and saw citizens up and down the country debating the feasibility of expanding wind power capacities and electricity grids. With populist right-wing parties ready to pour oil on the flames, local opposition to wind farms can boil over, gripping communities in bitter disputes.

German author Juli Zeh captured the complexity of these conflicts in her bestselling novel "Unter Leuten". The potpourri of rural intrigue, long-held grudges, and wild ambition portrayed in the novel chimes with research findings and reveals the inadequacy of attempts to explain opposition to energy projects as mere NIMBYism (Not In My Backyard). Rather, these conflicts are fuelled by a multitude of complex interests, attitudes and aggressions. When citizens, politicians and organized interests oppose energy transition projects, they are driven by a variety of factors, including direct impacts (on quality of life in residential areas), material disadvantages (property values), and concerns about health hazards and landscape change.

2 Is the energy transition being exploited by populists?

Political parties may well be tempted to oppose energy transition projects in order to curry favour with voters. One central question of the Demokon project was whether the German energy transition has become a breeding ground for populism. Although the AfD frequently draws on populist rhetoric to rail against energy transition projects, our research failed to show that populist agitation significantly influenced the course of conflicts or attitudes within local populations. Energy transition conflicts are underpinned by the conflicting interests of conservation, landscape preservation, tourism versus green energy. These conflicting interests alone can lead to polarization. Diverging goals (pristine nature versus clean energy) are often played off against each other in these conflicts, reflecting populist arguments. Other aspects of populism (e.g., elements of the critique of elites, anti-pluralistic worldviews, and claims to represent broader public opinion) are also evident in these conflicts. However, our research shows that this does not provide a robust explanation for the deeper causes of energy transition conflicts and that other factors often have a stronger influence on their course.

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3 When ways of life, mindsets, and interests collide...

Our research findings show that in every conflict it is the specific interests of diverse actors and their particular perspectives on the issue that collide in the debate. Plans to establish a wind farm in a forested area can attract the ire of local interest groups otherwise rarely heard in public debate, such as hiking clubs or bird conservation and local heritage associations. Energy transition conflicts often give rise to motley coalitions of actors with shared interests. What these social conflicts have in common is their tendency to polarize communities and the escalating rhetoric and actions of those involved.

The inability of the conflict parties to find a common language is a core problem in this context: professional planners struggle to discuss their decisions with the public when confronted with the raw emotions of everyday language. Mediators, who can adopt a neutral position and facilitate between the conflict parties, have an important role to play here and are used frequently in Germany (in connection with the Stuttgart 21 railway project and various collective bargaining disputes, for example). Town mayors, for example, could assume this role in energy transition conflicts, but many prefer to take a passive stance – especially when conflicts grow heated. Many, of course, are fearful of powerful local interest groups and have one eye on the next election. But ducking away does not help to resolve these conflicts, what is needed is a proactive approach.

4 Resolving conflicts isn't easy, but it's not impossible either

Which conflict resolution strategies are particularly promising? Most successful energy transition projects have a magic ingredient: Participation. [Financial participation](#), public participation (from information bazaars to debates) and voting (referendums) all serve to build acceptance, establish a balance of interests, and improve outcomes for the common good. During his tenure as Minister of the Environment in Schleswig-Holstein, Robert Habeck – now Federal Minister for Economic Affairs and Climate Action – took part in numerous public participation events in connection with the development of new electricity grid infrastructure. Today, he regularly upholds the importance of pursuing a strategy of participation (as do most other politicians and experts).

Many observers have stressed the importance of financial participation (benefit sharing / community ownership), but as the case studies show, it is not a panacea and opposition groups may well view financial participation as a form of "corruption" – an attempt to simply buy their consent. Referendums, too, can be seen as instruments by which a majority imposes its will on a minority. Which leaves us with the golden middle way that has long defined democracy: discursive negotiation. As Jürgen Habermas has argued, this process plays a pivotal role in ensuring the viability of decisions and affording stable democratic legitimacy.

5 What's next for the participatory energy transition?

It is clear that more must be done to create opportunities for discursive participation around energy transition projects, including developing new formats that will work on a larger scale. However, public debate has been marred by a growing minority that refuses to abide by the conventions of civil discourse. In response, decision-makers and project developers have pulled back, limiting rather than expanding opportunities for debate. Reluctant to provide a platform for opposition groups and critical initiatives, organisers are increasingly turning to information bazaars, where members of the public can visit booths to learn more about proposals. While this format does provide for face-to-face discussions, it does not facilitate an orderly process of exchange and negotiation within a larger group. This is highly problematic because, as has been shown, there is no alternative to discourse: far-reaching transformations of this kind simply have to be negotiated.

Citizens' assemblies (also known as 'mini-publics') offer one possible solution and proved successful in one of the case studies. [Research conducted by RIFS projects over the last few years has confirmed the effectiveness of this model](#). But in the energy transition, as in general: there are no quick fixes. Citizens' assemblies cannot and will not solve all the problems – ideally, citizens should have access to a range of opportunities for debate and participation. Only by establishing a variety of options for input and feedback can we respond adequately to the democratic challenges presented by this transformation process.



The results of this research are available here:

- Radtke, J. (2023). [Energiewende-Konflikte und Populismus: Zur Rolle lokaler Akteure](#). RIFS Study, Juli 2023.
- Demokon project website: <https://demokon.de/>

