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Citizen Appropriation of Energy Transition: Encouragement of Collective Action as a Public Policy

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Abstract: *This proposal is based on an investigation carried out as part of a study entitled “Localizing ecological, democratic and social transitions”, funded by the TEES programme of ADEME. The aim of our project is to study ecological, democratic and social transitions as a whole, by examining the measures that aim to enlarge the groups participating in public debates and decision-making and in transition trials. To this end, we have been able to monitor the work of a Life project - the Local Energy Transition Strategies Going for Climate Change - carried out under the auspices of the French Centre-Val de Loire region in partnership with ADEME, with funding for the period 2021 to 2025. The aim of this project is to speed up energy transition by encouraging the collective appropriation of energy issues by local stakeholders.*

More concretely, the aim is to set up a system of citizen involvement every year for three years, in the form of collective actions in six areas (groups of municipalities) within the Region. The aim of the “collective intelligence” training programmes and workshops and of the support of the project leaders is to train groups of citizens who will set up actions for energy sobriety or production.

This enhanced role of community groups and local collectives can be found in numerous domains of public action for the environment and ecological transition. However, putting this aim into practical action is generally achieved by aid provided on a thematic rather than a regional basis through a call for projects for existing collectives. This Life project takes a different approach, involving the creation of new citizen groups by putting workshop participants in contact with “inspiring” initiatives. By offering so-called “sobriety” initiatives, the aim of this project is not only to create citizen energy communities, but also to develop actions in different domains of energy and ecological transition (housing, mobility, consumption, food, re-use).

One of the interests of the Life project for our research is that it makes it possible to take a different viewpoint of the incentive measures and of the expected effects of collective action. Our investigation through the project

leaders and the workshop participants provides us with a way of viewing the situation upstream of the action and of examining the ways and means of encouraging commitment, how this is seen by the participants, and the difficulties of getting the new groups involved in concrete actions.

Our proposed text is organized around two main questions:

- 1) How do the effects of incentive measures for collective engagement vary in different socio-spatial contexts?*
- 2) Does calling on citizen involvement have an effect of politicization or depoliticization of environmental issues?*

Keywords: *Socio-ecological transition, energy transition, collective action, sustainability transitions, local energy communities*

1 Introduction

In France, as in many countries, community groups and collectives have been given a key role in many domains of public environmental action and ecological transition. For example, the second scenario of the French environment and energy management agency (ADEME) for a carbon-neutral society by 2050, which is based on “regional cooperation”, focuses on the role of collective citizen initiatives to bring about change in the regions (ADEME 2021). Supporting existing collectives is thus strategically important for public transition policies (Audet 2015, Mazeaud 2021), often through calls for theme-based projects.

For a long time, raising awareness of the need to change practices focused on changes at the individual level (Martin, Gaspard, 2016), but both researchers and public policies currently seem to focus on forms of collective organisations and citizenship schemes (CGDD, 2017; Cit’in, 2017; Villalba and Melin, 2022; Van Neste, Melé and Larrue, 2024). There is a tension in the literature between, on the one hand, studies analysing the means and competencies of people involved in collective actions and that index the actions taken on the basis of the uneven distribution of resources or “capital” (Noblet, Guillemot and Chouinard, 2016 ; Beaurain, Rouaux and Arnould, 2017), and on the other hand, those that focus more on the role of learning processes during the action (Deboulet and Nez, 2013; Seguin, 2020). These two approaches, like those we used for conflict situations (Bobbio, Melé and Ugalde, 2016) or collective actions related to waste management (Melé, Cirelli, 2023), are based on surveys investigating the way individuals become involved in collective action.

The present paper takes a different and complementary approach, based on observation and analysis of a trial conducted in the Val-de-Loire region in

France. As part of a current study entitled “Localizing ecological, democratic and social transitions”, funded by the TEES programme of ADEME, we conducted a survey (about 20 interviews) and observed the work of the Life project - *Local Energy Transition Strategies Going for Climate Change* - carried out under the auspices of the Centre-Val de Loire region in partnership with ADEME, with funding for the period 2021 to 2025. The aim of this project is to speed up energy transition by encouraging the collective appropriation of energy issues by local stakeholders. Specifically, the idea is to set up a system of citizen involvement every year for three years, in the form of collective actions in six areas (groups of municipalities) of the Region. The objective of the “collective intelligence” training programmes and workshops and of the support of the project leaders is to train groups of citizens who will set up actions for energy sobriety or production.

In this way, our survey of project leaders and workshop participants offers an approach that provides a new viewpoint of how commitment occurs and the expected outcomes of collective actions. Here, it is not a question of investigating forms of organisation or internal governance, which have already been well documented (Debizet, Pappalardo, 2021), but of examining the emergence and role of incentives provided by the public authorities. We were able to observe how new citizen collectives emerged through contact between the workshop participants. Finally, by offering so-called “sobriety” initiatives, the aim of this project is not just to create citizen energy communities, but also to open up actions in different domains of energy and ecological transition (housing, mobility, consumption, food, re-use).

This paper thus offers a way of viewing the situation upstream of the action and of examining the ways and means of encouraging commitment as a public policy objective, the perceptions of the participants, and the difficulties of getting the new groups involved in concrete actions.

2 The Fragile Organisation of Citizen Collectives

Altogether, 500 people across the six areas participated in the first phase of the project. In all the areas, it was difficult to retain the participants, with a strong drop-out rate (40%) after the first workshop, partly compensated for by participants who joined up over the course of the project (only 40% of the 224 participants in the fourth workshop had attended all four workshops).

Recruitment methods were determined by each group of municipalities; two areas used a system of random draw, the others were based on volunteers. The majority of participants were aged between 50 and 64, with few in the younger

(20-25 years) and older (65+ years) age range. There were also more executives and professionals than manual workers. In Blois and Bourges, the random draw system provided a greater variety of participants, including people with less interest in the theme and who would not have participated spontaneously.

People already involved in associations, or who were or had been local councillors (10% of participants), were often mentioned by the participants when describing the group. Some said, and regretted, that they felt that the group was composed of people already convinced about the issues of transition.

At the end of the fourth workshop, participants had to subscribe to certain activity ideas and make a commitment to self-organise. According to one of the facilitators, what emerged from the workshops was not projects, but "embryos of collective dynamics", in that everything is open-ended: the scale of intervention, the status and organisation of the group driving the project, the actions to be implemented, the relationship with existing groups, partnerships, and above all the real involvement of the people on the list.

The current dynamics regarding energy production and sobriety (food, housing, consumption, transport) differ widely. While more participants focused on questions of sobriety, a group interested in renewable energy rapidly emerged. The composition of the groups arising from the project (one per area for energy production) was slightly more diverse than the energy production cooperatives that exist in the region, which are characterised by retirees with technical skills and competence in setting up projects. Compared to sobriety projects, energy production involves a more complex organisation of collective action, time constraints, and more technical set-ups. However, the support of *Energie Partagée*, a national organisation that promotes civic energy-production collectives, helps identify the range of possibilities.

Twenty-six sobriety initiatives emerged from the workshops, involving first of all food, sharing objects and transport (5 each), followed by awareness raising (4), and then housing, waste management and light pollution (2 each). At the time of our survey, which was carried out four to six months after the last workshops, some of these groups were no longer active, some had decided to join existing organisations, and others were going through a structuring process with variable levels of involvement. The surveys, which we carried out with the main spokespersons of the regional project leaders, revealed a significant reduction in the number of participants compared to those enrolled in the final workshop. Uncertainty about the future of the groups lies partly on their capacity to attract new participants, from a small core derived from the Life project.

3 Tensions between Politicization and De-politicization

This experimentation is firmly rooted in a means of public action advocating citizen involvement in the issues of ecological and energy transition. It is a public policy choice, as well as the position of the European Green group, which is responsible for environmental policies in the Centre-Val de Loire region, and which calls for the generalisation of participative procedures and the optimisation of the action of community groups in the framework of a policy of so-called "continuous democracy". These elements can be considered as a form of politicization, whereby the right to speak about the issue of energy and the climate is not restricted to technical bodies, broadening participation in the debate on the meaning of public actions. However, the conditions for implementing this approach are characterised by an opposing process, which could be qualified as de-politicization, in that it involves a disconnection with the local political scene, as well as eviction from the debate of the possibility of sharing decision-making about energy-related policies.

Paradoxically, a certain disconnection of actions with the local political scene can be observed. Some of the participants of the first workshop expressed their incomprehension and sometimes non-acceptance of the objective of creating groups committed to implementing the actions. They thought that they had been invited to join a panel of citizens to discuss the procedures for transition in the domain of energy. They considered that they had the capacity to give their opinion about public action procedures. This misunderstanding implicitly highlights the standpoint of the project; residents are seen as potential partners, project implementers, and not as participating or playing an active role in public decision-making.

Our observations reveal workshops based on methods that aim to allow expression of feelings, personal experiences and suggestions, but which do not really provide opportunities for debate. We can see here the techniques and procedures typical of "collective intelligence" training courses and a certain routinisation of participatory schemes (Mazeaud, Nonjon, 2018). Certain questions considered as "political", in the sense here of their capacity to spark debate between the participants and to introduce controversial issues in society, are ignored, notably the question of nuclear power, the role of private enterprises, or the effects of European or national regulations (Christen, Hamman, 2015). Moreover, citizen initiatives cannot take the form of demands made directly to the local authorities; the participants are asked to suggest actions that can be carried out by groups of self-organized and self-sufficient citizens. Consequently, priority is given to projects involving awareness, the provision of new services (pooling objects, car-sharing), and organising access to organic, local food. Some of the people we interviewed emphasised their

interest in forms of more confrontational collective actions demanding an acceleration of climate change policies, while accepting that their participation in the dynamics proposed by the Life project involves a more “benevolent” form of action and which demonstrates a consensus regarding the objectives with the local authorities.

Furthermore, the link with the regional strategies expressed in the regional climate-air-energy plans (PCAET) does not seem to be particularly sought after, nor appear in the interviews as an objective for the facilitators or participants. In any event, the project does not suggest a reason to re-open the debate about local strategies regarding energy transition. Nevertheless, the lack of connection between these two measures does not necessarily imply a contradiction. The actions of the Life project can become an element of the action plan or awareness component of the PCAET, as in Blois.

The idea of promoting shared governance, mentioned without further details in the presentation documents of the project, could suggest that setting up the project in an area must result in a new way of steering transition actions at the local level, or to opening a debate on the modalities of making decisions about the local energy policy. There is some continuing ambiguity about what exactly is to be governed – regional energy transition at the inter-municipal scale, as suggested by the workshop invitation, or each of the renewable energy production projects. In fact, the call for open governance only concerns energy production projects, which, once they go beyond microprojects, require drawing up contracts between different types of stakeholders and consideration of how the citizen collectives and local groups can continue to play a role, even if private investors contribute to the funding. It involves promoting “democratic” management and decision-sharing practices in citizen energy communities (Gomez, Til, 2023: 7). Based on this principle, decisions are taken on the basis of one person = one vote, which allows “citizen” control of partnership projects, independent of the amount of money invested.

Providing this framework through the creation of a citizen collective means localizing a resource that the local council can take over when confronted with a private project, or when it wishes to support a collaborative project or to establish a group of activists when setting up shared energy-production actions. To enable the creation of local energy communities, the Life programme mainly activates the citizen dimension.

4 Conclusions

This experimental project promoting all forms of engagement in actions for transition opens up the issues of renewable energy production. Encouraging commitment and collective action occurs through a simulation process, whereby participants come together to imagine the type of society and of citizen involvement that would bring about a sustainable world. We can observe a tension between politicization of a technical issue by opening it up to the public concerned, and de-politicization of the position attributed to the participants who were encouraged to think of actions that could be taken by the local population. Indeed, the opportunities for discussion in the workshops did not lead to a debate about the dysfunctions or the effects of current regulations, but rather to finding ways of getting round them in order to limit their negative impacts in a given area.

This leads to a shift from the more strictly political forms of community action, such as attempts to provide a counter-balance (Lapostolle, Roy, 2022), requests for debate about local policies, advocacy of attributing new rights or for the overhaul of the regulatory system (Fung, 2003; Coler et al., 2021). The question of democratization appears to be limited to reference to shared governance of energy production projects. Overall, it most often involves enabling people who are already alert to environmental issues to consider taking action. Rather than shared governance, the aim is to set up pro-energy transition coalitions at the regional level (Hess, 2018; Gomez, Tyl, 2023), which could enable the spread of projects by creating a favourable supporting environment (Fontaine, 2018). The aim of this experimental project is thus to act extensively on the social fabric of the region. The project leaders hypothesise that this enrolment and support process will increase the number of areas proactively seeking to develop renewable energy initiatives that could be transformed into the “renewable or citizen energy communities” defined in the French Energy Climate law of 2019 (Gomez, Tyl, 2023).

The strategy of the project is thus to organise and raise the profile of collectives, predicting that it is possible to act at a very early stage in order to setting up the energy transition public. However, we observed the considerable fragility of the groups created during the project, which have not yet become collectives; some will not withstand the test of autonomous collective action, and others will have to adapt to the possible resources and alliances in each local context, in other words, demonstrate their ability not only to act but also to exist collectively in the social world.

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