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Can low-income households participate in the sustainability transition?

Justice and equality in energy and climate policies of three Norwegian cities

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Background

- Climate change (IPCC)
- Need for deep and wide societal transitions
- Protests «yellow vests movement»
- Just transition (EU)
 - “by far the biggest challenges is to create a just transition that ensures fairness for the poorest people” (Diederik Samsom, chief of staff of European Commission Vice President Frans Timmermans)
- Justice in transition studies



The COJUST project

Co-producing energy and climate policies: Justice and equity in sustainability transitions (COJUST)

Funding: Research Council of Norway (pilot, radical frontier research)

Main objective: to co-produce energy and climate policies with and for low-income groups in Norway

Secondary objectives:

- (1) To recognise and amplify low-income group views on energy and climate policies
- (2) To understand the possible social impacts of energy and climate policies and how these policies can overcome social justice challenges

Three areas: mobility, housing, consumption

Three Norwegian cities: Trondheim, Bergen, Stavanger



Energy justice

- Distributional justice
- Recognition justice
- Procedural justice

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Energy justice: A conceptual review

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ABSTRACT

Energy justice has emerged as a new crosscutting social science research agenda which seeks to apply justice principles to energy policy, energy production and systems, energy consumption, energy activism, energy security and climate change. A conceptual review is now required for the consolidation and logical extension of this field. Within this exploration, we give an account of its core tenets: distributional, recognition and procedural. Later we promote the application of this three-pronged approach across the energy system, within the global context of energy production and consumption. Thus, we offer both a conceptual review and a research agenda. Throughout, we explore the key dimensions of this new agenda – its evaluative and normative reach – demonstrating that energy justice offers, firstly, an opportunity to explore where injustices occur, developing new processes of avoidance and remediation and recognizing new sections of society. Secondly, we illustrate that energy justice provides a new stimulating framework for bridging existing and future research on energy production and consumption when whole energy systems approaches are integrated into research designs. In conclusion, we suggest three areas for future research: investigating the non-activist origins of energy justice, engaging with economics, and uniting systems of production and consumption.

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Context

- Norway – one of the wealthiest countries, egalitarian, low income disparities
- Growing income inequality
- Low-income households (60% of median income)
 - 2019: 11% of all households in Norway were considered to be low-income households (Statistics Norway)
 - Immigrants, single parents, large households, single people, persons who receive social assistance are vulnerable groups (Statistics Norway)



Study I: Climate plans

- Cities – major contributors to climate change
- Method: document analysis
 - Climate and energy plans:
 - Considered as important instruments to reduce the impacts of climate change
 - Understand how the cities work with climate and energy planning
 - Investigate if and how justice aspects and social sustainability are addressed



Image: Colourbox.dk/fotograf

Climate plans - content

- Green regulation
 - Structured into different policy areas (transport and mobility, energy in buildings, consumption patterns, waste management and climate adaptation)
 - Provide a description of ambitions, objectives and measures
- High ambitions for developing green and environmentally friendly societies which should be a good place to live for their citizens.



Justice in climate plans

- **Distributional justice**
 - Benefits for electric cars (reduced tolls, parking spaces etc.)
 - Few financial resources, requires access (to own housing, electric car)
- **Recognition justice**
 - Discussions the economic and social context
 - Bergen: a sustainable housing supply
 - Stavanger: long-term reductions in the price of bus tickets
- **Procedural justice**
 - Engagement of citizens in decision-making processes is crucial to achieve the mentioned goals
 - Focus on Communication (digitally) and information to citizens (one-way communication)



Image: Colourbox.dk/fotograf

Study II: Storytelling workshop



Mobility – Your story

<p>Every day... (How do you get from your home to other places on a normal day? For example: what kind of transport do you use?)</p>	
<p>What is difficult? Any problems? (Is there anything that is difficult about transport in your everyday life? Any problems? Why is it difficult?)</p>	
<p>Consequences of the problem (What does the problem mean for you, for your family, for your everyday life, for other people?)</p>	
<p>Solution/s (What has been done to solve the transport problem? Who is doing something? Where can you get help? What would you prefer/need?)</p>	
<p>What works well? What do you like? (Is there anything about transport that works well for you? Why does it work well? Anything you think is environmentally friendly?)</p>	

Exclusion and shame

- Climate change mitigation and environmental protection considered as important
- They want to participate/be included in transition processes
- Due to their economic situation they feel excluded
 - They cannot afford electric cars/bikes. Often health problems make walking/biking difficult.
 - They cannot afford energy-efficient and climate friendly homes (isolation, windows, heating etc.)
 - They cannot afford local, healthy and organic food and high-quality long-lasting clothes etc.
- The sustainability transition seems to be increasing the number of things to feel shameful about
- They experience to be pointed at by the «moral finger» by wider society for
 - Driving an old diesel car
 - Wasting energy due to low standard homes
 - Buying low-quality, cheap and unsustainable food, clothes etc.



Unsustainable (or not?)

- Who has a sustainable lifestyle?
 - Wealthy person with new electric cars, newly energy-retrofitted house, a lot of local organic food in the fridge and five air travels every year?
 - Person with low-income, an old diesel car, small badly isolated flat, no food waste and a very low consumption of clothes, technology, air travel etc.?
- Low-income groups have low carbon footprints and contribute to the transition



“It is a bit comical that we who live with low income get the “moral finger” that we do not live sustainable enough.”

Injustice

Mobility

Ex: support for electric cars

“The subsidy schemes for buying an electric car are bloody unfair because the people getting the subsidies are the ones who can afford to buy an electric car in the first place. [...] They get support for buying an electric car, but I don't get support for taking the bus.”

Housing

Ex: support for energy retrofitting

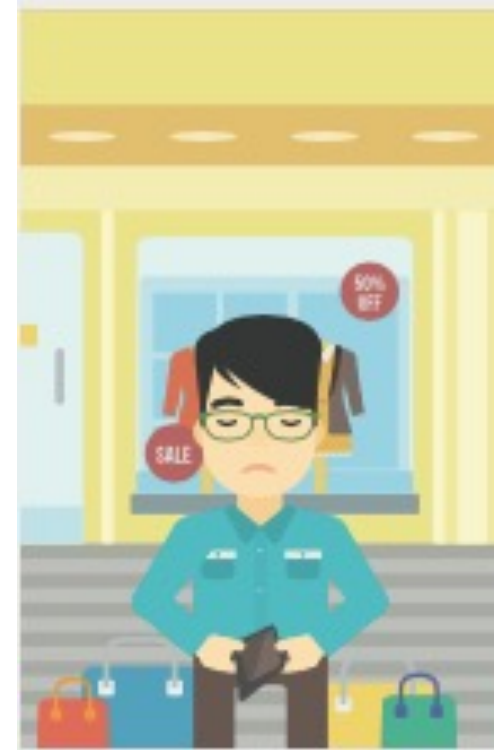
“If we get support [through ENOVAs support schemes] we cannot afford to install these things anyhow. The support schemes are unfair. We have a heat pump and it's fifteen years old. When it gets cold in winter, it stops working. This winter, when it was 20 degrees below zero and it suddenly stopped running, we were freezing to death.”

Consumption

Ex: promotion of local and organic food

“We have been to the farmers' market, but we can never afford to buy anything. We go there and drool then and look for the samples.”

“Why don't those who live sustainable lives (low consumption) get rewarded?”



Images: Colourbox.dk/fotograf

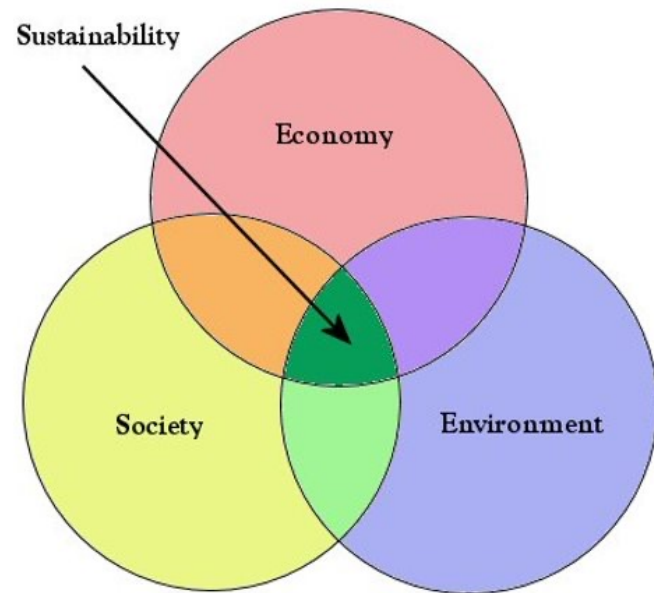
Alternative policies

- Support schemes should be linked to people's economic situation
- Low-income groups should be prioritized when supporting energy retrofitting of homes
- Cheaper/free public transport
- Removing VAT on organic food
- Create spaces for second-hand markets and for exchanging and giving away things
- Establish sharing solutions (ebikes, ecars, tools, equipment etc.) located together with organisations/foundations who support low-income groups

- Stop pointing the «moral finger» at low-income groups

Summary

- Benefits and disadvantages are not equally distributed
 - Many policies benefit the wealthy
 - Many of the subsidies and schemes intended to encourage climate-friendly lifestyles are outside the budgets of low-income households
- Low-income groups are not adequately recognized
 - Mostly not addressed as target group in climate plans
 - Not recognized as resource for sustainable living
- Low-income groups are not included in decision-making
 - Focus on one-way communication
 - Focus on digital communication which requires access to and knowledge about the communication channels
- Current policies increase, rather than decrease social inequality and contribute to feelings of exclusion and shame
- Social sustainability not adequately taken into account



Thank you for your attention!

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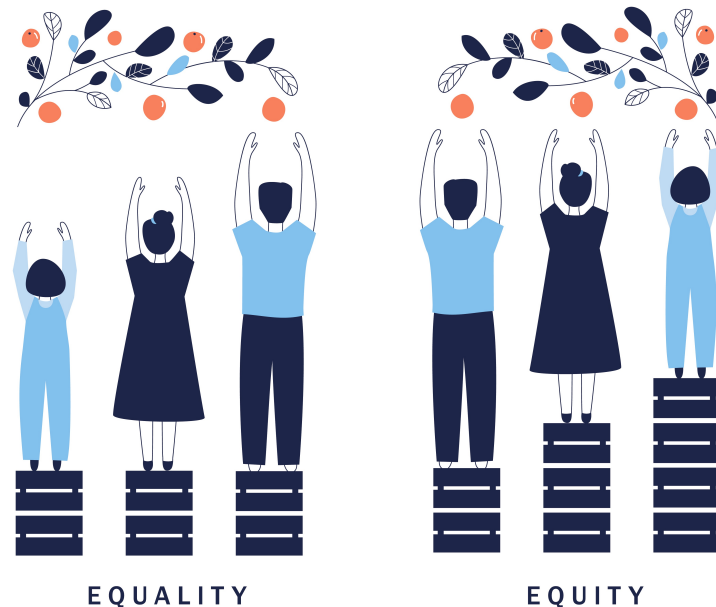
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