Vision Statement of the trilateral Winter school “Youth visions on the climate-social justice nexus“
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Energy justice challenges in France, Romania, and Germany.

Mapping inequalities, exploring normative approaches and identifying policy recommendations.

I. Introduction

This paper represents the youth vision from the Trinational Exchange organised in the framework of a winter school on “Youth visions on the climate-social justice nexus” which took place in Cluj-Napoca, Romania from the 5th-12th of March 2023. Bachelor's, Master's and PhD level students from France, Germany and Romania took part in developing a vision statement as a result of reflections from the presentations, debates, site visits, and exchanges over the week. This paper is a culmination of group reflections on mapping inequalities in different themes and countries, exploring normative approaches to tackling these challenges and identifying clear policy recommendations on how to address these inequalities. Applying a world cafe format, this multi-lingual, cross-cultural vision statement was produced on the final day of the Winter School and is a result of a social experiment designed to give the students a common platform to express their individual experiences and thoughts of the week combined into a single common document while exchanging and developing ideas in a small group setting.

II. Conceptualization

Energy is a fundamental driver of economic development and human progress, playing a crucial role in powering industries, homes, and transportation. However, access to affordable, secure, and clean energy is not evenly distributed across the world, with significant inequalities existing both within and between countries. These inequalities have significant implications for social, economic, and environmental outcomes, including poverty reduction, health, education, and climate change. As such, it is essential to examine the inequalities that exist in the energy sector, as understanding the root causes and consequences of these inequalities is critical for identifying effective policy interventions that can promote sustainable and equitable energy access for all.

Robust mapping of inequalities is a necessary first step to understand root causes. Therefore, within the context of this paper, a conceptual framework is developed on a geographical and thematic layer. The main geographical issues include the local level, the national level, and EU level. Furthermore, the topic is split up on a thematic level listed below. Given the expansive nature of the topic of inequality, the following list serves as a short summary:

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1. Access to infrastructure
2. Transportation impact on health and economic opportunity
3. Decision making process of investments
4. Mismatch of households and company
5. Participation in the production and distribution of energy

Conceptual Framework

1) Access to infrastructure

a) Having access to the energy infrastructure is an issue for lower income households because they often live in neighbourhoods with poorer infrastructure. Furthermore, problems exist in communicating the possibility of having access to energy infrastructure, lack of knowledge and lack of common-language knowledge. Households who rent for a short time, such as students, have no interest or power to change the way of access to energy sources. Unregistered buildings or households don't have access to the energy system.

b) Communities in the countryside have poor infrastructure and low level of access to energy facilities. Politics and policies often tend to neglect rural areas, because they have low economic power and it is expensive to provide for all the rural areas. Expansion of the energy grid to rural areas takes much time, and there is no prospect to provide access for the whole country (such as gas). As well, the access to funding is difficult for rural areas with a weak economy, infrastructure, and smaller population.

c) There are different problems for countries within the EU, such as different energy production and resources and different amounts of economic power. Energy crises have large impacts on countries, which are energy dependent from other countries, although there are also a variety of sources that provide security in case of energy crises. Bigger investments in energy grid availability go to countries with already good infrastructure.

2) Transportation impact on health and economic opportunity

a) Access to public transportation is related to the social economic situation within a city. The freedom of choice of which kind of transportation is used, is primarily given to wealthier individuals.

b) Increased mobility/infrastructure in the city as opposed to rural areas. Longer distances in the rural areas are more expensive, so mobility in rural areas is more expensive, because of the utilization rate.

c) Wealthier countries have a modern infrastructure for mobility as compared to the less financially stable countries. Subsidies and taxes between the countries are different, for example fuel or train tickets. The infrastructure needs to be adjusted to the specific geography of a country.

3) Decision making process of investments

a) Within cities, poorer districts are less attractive to invest in based on economic status and potential racial biases, which creates a hesitancy for energy businesses to invest. This can create inequalities regarding access to energy.

b) Rural communities are disadvantaged when it comes to investments in energy infrastructures since they have less financial capabilities and do not generate as much economic return on investment as urban centres. Cities on the contrary are more attractive to investors and, therefore, their citizens generally have an easier access to energy.

c) Even though economic considerations are relevant for investments in the energy sector, at the European level, environmental considerations are prioritized in investment decisions. This reflects unequal access to European investments funds for those EU countries which have less financial capacities and still depend very much on fossil fuels.

4) Mismatch in support between households and companies

a) Companies are more flexible in terms of sustainable energy solutions implementation while households might require subsidies. At the same time there is a lack of incentivising initiatives.

b) Households and companies in rural areas tend to be more energy poor, less energy efficient and have less access to energy infrastructure, however the companies receive more financial attention from the government as compared to households. Nevertheless, even with the funding, the ability of these rural companies to thrive is still not proven.

5) Participation in the production and distribution of energy

a) Wealthier communities have the finances to fund energy communities and local energy production, whereas poorer ones do not.

b) Rural areas have the space and local ties that could facilitate the formation of energy communities, but often lack the financial resources. For urban areas, there is usually enough financial capacities, but a lack of space and of community spirit prohibits widespread adoption.

c) A lack of supportive policies in parts of Europe limit the formation of energy communities. Geographical differences lead to a difference in the energetic potential of renewable energies that can be exploited by energy communities.

III. Normative contextualization

The issues identified in the first section regarding the current state of energy poverty in the EU highlight the following five main spheres of injustice. They are based on the four tenets of just transition, namely distribution, recognition, procedural and restorative justice, following the three principles of allocation: equity, equality and need. Distributional justice deals with the equitable

allocation of resources, amongst people, with different needs. Procedural justice refers to the equal access and treatment of people in need. Recognitional justice addresses the understanding of the wide range of problems that people face and, lastly, restorative justice addresses burdens created historically that need a sort of restoration.

One of the main challenges in tackling energy poverty is that a clear and widely accepted definition does not exist, making it impossible to apply the concept in legislation, which leads to inconsistencies between and within countries. What follows is the inability to correctly identify and reach the vulnerable groups, because of the lack of precise indicators. Not having a clear definition makes monitoring any further actions difficult and prevents sharing best practices between the member states. For instance, in Northwest Europe, energy poverty is associated with urban, poor quality, inefficient apartments; while in Central and Eastern Europe is often related to low-income of households, this shows a discrepancy in the implementation of policies.

There is a dire need for responsive administrative bodies that can create accessible, efficient, and simplified procedures. Moreover, the procedures created by the authorities should take into account representatives of civil society. Further, there exists a lack of common involvement of different stakeholders in specific aspects of the issues that affect people in energy poverty. The cooperation on local and national level involving actors from the public and private sector as well as civil society is not facilitated. The situation is further complicated by the prevalence of corruption and political mismanagement.

Several gaps relating to the financing and the allocation of resources exist. There is a general lack of transparency, meaning that no information is provided on where the funds come from, where they go and how they are distributed. As a result, there is not enough information to build trust on the side of the public, therefore making it hard for them to take part in the decision-making process. Currently, the financial resources and support measures are not reaching those who are in need. The aid is primarily directed towards industry and businesses, leaving households neglected. Without differentiation, the financial support is given to everyone equally, resulting in the so-called “Santa Claus justice”. The principle of equity is completely ignored, thus the already existing gaps become exacerbated and new ones are created. However, often even bigger inequalities are created as a result of differentiation based on the wrong criteria. Such is the case in the deployment of the “Anti-crisis Shield” in Poland, which provided a lower price based on the levels of consumption that led to a further worsening of the situation for people residing in energy inefficient buildings. This lack of support and protection results in an increase in the socio-economic gap between rich and poor and a decrease in the trust of the public towards public institutions, among others. Additionally, if consumers are not able to pay their energy bills and are subsequently cut off from electricity supply, there are further health gaps between low- and high-income households created.

Discrepancy of the environmental impact between generations, regions, and individuals both in terms of responsibility for the environmental impacts and the vulnerability due to these environmental impacts. Previous and current generations caused problems that will be felt for generations to come. Specific regions (e.g., industrialized countries in Western Europe) share a greater responsibility than others, while the environmental impacts will hit every region. Those

regions that share the highest responsibility generally will be able to adapt to environmental damages to a much higher degree than those with a lower responsibility. At the same time, those regions also need to invest in mitigation strategies, further straining their resources. Overall, people with higher income are responsible for a majority of environmental impacts but have the means to shelter themselves from the consequences. People with lower income won't have the same responsibility but will nevertheless be asked to contribute to mitigation efforts.

IV. Recommendations

Changing energy consumption behaviour

One of the most important ways of dealing with worldwide energy challenges is to encourage changes in our energy usage. Empowering consumers through the use of smart meters can play a crucial role in safeguarding the well-being of vulnerable communities, particularly in EU member states where energy poverty is a significant issue. In support of this, energy suppliers could provide tools that offer consumers a better overview of their monthly energy use through creating energy use through an energy diary. To make sure that this information is easily accessible, it should be translated into a wide range of languages, while continuously updating inhabitants on their energy use. In general, it should make use of an easily accessible energy-logging interface.

To inform citizens about how the energy market works and the various options available to them, local representatives need to be better equipped to offer support to their citizens. This can include recommendations to reduce energy consumption, as well as education on price levels and the environmental impact of energy use. Access to information and advice on energy-saving measures must be available both off- and online in an effort to reach as many households as possible. To encourage electricity suppliers, tax credits can be offered as well. Their services can include advice and support in reducing their energy consumption while also benefiting the environment. A broad range of different strategies is beneficial in aiding consumers to make sustainable decisions concerning their energy use and tackle energy poverty.

Outreach

One of the challenging tasks is to reach the right people through direct campaigning, through earmarking of the funds, improving accessibility and to have more data on the people that require funding the most. Oftentimes, some of these factors are missing in plans that aim to improve the visibility of the target group. National databases could be used to provide accurate data, whilst targeting minorities could be improved by a better network of representatives. Social-targeting can be used to identify and prioritize low-income families and individuals living in older buildings with poor insulation who are most in need of energy-efficient upgrades.

Incentivize retrofitting for homeowners/landlords

Energy inequality and injustice can be addressed by incentivizing homeowners and landlords to retrofit their buildings with energy-efficient upgrades. To achieve this, governments should focus on tax cuts and interest free credit as below:

1. Landlords who invest in energy-efficient upgrades for their buildings should benefit from tax cuts. This can encourage building owners to make environmentally responsible choices and help lower energy bills for residents.
2. Governments can offer interest-free credit to low-income families and individuals to cover the costs of retrofitting their homes. This can make retrofitting more accessible to those who otherwise wouldn't be able to afford it.

Support the retrofitting process

To support the process of retrofitting, the paper proposes several solutions including investments in people, which in some cases are better than pure financial incentives. Lower barriers for support mechanisms could be used to make funding applications less of a daunting task. This ties in to reducing the bureaucratic process with a more simplified procedure. A clear timeline of project phases should be included in the larger strategic approach. Retrofitting should also be of help towards finishing the projects in a timely and efficient manner.

In order to implement the project in the best possible way and addressing the vulnerabilities in the communities, we must at the same time have initiatives that in the large scheme of things make implementation possible. The first step to achieve such a goal, implementing any change, is based on a value-judgment of what the best way forward would be. In other words, the decision-making process should be closer to the communities that are being affected by it. This can be achieved by local authorities and managers that are able to communicate with both the EU level, as well as with national and federal authorities relevant to the project.

Support tenants endangered by energy poverty

In order to provide support to tenants that are part of the most vulnerable group from the perspective of energy poverty, we ought to use a multitude of policies that are designed to target specific problems of these groups. The first approach that we recommend is:

Improvement of the legal frame

We consider that access to energy supply is a fundamental human right therefore a standardized definition of energy poverty is needed to access those in need. This definition should include existing socio-economic research and empirical datasets, while making sure it is adapted to fit local contexts. With that in mind an uncuttable basic energy supply has to be treated as a given and not as a commodity. Further building on this idea it is a necessity for at-risk communities and individuals to have security of living arrangements, which might happen through measures such

as rent caps and limiting of evictions, measures to lessen negative effects of gentrification, housing market speculation; this legislation should remain dynamic in nature so that it can adapt to arising loopholes, having a strong judicial arbitration mechanism in order to streamline its processes and aid these communities and individuals.

Subsidies

The importance of subsidies cannot be understated; their development must come from centralized sources based on coherent allocation of resources. The subsidies must be sourced from pre-existing funds based on taxation, such as the green tax and emissions tax pools. Further funding must be discussed at the EU level as a means to level the playing field for all countries, irrespective of their means. Eligibility criteria for the subsidies should be based on the previously discussed methods (socio-economic research and empirical datasets), prioritizing access to those who are most affected.

Mechanisms and institutions

When it comes to energy supply and the housing market, the current structures are not equitable. Therefore the current vertical cooperation inside these structures needs improvement: focus on local actors and a grassroots, bottom-up approach is imperative. Individuals acting as cooperative elements of a cohesive community must be the underlying bedrock of this process.

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