

Just energy transitions in underprivileged neighbourhoods

Achieving inclusive and equitable energy transitions in underprivileged neighborhoods is crucial for advancing sustainable urban renewal and achieving environmental goals. However, ensuring that communities in marginalized urban areas benefit equally from these transitions poses significant challenges. Inhabitants of these neighborhoods often experience energy injustices due to costly and inaccessible renewable energy services. While socio-demographic factors contribute to these inequalities, the socio-spatial characteristics of these neighborhoods—such as the quality and energy efficiency of buildings, public infrastructure, ownership structures, and social networks—also play a crucial role. Moreover, structural injustices can severely limit inhabitants' abilities to engage in collective action, depriving them of the necessary resources and opportunities to develop their capabilities (Gaupp et al., 2023). The stigmatized character of these areas may not only undermine engagement for collective action, but also diminishes community support and cooperation, weakening social cohesion (McNamara et al., 2013). These factors can act as barriers for collective and sustainable transformations. Without deliberate efforts to promote equity in inner-city underprivileged areas, energy transitions will remain unjust and, therefore, unsustainable.

This PhD research focuses on addressing these energy injustices in two contrasting case study neighbourhoods in Ghent: Watersportbaan, a social housing neighbourhood, and Sluizeken-Tolhuis-Ham, a 19th-century working-class neighbourhood. The goal is to explore how residents of underprivileged neighborhoods can take an active role in the shift to sustainable energy. By promoting bottom-up actions, communities can be more involved in the transition, fostering community involvement and collective agency.

Central to this research is the theoretical conceptualization of "thinking energy transitions with care". Care is a manifold

range of doings needed to create, hold together, and sustain life, and continue its diverseness (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). By approaching energy transitions through the lens of care, this research disrupts the traditional focus on technology and emphasizes the interconnectedness of energy systems with all aspects of daily life. Rooted in feminist theory and care ethics, this approach highlights the relational nature of energy systems and challenges the dominant narrative of individualism. A care perspective for just energy transitions in underprivileged focuses on questions "Who cares?"; "What for?"; "For whom?"; "Why do we care?"; and "How to care?". The concept of "caring-with" (Damgaard et al., 2022; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017; Tronto, 1993) underscores the shared responsibility of all stakeholders to care for the energy networks they are part of, where public institutions and community stakeholders engage in a reciprocal relationship, collaborating on solutions that are sensitive to local contexts.

To care for more just transitions in underprivileged neighbourhoods is a concrete doing, it comes with an attachment of committing (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017), of action for more equitable neighbourhood energy transitions. The PhD employs an action research approach, engaging citizens by concentrating on their daily lives and how they relate to energy, with the aim of promoting emancipatory and collaborative goals.

This PhD is connected to the CO2PED-project, an international interdisciplinary research project that investigates more inclusive energy transitions from different perspectives in 8 different neighbourhoods in 4 European countries: the Netherlands, Belgium, Portugal and Estonia.

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