Energy Research & Social Science 42 (2018) 53–60

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Energy Research & Social Science

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/erss

Original research article

# Energy democracy in a continuum: Remaking public engagement on energy transitions in Thailand

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ARTICLE INFO

*Keywords:*
Energy democracy
Thailand
Energy transitions
Community energy

ABSTRACT

Sustainable energy transitions are fundamental in making climate actions effective and in attaining sustainable development. To achieve the transition inclusively, fairly, and justly, democratizing these processes seems imperative; yet, not all human societies are thriving in democratic spaces. Focusing in the non-democratic state of Thailand, this paper explores the materiality of energy democracy in such locations. Using mixed qualitative methods and a grounded approach, the paper offers a case study of community-oriented renewable energy transitions as practices occurring outside the realms of state-sanctioned and government-fostered apparatuses for public engagement. The case shows how these practices continually shape and co-produce energy sociotechnical orders. The paper further shows how a space for communal deliberation can become a site for the making and remaking of public engagement, and how, over time—of hits-and-misses, of consensus-and-dissensus, of stability-and-uncertainty—it could became durable, yet remained open-ended and provisional.

> "Not only is the force of public discussion one of the correlates of democracy…but its cultivation can also make democracy itself function better…The achievement of social justice depends not only on institutional forms (including democratic rules and regulations), but also on effective practice."
>
> Amartya Sen ([1][1]:158), Development as Freedom.

## 1. Introduction

International norms suggest that sustainable energy transitions are fundamental in making climate action effective and in attaining sustainable development. The Paris Agreement on climate change, on one hand, calls for a multilevel action on decarbonisation of energy systems. By multilevel, it means that energy transition has to occur across scales—from the local to the subnational to national to international. Agenda 2030 or the Sustainable Development Goals, on the other hand, calls for energy transitions as a component of the goal of universal energy access. In many developing countries, energy transitions towards sustainable, environmentally benign systems are key not only in meeting these normative agenda; it is also vital for well-being and quality of life. Yet, little is known about how communities (*i.e.* those at the bottom level of governance) in developing countries are progressing in their transitions. Even less is known about transition processes occurring in non-democratic societies. This paper seeks to address this gap. It explores, examines, and reflects on how community practices of energy transitions occur democratically even in a non-democracy.

Broadly, energy democracy refers to an emergent social movement that re-imagines energy consumers as "prosumers" or innovators, designers, and analysts who are involved in decisions at every stage of this sector, from production through use [2]. In many democratic societies in the developed world, energy democracy has been thoroughly documented in scholarly papers in terms of actions and interventions by community energy groups, co-operatives, and associations (*e.g.* in the UK [3]). This paper joins this corpus, but enriches it further by focusing its gaze on one understudied location in the developing world. A critical interrogation of this marginal topic opens up a new opportunity for scholars and practitioners alike to scrunitize how community energy transitions are practiced *in situ* in developing countries, what their challenges are, and what their futures could be. In so doing, we are able to compare how these experiences demonstrate similarities and/or differences *vis-à-vis* energy democracy-as-construed in the global North.

Following this introduction, the paper is presented in four sections. Section 2 describes the contexts by which the paper is framed: that energy democracy is a dynamic practice in a continuum of public engagement. Public engagement, which comprises exercises and processes enabling citizen engagement on public issues, is experiencing a deliberative turn in the ways and means by which we could understand, navigate, and appreciate its value in the co-production of energy transitions, including in non-democratic locations. Section 3 details the methods used in highlighting the 'grounded' approach to present an empirical case of a community-in-deliberation for a sustainable energy

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2018.03.008
Received 18 October 2017; Received in revised form 6 December 2017; Accepted 8 March 2018

future. Section 4 discusses how this community navigates energy transitions as co-produced sociotechnical projects in what can be called the 'making' of public engagement for community energy transitions. Section 5 describes how active citizens in a non-democratic state exhibited the ideals of public engagement for energy transitions in what can be called the 'remaking' of public engagement. Section 6 concludes the paper.

## 2. A continuum in the democratic co-production of sustainable energy transitions

Energy democracy is a concept open for interpretation, but its agenda could include processes of social mobilisation for economic, social, and political projects of energy transitions [2]. The spaces in which these processes are made show shifts in who controls power, not only electric power but also political, social, and economic power ([4]; *cf.* [5]). As a social agenda, energy democracy encompasses several advocacies, from eschewing fossil-based institutions and corporate profits to addressing historical economic and political inequalities. Being a social movement, therefore, energy democracy blossoms from below—*i.e.* within and amongst neighbors, communities, and groups—and expands through strategic alliances, coalitions, and networks to build political, economic, and social power [6–8]. Energy democracy, in sum, pertains to active civic participation in the production and use of energy.

Civic participation on issues of public interest is not new; it is a well-studied aspect of social life and considered part and parcel in the making of social orders [9]. Yet, the concept and practice of public engagement undergoes changing interpretations. Its meanings and contextualization are subject to a dynamic interpretation and re-interpretation, of making and re-making. Chilvers and Kearnes [10] suggest that what matters when enrolling citizens in public engagement is the nod towards reflexivity of the many inevitable openings, closures, framing conditions, and ambivalences that exist when imagining social orders. A focus on reflexivity acknowledges how tension-filled the exercises of public engagement are [11]. Existing in a continuum that is processed and practiced over time, public engagement is indeed characterized by hits-and-misses, of consensus-and-dissensus. By looking at public engagement from this temporal perspective, one could appreciate the durability or non-durability of exercises and practices that make public engagement. Such moments of ebbs and flows, hits and misses, stabilities and uncertainties means that civic participation is, at best, open-ended and provisional [11,10]; and so should be our understanding of energy democracy.

Energy democracy could mean public engagement exercised in multiple ways. Just like other arenas of civic participation, energy democracy is referred to by other names and brands. In many communities in developed countries, it manifests in citizen-organized, community-managed energy systems. The oft-cited German *Energiewende* has been suggested to be largely a product of energy democracy [12]. In many ways, these local-level social action practices have helped reveal what can be called the 'deliberative turn' in contemporary politics [13,14]. This turn is evidenced by citizens, more than ever, becoming 'engaged' with public issues that affect them. In *Energiewende,* these issues encompass society's better appreciation of risk, new ownership structures, and socio-economic opportunities. In other locations, such as in the UK, citizen engagement in community energy is also due to factors such as social cohesion and job opportunities, among others [3]. While energy democracy has been richly documented in the context of the democratic global North, little evidence can be found about the emergence of these modes of public reasoning for energy transitions in non-democracies.

Energy transitions are key in addressing one of the most profound sustainability challenges facing society today, climate change. The deployment of renewable energy technologies—advanced as a key response to the climate challenge—as replacement to fossil fuel-based energy systems has to occur quickly and as a multilevel venture. This new international project on decarbonisation, enshrined in the Paris Agreement [15], has already received countenance from across governments, democratic or not. Enrolling those at the bottom rung of the multiple levels of governance, *i.e.* local governments and communities, are key to the decarbonisation process. Article 11, Section 2 of the Paris Agreement [15] recognizes this focus on the 'local.'

A focus on the local has technological basis: the distributed nature of renewable energy sources—wind and sunlight in particular—allows almost everyone to tap these forms of energy themselves. The word 'energy prosumer,' a word play between 'consumer' and 'producer,' aptly captured this evolved meaning of ownership. It has also become a hinge by which the social movement on climate action attaches their tactics to challenge the power exclusively held by energy firms and utilities [4,8,7]. With energy transitions constantly re-imagined, localized forms of energy democracy also underlined new opportunities for citizen participation, at the same time that 'public engagement' has also become opened to new meanings. One of the many sites where these dynamics have been observed is in non-democratic Thailand.

## 3. Methods and data

Thailand was studied in this paper for the following reasons. Its emergence as upper-middle income economy in 2011 from a low-income country in less than a generation [16] makes it an interesting case to study how developing countries navigate the tensions and trade-offs arising between industrialization and decarbonization [17]. The country's energy landscape is also almost homogeneous: with the state owning the largest stake in energy generation and distribution—an interesting context compared to the mostly privatized and deregulated nature of electricity systems in other Southeast Asian economies. The state owns publicly-listed energy corporations such as the Electric Generating Authority of Thailand, its subsidiary the Electric Generating Company, and PTT (with businesses in natural gas and other fossil fuels) (see some discussion in [18]). With a steadily rising emissions—from 152 $MtCO_2e$ in 1990 to 369 in 2013 [19], Thailand also offers a lens by which we can better see the contrasting contexts of development and decarbonization. Inequality is another point of interest. Thailand, despite its impressive industrialization, still has significant rural poverty [20], where more than 80% of the country's 7.1 million poor people live in rural areas [21]. The state of politics in Thailand is another key context. Amongst the countries in Southeast Asia, it is the only country not colonized by western powers. Its turbulent contemporary political history also makes it an important study site. Following a series of take-overs and protests, Thailand is, as this paper goes to press, under a military government.

In many ways, therefore, Thailand represents a locus of study by which one can glimpse the relationships between democracy and the environment—of which the empirical evidence remains a considerable gap in the literature [22]. A 12 October 2017 search of the International Bibliography of the Social Sciences found only eight articles with the words 'Thailand,' 'democracy,' and 'environment' in the title, keyword or abstract published in the last twenty-five years; 1992–2017. The Social Sciences Full Text and ScienceDirect databases returned one and zero articles; respectively. This paper addresses this gap by asking a critical question: how democratic processes and exercises of public engagement for sustainable energy transitions could be (or are being) produced under a non-democracy? This paper does not necessarily provide an extensive response to this question; what it does instead is show empirical evidence that public engagement on energy transitions is possible in a non-democracy; and that these exercises were even capable of producing new meanings of public engagement.

The fieldwork for this study was conducted from November 2016 to January 2017 during which the author spent time in Bangkok, Chiang Mai, and Phetchaburi. A 'grounded' approach, which means that the research involved a critical exploration of the problem at hand 'without