Putting people at the heart of energy transitions

Exploring the role of social innovation in energy system transformation

Antwerp, April 28th, 2022

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Illustration: Maria Frajje
Putting people at the heart of energy transitions

BEPA (2010):

“At a time of major budgetary constraints, social innovation is an effective way of responding to social challenges, by mobilising people’s creativity to develop solutions and make better use of scarce resources”.

Former EU commission president JM Barroso (2012):

“Social innovation is not a panacea but if encouraged and valued it can bring immediate solutions to the pressing social issues citizens are confronted with.”

EU Commissioner for Research, Science and Innovation, C Moedas (2018):

“The EU will fund more social innovation because it’s the future of innovation”.

Longer history of high expectations
Social innovations in energy transitions

... capable to satisfy human and societal needs underpinned by energy. It contributes to a low carbon energy transition while in parallel empowering vulnerable social groups and cultivates civic traditions of trust, equity and solidarity within and beyond the spatial context on which they occur...

(Koukoufikis, G, 2021)
Both instrument and emancipation: a critical-reconstructive perspective

Moulaert & MacCallum 2019; Jessop et al. 2013; Schubert 2019; Edwards-Schachter & Wallace (2017); and others
1 Social innovation foregrounds the ‘social’

Acceptance of technology

Power of ideas

Nieuws Eneco – Eneco Energie Lab
2 Social innovation for structural change

Ongoing incremental change

Structural change
3 Social innovation as ‘collective action’

Linear interventions

Co-creation and experimentation
4 Social innovation involves multiple actors

Innovation ‘heroes’

Multi-actor innovation

Illustration by Maria Fraaije
Social innovations are transformative to the extent that they

• challenge  
• alter  
• replace  

dominant structures & institutions

Pel et al. 2020; Avelino et al. 2019
Tapping into the potential

• Not the absence of technology, but foregrounds the social
• Improvement, but also as emancipation or transformation
• Interventions but also co-creation and experimentation
• Spans a multitude of actors including innovation heroes

Challenge but also maintain institutions
Not inherently good but comes with tensions
Diversity of orientations & directions
Thank you!

Putting people at the heart of energy transitions: four projects shine a light on the path forward

28–29 April 2022
Readings


