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Perspectives

The value of social conflicts. Critiquing invited participation in energy projects

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ABSTRACT

With this paper, I want to raise attention to the value of social conflict in energy policy and planning, and the limitations of participatory processes for including different normative appraisals in energy policy and planning. I first discuss three perspectives on the value of social conflict. Although invited participation is generally considered as a way to ameliorate, or anticipate social conflict on energy projects, this 'participatory reflex' goes past the fact that social conflict can itself be considered a form of participation, i.e. self-organized participation. Second, I discuss two basic characteristics of social conflict that show the limitations of invited participation in identifying and including divergent normative appraisals: 1) social conflict challenges institutions, and 2) social conflict involves emergent positions and groups. I propose to see social conflict as self-organized participation that serves as an source for identification and inclusion of normative appraisals in energy policy and planning. This not only necessitates the study of these phenomena as such, but also suggests a different approach to deal with such phenomena in research and practice. I will lay out three directions for further research.

1. Introduction

Social conflict is ubiquitous in energy policy and planning. Across the full range of technological options in the energy transition, both fossil and renewable, we observe public protesting to new energy projects: wind energy, biogas installations, transmission lines, carbon capture and storage, shale gas, natural gas, gas storage, solar fields and so on. As a consequence of the conflicting normative appraisals that are inherent to the energy transition and planning of energy projects, there just are no unequivocal solutions in energy planning. The energy transition involves choices, under (scientific and moral) uncertainty, for particular technologies that create path dependency and lock-in, which gives rise to conflicts over means, speed and direction of change in the energy system [1].

Social conflict occurs when groups of citizens, civil society groups, governments and/or companies manifest the belief that they have incompatible objectives with regard to a technology or policy option (based on [2]). I focus here in particular on social conflicts surrounding the development of a specific energy project at a specific location (e.g. a wind park, a geothermal well, a transformation station), where local communities organize advocacy and opposition. Such social conflict may be rooted in e.g. conflicting interests, expectations, or values [3,4].

Social conflicts are highly complex and dynamic: new action groups may emerge over time, that put new issues or concerns on the agenda, support may be mobilized from (environmental) NGOs and often also from local government or influential individuals. A social conflict surrounding a local energy project is generally not just a *local* conflict nor just an *energy* conflict. Such conflicts involve wider issues regarding the long term regional, national or global energy transition, as well as issues pertaining to local democracy, social cohesion, trust in institutions, etcetera.

Social conflict poses a significant challenge for the energy transition. Energy systems are becoming more and more decentralized, relying on technology with a significant spatial impact (e.g. wind parks, solar parks). This will continue to raise conflicts, for instance related to what can be considered fair distribution of burdens and benefits, fair decision-making procedures, and fair representation of individuals and their viewpoints (i.e. claims over energy justice, e.g. [5]). This, together with the normative diversity inherent to the energy transition [1], makes that social conflict is, and will be a given, no matter how well it is anticipated.

Policymakers and developers also recognize this challenge. As an attempt to avoid the messy social conflicts surrounding energy projects, policy makers tend to shift towards a greater emphasis on participation in policy and planning of energy projects. In the Netherlands for instance, the wind energy sector and environmental NGOs signed a code of conduct that prescribes (early) involvement of stakeholders and financial participation of local communities so as to increase social support for wind energy projects [6]. The Dutch gas sector recently followed that example [7]. Also, a new Environmental Law has been

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passed that obliges energy developers to implement participation procedures in the planning of energy projects [8]. These attempts reflect the idea that participation is desirable and an effective means for avoiding or anticipating conflict.

In itself, the effort that is put in developing and organizing participatory processes is laudable. Energy policy and planning involve normative choices that need to be deliberated in democratic decision-making [1]. Invited participation [9] is a mechanism for organizing such deliberation. However, as I will argue in this paper, invited participation – even when done with the best purposes and according to state of the art insights on participatory approaches – is not sufficient for ensuring the inclusion of different normative appraisals in decision-making on energy. With that, the value of social conflict for energy policy and planning tends to be overlooked. With this paper, therefore, I want to raise attention to the *value* of conflict. I will discuss three reasons why social conflict is of value in Section 2.

The value of conflict follows from an understanding of social conflict –not as something to be 'solved' through participation- but as *itself being a form of participation* (cf. [10]). Social conflict involves the mobilization of collective action and advocacy, including contestation of existing power-relations [11]. As such, social conflict can be considered self-organized participation.

Social conflict as self-organized participation can be contrasted to *invited* participation [9]. Invited participation refers to all processes and procedures that are set up by e.g. governments, companies, academia or consultancies to engage in some form of dialogue with stakeholders. Invited participation can be legally prescribed or organized as dedicated and ad hoc processes within the context of a particular project.

This definition leaves open the question whether this dialogue indeed leads to empowerment, learning or legitimacy. In fact, invited participation has often been critiqued for not being *true* participation (see e.g. [12–14]).

In Section 3, I will discuss two characteristics of social conflict that show the limitations of invited participation for the inclusion of divergent normative appraisals in decision-making on energy. Considering social conflict as self-organized participation means that social conflict deserves more attention, both from scholars studying it as a process of participation (including its deficits, limitations, challenges, opportunities), and from policymakers and planners, as an important source of knowing what is at stake for whom. This may facilitate agile participatory governance in the energy transition. Seeing social conflict as a source for the inclusion of divergent normative appraisals in energy policy and planning comes with a number of challenges. Based on these, I will lay out three directions for further research in Section 4.

2. The value of social conflict (as self-organized participation)

The participatory approach emerged over the past decades as a critique to the prevailing expert-analytic approach, which was perceived to be too linear, deterministic and exclusive [15,16]. The literature on participation generally assumes three arguments for participation: empowerment, learning and legitimacy [17], or, in the words of Fiorino [18]: a normative, substantive and instrumental argument. The normative argument pertains to democracy; according to this argument participation is a goal in itself because every citizen has the right to speak and be heard. The substantive argument focuses on the function of participation in knowledge production and, thereby, creating more integrated decisions. The instrumental argument for participation is that a policy plan is more likely to be accepted if stakeholders are involved in the decision-making process.

As part of the participatory approach, many participatory tools have been developed and applied. For a more detailed elaboration of the development of tools and the participatory wave, see Ref. [17]. Although participatory tools range from consensual to agonistic, a majority of these tools are inspired by Habermas' notion of the ideal speech situation. This refers to a safe and egalitarian situation where people can express their viewpoint without interference of power asymmetries [19], and where "actors seek to reach common understanding and to coordinate actions by reasoned argument, consensus and cooperation rather than strategic action strictly in pursuit of their own goals" [20, p. 86]. The assumption underlying such participatory tools is that consensus is required to achieve progress in decision-making processes (cf [21]).

Conflict is thus something many participatory tools seek to steer way from. Social conflict takes place in a real-world setting where people pursue their own interests and perform strategic behavior, and is far from an ideal speech situation. Interestingly though, the arguments that are used to advocate participation also apply to social conflict. In other words, social conflict on energy projects can be of value for normative, substantive and instrumental reasons.

First, the **normative** perspective on the value of social conflict pertains to the democratic value of conflict. Following this perspective, social conflict on energy technology, enacted e.g. through social movements but also through more improvised acts of contention, is a form of political engagement and therefore welcomed in a plural democratic society [22]. This perspective can be found in social movement literature, which considers social movements a claim for political representation [23, p. 16]. Social conflicts in planning of energy projects not only play out inside, but also and even more so, *outside* formal arenas and institutionalized democratic procedures. It plays out in informal arenas, on social media, and in street-level interactions between e.g. local civil servants, 'stakeholder managers' of energy companies, and citizens (following [24]). Verloo [24] argues that these street-level interactions in social conflicts provide opportunity for (local) democracy. At this local level, citizens put forward their concerns and values; however, these concerns and values do not always reach the (local) government or involved companies. This may have to do with the gap between what are considered legitimate claims by planners or project developers on the one hand, and the ways in which citizens express their preferences and concerns in social conflict on the other [25].

Second, the **substantive** perspective on the value of social conflict pertains to knowledge production. Social conflicts are sites of knowledge production. Social conflict can lead to better (i.e. richer, more creative, more integrated) knowledge, and often results in policy learning (e.g. [26]). The high level of (scientific) uncertainties and the lack of consensus on both the 'facts' as well as the 'values' that should be prioritized, can lead to "wrong" or limited problem definition. In that sense, conflict can help problem structuring and avoiding type III errors (i.e. solving the 'wrong' problem [27,28]). Rip [29] states that "it is possible to profit from controversies. In many cases, controversies provide partly conflicting assessments of new technologies or of the impacts of actual or proposed projects, that are further articulated and consolidated in the course of controversy. Thus, informal technology assessment occurs." The substantive perspective can also be found in management science, where it is shown that conflict can increase performance, creativity and innovation in organizations and teams (see e.g. [30–34]).

Third, the **instrumental** perspective on the value of social conflict reflects a management perspective. It focuses on constructively dealing with conflict rather than trying to avoid it in policy and planning. According to this perspective, social conflict should be seriously considered and addressed in order to avoid backfiring or "unproductive outcomes" [35]. Unproductive outcomes may refer to "outcomes in which neither the parties in conflict nor society in general is better off with the outcome. Examples of unproductive conflicts are those conflicts that end up in lengthy juridical battles between the project promoters and its challengers, or those projects that remain unimplemented and fail to address the societal or spatial problem for which they have been set up." [35, p. 96]. Another example comes from Wolf [36], who conducted in-depth analysis of how policymakers deal with conflict in a highly contested policy-making process over a multibillion highway in Antwerp (Belgium). She shows how policy-makers tried to

Table 1
Three perspectives on the value of social conflict on energy projects.

The value of social conflict	Description
Normative perspective	Conflict is important as a form of political engagement (social movements, citizenship)
Substantive perspective	Conflict leads to integrated knowledge (problem structuring, technology assessment, learning)
Instrumental perspective	Harnessing conflict to avoid unproductive, and achieve constructive outcomes (constructive conflict management: avoid backfire, mutually acceptable outcomes)

quell conflict by de-politicization strategies, and how this led to a 'boomerang effect': conflict did not disappear but rather seemed to come back harder the more forceful it was done away with. Furthermore, the instrumental perspective considers conflict to be constructive as it can contribute to mutual trust, preservation of relationships [2], group identities [37] and the building of institutional capacity [38]. The three perspectives on the value of social conflict are summarized in Table 1.

3. Two characteristics of social conflict that show the limitations of invited participation

As stated in the introduction, a common response to social conflict surrounding energy projects is to advocate and organize participatory processes. Although a lack of participation can indeed be a key source of social conflict, I reiterate here the presumption that, no matter how well participation is organized, social conflict will remain in the energy transition. Rather than viewing social conflict as something that can be 'solved' or anticipated through invited participation, it is therefore more interesting to view social conflict as a source for the identification and inclusion of different normative appraisals. I will discuss here two characteristics of social conflict that point to limitations of invited participation and that thereby emphasize the relevance of this view on social conflict.

3.1. Social conflict challenges existing institutions

Social conflict is a form of self-organized participation. By definition, this self-organized participation is bottom-up. Self-organized participation in the energy domain does not only take the form of people opposing to an announced project, but also of groups of citizens that are motivated by critical assessments of incumbent institutions and modes of energy supply (see e.g. [39]) and who start investing in their own energy projects. Such energy cooperatives can also be viewed as manifestations of social conflict.

Invited participation is initiated by government, companies or knowledge institutes because they want something and think they can make it better (i.e. more legitimate, innovative or supported) through involvement of stakeholders (including citizens). These forms of participation rely on more or less fixed procedures. Think of governments' setting up citizens' juries (e.g. [40]), or energy companies setting up workshops with people living in the vicinity of a newly planned project to discuss alternative options. Invited participation to a large extent relies on institutionalized participation. Energy companies have dedicated departments, often with formalized procedures, for involving communities in planning of energy projects, and ISO standards for social responsibility include stakeholder analysis and engagement. Also in policy procedures public participation is institutionalized and made compulsory. Also when invited participation is not (a legally required) part of formal policy procedures, it generally assumes an analytical rationality and discourse that fits well with the institutions it is supposed to support [41]. Social conflict however exists to *challenge* existing rules and practices. That is, social conflict in energy projects are typically a manifestation of what Hajer [42] refers to as 'institutional void': they challenge existing institutions and create new political spaces in which the traditional mode of operation in energy systems is challenged and reshaped. Social conflict is thus often a response to institutions and the decisions, projects or technologies they produce (with 'institutions' referring to humanly devised formal and informal constraints that structure political, economic, and social interaction [43]). Several accounts in the literature show for instance that a lack of perceived procedural justice is an important source of contestation in energy projects [44–46]. Institutions are, and we can clearly observe that in the energy field, not fixed, but evolving, also as a response to changing societal norms (as witnessed by more attention to local communities in energy planning, and development of compensation schemes). The point however is, that institutions, even when they are intended to include diverse public values and interests in decision-making, just cannot anticipate all new values that emerge. Institutions, by their very nature, draw up boundaries and thereby always imply in- and exclusion. This means that when the institutions do not 'fit' anymore, overflowing can occur [47]. Social conflict is a case of overflowing, in which (groups of) people try to articulate and bring under the attention their concerns and interests that are perceived to be insufficiently met [25]. This implies that the scope, framing and nature of themes and issues addressed in social conflict as self-organized participation diverges from that what would (and could) logically be dealt with in invited forms of participation.

3.2. Social conflict involves emergent positions and groups

The unstructured nature [27,48] of energy issues means that ideas about which issues need to be addressed and how are divergent and dynamic. First, because energy technology development is continuous, which makes that new solutions make existing solutions obsolete, less preferred or rejected. Second, over time, knowledge is developed on potential impacts or benefits. Third, especially when (abstract) ideas about energy (policy) are to be translated to energy projects in specific locations and contexts, new ideas, understandings and values with respect to that project will come up, often as some form of social conflict [49]. One of the reasons for this is that the impacts of an energy technology are very much context-dependent. In the Netherlands for instance, people in the northern province of Groningen oppose to a wind park with the argument that they have been an 'extraction province' over decades (first peat, then gas, and now wind), and this under a situation of decreasing local socio-economic conditions. In addition, the articulation of (potential) impacts and related values is done by stakeholders especially when there is something at stake. That means that when a project is planned at a certain location, the local community may be triggered to start a process of opinion formation. As a result, in the implementation phase new values, interests or meanings will come up [4]. Also, new groups are formed to advocate these positions or to defend these interests. An example is the emergence of anti-shale gas NGOs in countries such as the UK and the Netherlands after the announcement of shale gas exploration or production projects. This opinion formation process is a learning process, which means that positions change over time. Earlier, we showed how the social conflict on shale gas in the Netherlands changed over time from a local discussion on local safety issues to a national debate on the role of shale gas in the energy transition [26]. Interests and values in relation to energy technology, as well as the groups that are defending them, are thus emergent. Social conflict is a manifestation of emergent groups and interests,

but even in its seeming absence the normative diversity involved in energy issues [1] implies that it can be safely assumed that conflict is latent rather than absent.

Tools for invited participation tend to neglect this notion of emergent values and groups. The starting point there typically is that there are clearly identifiable interest groups, that share a particular interest, value set, practice or habitus [50,38]. Participatory tools usually make use of stakeholder identification techniques that assume that existing groups represent the relevant interests and values. This is exemplified by stakeholder analysis approaches where usually organizations are identified and mapped in terms of e.g. power and resources [51,52], and where NGOs serve as representatives of societal values and interests. Diversity of values and meanings is then covered by inviting people from different organizational types, e.g. NGOs for the societal perspectives, industry for the business perspectives, knowledge institutes for academic or 'neutral' perspectives, and governments for perspectives of different public sectors or governmental layers. The assumed correlation between perspectives and type of organization can be questioned; earlier we showed this correlation was low for the case of actors' perspectives on sustainable bio-energy [53]. It is through these kinds of assumptions on who the stakeholders are and what they are considered to contribute to and how, that participation produces exclusions of "social actors or competing visions of energy futures" [54, p. 586].

4. Conclusion

Invited participation is thus not a satisfying, or at least not a sufficient answer to the question as to how to include different normative appraisals in planning of energy technology. For this reason, I argue that we need to shift attention to social conflict as self-organized participation. This brings a number of challenges, that can be used to shape a research agenda.

First, if positions and groups are emergent and fluid, how then to grasp the relevant normative appraisals? Rather than static or snapshot methods such as surveys, the dynamic nature of social conflict calls for methods that account for this dynamic nature and the socio-technical systems in which they play out. Such methods use longitudinal data, and involve for instance narrative and longitudinal discourse analysis. Social media play an important role in social conflict; through these media opinions, knowledge and ideas are shared and shaped, and they facilitate coordination of collective action (e.g. the organization of protest and mobilization of resources). Social media data is an important data source for the analysis of the dynamics of social conflict, and with machine-learning approaches huge amounts of data can be analyzed (e.g. [55]). The analysis of longitudinal social media data is an interesting avenue for further research, that, in addition to methodological questions, raises all kinds of new questions with regard to the quality of data. Platforms such as Twitter generally make it possible to use only parts of the data (e.g. a certain subset of tweets with a particular keyword), without sharing the algorithm that has led to this selection.

With this comes also the question of representativeness. If social conflict is considered self-organized participation, how to assess the representativeness of the normative appraisals articulated in social conflict? Rather than representativeness in statistical terms, data collected through the methods above should perhaps better be understood in terms of discursive representation [56]. The observation that in social conflict groups and positions are emergent and fluid, implies that representation of persons and groups is not feasible. Dryzek and Niemeyer [56] argue that in such situations, representation of discourses[1] is a feasible alternative. This issue needs further conceptualization and empirical analysis.

Second, whereas Habermasian-inspired participatory approaches aim to exclude strategic behavior, strategic behavior is at the core of social conflict. That is, what values, positions or normative appraisals are brought up by actors when and how is very much subject to strategic considerations. Rather than seeing this as something that obscures objective value analysis as Habermasian-inspired approaches do, strategic behavior should be part of the analysis. That is, strategic behavior follows from interests, which in turn, make that stakeholders have "specific knowledge *because* of their interested position that other stakeholders for the same reason don't" [57]. This calls for further research to conceptualize social conflict as a process of value articulation, where values are intrinsically linked to knowledge and interests. For this, existing participatory literature can be connected to e.g. literature that conceptualizes decision-making processes in terms of actor networks and that describe how strategic behavior plays out in such processes (e.g. [58,59]).

Third, what is needed in order to use social conflict as a source of information about the diversity of normative appraisals? This question pertains to the relation between public debate and institutions. I argued earlier that social conflict can be seen as 'overflow' [47]: it is a response to institutions that are perceived to lack taking into account alternative normative appraisals. Using the value of social conflict implies that there should be some sort of 'backflow', where information (values, preferences, knowledge) from the public debate is fed back to formal decision-making procedures. Further research is needed to understand the interaction between public debate and institutions, and, if we are interested in increasing the legitimacy of decision-making processes (cf. [60]), to develop ways for improving this interaction. This comes with challenges, since there is a gap between the (in)formal institutions involved in energy policy and planning and the way social conflict takes shape. Institutional decision-making on energy projects is strongly rooted in a judicial rationality, where the legitimacy of decisions is derived from procedural correctness, and delegated authority, whereas social conflict on energy projects involves a narrative rationality, where the legitimacy of decisions is not only derived from fairness of procedures but also the desire to be acknowledged as a legitimate stakeholder, and community authority [25]. These different rationalities, and related ideas about justice and authority, make that the interaction between energy planners and public often result in a dialogue of the deaf (e.g. [61]). We need to study the interaction between social conflict and formal decision-making procedures and related institutions more closely. An example concerns the role of boundary workers, i.e. actors that try to translate input from social conflicts to (inter-) organizational decision-making, such as stakeholder engagement officers working for energy companies or governments.

The study of social conflict as self-organized participation in energy policy and planning necessitates interdisciplinary social science efforts, where new conceptual bridges are being built and methodological innovation is welcomed. Not only is this an exciting scientific endeavor, but also a societal responsibility given the huge challenge that the energy transition imposes on us all.

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[1] Defined as "a set of categories and concepts embodying specific assumptions, judgments, contentions, dispositions, and capabilities" (Dryzek and Niemeyer [56, p. 481]).

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