

Participatory local governance for a sustainable and socially just energy transition

Introduction

For decades, air pollution, global warming, the loss of biodiversity and the depletion of resources (Turiel, 2020) seem to lead us to an unprecedented catastrophe (Servigne and Stevens, 2020). Thus, we are living an emergency or systemic crisis that can be seen in any corner of the planet and whose elements are closely related to each other, giving rise to other equally severe crises in other orders. Asking ourselves about how we have arrived at this true anthropocene (Crutzen and Stoermer, 2000) should invite us to reflect on our current model of urban-agro-industrial development thanks to which the footprint of the human being has exceeded planetary limits. In particular, the continued use of non-renewable energy sources, the so-called “fossil capitalism” (Malm, 2020) is putting planetary survival at serious risk, at least as we know it.

Participatory urban governance for a democratic energy transition

The change of this model will be fought fundamentally in the urban centres. In particular, the role of local governments in relation to the governance of their local energy-climate planning is key. To do this, they have to "create governance models for energy sustainability ... based on efficiency and quality, with which to implement plans and actions" (FEMP and REE, 2020). Regarding this, there are two issues that it is important to avoid: that the strategy fails due to its deep sectorialization and that the actions are implemented without citizen participation, which is the one who facilitates and strengthens the processes of transformation of exclusive, unsustainable and vulnerable energy models that characterize our urban spaces.

Study cases

The Area of Studies and Social Innovation of [Fundación Tomillo](#), a socio-educational NGO that works for social inclusion in Madrid, has elaborated a research project entitled “[Participatory urban processes for the fulfillment of SDG 7: an analysis from global citizenship in Europe and Spain](#)” for the [SG of Active Citizenship and International Cooperation of Madrid City Council](#). Its goal is to inspire local policies from a global citizenship perspective, identifying participatory and socially innovative responses to the challenges related to the fulfillment of SDG 7. For this, 6 inspiring participatory urban practices were analyzed: Roundtable for Energy Transition and

against Energy Poverty (Cádiz, Spain), Energy Advisory Points (Barcelona, Spain), Vilawatt (Viladecans, Spain), Leuven 2030 (Leuven, Belgium), Manchester Climate Partnership and Agency (Manchester, United Kingdom) and Brixton Energy Community (London, UK).

The experiences outlined have very different characteristics and scopes, although they are articulated in three common objectives: contribute to the transformation of the city model to reduce its carbon footprint; improve quality of life and empower individuals and communities; and, promote social and citizen participation. In their implementation, the initiatives are open to participation without relevant restrictions and reflect the presence of key agents in decision-making that is also carried out in a democratic manner. The scope of citizen participation has been uneven, with impacts on the generation of normative changes up to processes with a more deliberative and exploratory profile. In any case, participation has been associated with the awareness of its participants, the promotion of their critical spirit and the of some competences linked to active participation: teamwork, self-esteem, dialogue and debate, among others. In addition, the initiatives promote human rights from a reframe of energy as a right and from the exercise of participation in public affairs understood as a “right to the city”. Likewise, the initiatives have involved a large number, diversity and representativeness of agents, which has enriched the debates and actions. Finally, the initiatives promote solutions for a sustainable energy transition but the measurement of their social impact has not been sufficiently developed, although the indications suggest that they have profound effects on urban resilience and on communities.

Manchester Climate Partnership and Agency as a study case

In particular, one of the selected cases has been the Manchester Climate Partnership and Agency. Thanks to Jonny Sadler, Deputy Director of the Manchester Climate Change Agency, and Hannah Mitchell, member of the Youth Board, who kindly granted us some of their time for an interview, we discovered that, since 2009, the city of Manchester has been implementing decarbonisation plans. Currently, they are articulated around its Strategy for 2020-2025, with four objectives: reduce CO2 emissions by 50%, achieve climate resilience, improve the health and well-being of the citizenship and decarbonize its economy. The goal of the Strategy is to decarbonize the city by 2038 at the latest and turn it into a more economically attractive, socially fair, democratic and participatory space.

In this context, the initiative consists of the governance model of the city of Manchester to implement its plans for energy transition. In particular, the establishment of a Climate Change Agency, created in 2015, responsible for promoting the city's decarbonization actions. It is an independent body which includes the city's most relevant scientific advisers and environmental defense entities, as well as representatives of the most relevant social, cultural and economic sectors. In this context, the Manchester Climate Change Partnership, which is supported by the Agency, was created in 2018 to channel social and business participation and

constitute the main body for the governance of the efforts of its agents for the decarbonization of the city. It consists of a structure of around 70 organizations, including the City Council, local universities, energy distribution companies and social housing builders, entities of the artistic and cultural sector, the Manchester Cathedral and the club of Manchester City Football Club. Also representatives of the Manchester Youth Board, a body that gives voice and participation to young people of different profiles, currently made up of nine young people between 16 and 28 years old.

The Manchester example has inspired four important lessons learned in a process of local decarbonization and participatory governance:

1. When trying to combat the effects of climate change, it is essential to focus dialogue with citizens and business on what matters to them in their daily lives: employment, home, leisure, economic attractiveness, etc.
2. The fact of having a formally independent Climate Change Agency in the city has significantly facilitated the adoption of ambitious measures and a more comprehensive framework of actions.
3. It is necessary to find the right balance between a bottom-up perspective, to maximize the participation of citizens and the main actors and representatives of the economic, cultural and leisure sectors of the city, without losing sight of the top-down perspective, to the extent that certain social demands can only be tackled from the implementation of actions led by local authorities.
4. In order to demonstrate to the local residents and the business sectors that sustainability is attractive for them, it is essential to advance in experimental cases that prove it.

Other study cases

Among the rest of the cases:

- [Roundtable on Energy Transition and Roundtable against Energy Poverty](#) (Cadiz, Spain): at the end of 2015 the Cadiz City Council created these two spaces in which citizens meet periodically to participate in the process of defining the city's energy future and promote a change in the energy model and culture that reduces the socio-environmental impact of the city's energy metabolism.
- [Energy Advisory Points](#) (Barcelona, Spain): it involves, since 2017, a universal service whose responsibility is the Area of Social Rights, of the Barcelona City Council through 11 spaces in which a service is managed to combat energy poverty and promote a change in the energy culture of Barcelona's citizens through empowerment, training and advice on energy matters, as well as social and labour market insertion in the field of green jobs.
- [Vilawatt](#) (Viladecans, Spain): with the aim of putting the city on the path towards the energy transition and led by its local government, Viladecans has launched a local energy operator with the participation of citizens, awareness-raising initiatives, training and support for the change of culture and improvement of energy efficiency in

homes, shops and schools, comprehensive energy renovations of buildings and a local electronic currency, called Vilawatt, associated with the capitalization of energy savings resulting from the new operator and to the promotion of local commerce.

- [Leuven 2030](#) (Leuven, Belgium): it is a participatory process for the implementation of a Roadmap for Climate Change towards 2025, 2030 and 2050 in which the city mobilizes its resources towards decarbonisation. The process has been articulated around a public-private consortium called Leuven 2030, in which around 600 local agents are articulated equitably represented in its decision-making bodies, among which are companies, financial entities, social enterprises, defense organizations. of sustainability, social innovation, culture, academic and knowledge institutions, as well as citizens.
- [Brixton Energy Community](#) (London, United Kingdom): a group of citizen cooperatives that, since 2011, have supplied electricity to three communities in the south of London through photovoltaic panels installed on their roofs. Its objective is to generate resilience and development opportunities for citizens through their empowerment in terms of energy, social inclusion and community development, social skills and local employment. Brixton was the first “[Repowering London](#)” project, a platform created to replicate experiences of energy participation and democracy.

Final recommendations to promote citizen participation

In order to promote local policies to achieve SDG 7 with an active citizenship participation perspective, the research has identified a decalogue of lessons learnt based on the experiences analysed. Its objective is to guide local policies for the establishment of processes that involve and incorporate, from their design to decision-making, the citizens:

1. Know the history of the territory, the agents that are already working and the processes that are being implemented.
2. Aim for a cultural and systemic change.
3. Establish joint diagnostic processes in which instrumental and epic objectives are established in a language that people understand and transcend the mere energy field.
4. Involve the appropriate people and organizations, attending to the agents whose needs originate them and those whose involvement is more effective to produce a change in the reality on which they are intervening.
5. Empower residents by basing the actions on their needs, and by providing them information about the end of the participation processes, their roles, times, spaces and resources made available to them.
6. Establish viable participation structures with democratic governance to structure processes, build routines, and generate the trust necessary to promote participation

and collaboration among agents, and deal constructively and positively with conflicts of interest.

7. Incorporate digitization into processes.
8. Consider the gender perspective in participation policies and processes.
9. Measure your social impact.
10. Get international recognition.

References

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