Glava Energy Center

From Late Consultation to Early Dialogue

Towards Energy Communities

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Summary

The energy transition requires processes that combine climate objectives with local values, and research shows that early dialogue leads to both better decision-making and higher social acceptance. Consultation is particularly important in complex issues where different legitimate interests need to be balanced over time and where solutions are developed through iterative learning and joint problem-solving.

However, consultations often take place too late, offer limited influence, and risk undermining trust. This leads to appeals, delayed projects, and reduced local legitimacy, even though perceived fairness and clear links between input and decisions are key success factors.

Planning therefore needs to be renewed through earlier dialogue, transparent feedback, and institutions that enable shared ownership and responsibility, such as energy communities within the EU's REC/CEC framework. These strengthen local value creation, increase local anchoring, and make it possible to implement more projects faster and with greater societal acceptance.

The Energy Transition as a Societal Project

The energy transition is not primarily a technical project but a societal one. Resistance to wind power, solar parks, or new grid infrastructure is explained in research less by egoism and more by justice, participation, and place identity: who benefits, who bears the cost, how fair the process is perceived, and how strong the connection to local values is.[1],[2]

Reviews from the EU Commission's Joint Research Centre show that social acceptance is shaped by perceived, and not the actual, fairness in the distribution of benefits and costs, the degree of citizen participation, and trust in actors and processes.[2] Late-stage information meetings and formal consultations tend to create distrust, while early dialogue and benefit-sharing are highlighted as the way forward.[3]

Stakeholders need to meet early to develop a shared understanding of the problem to be solved. Equally important is the insight that these stakeholders must also co-own—even temporarily—a compromise solution.

Limitations of Current Consultation Processes

Against this background, it is reasonable to update how we perceive the consultation process. In Swedish planning, consultation serves important functions: gathering knowledge, improving decision-making, providing transparency, and enabling influence at an early stage.[4]

At the same time, practice and research show that consultations often come late and are weakly linked to actual power-sharing—the process becomes consultative rather than co-creative.[5] A new Swedish study also points out that 'invited participation' often becomes too vague to contribute to real fairness, precisely because the link between dialogue and decision-making is unclear.[6]

Complex Rather Than Complicated Problems

A key distinction matters for how we organize the process. Complicated problems have many parts but can be broken down into manageable analysis and expert solutions; examples include building a bridge or designing a technical facility.

Complex problems are of a different nature: actors with different goals and values, uncertainty that cannot be eliminated, feedback loops, and dilemmas where several legitimate values conflict—climate goals versus local habitats, labor markets versus nature values, future prospects versus landscape experience.[3]

In complex problems, there is no single 'right' answer; the solution requires dialogue, learning, negotiation, gradual adaptation over time, and may need to be 'renegotiated' as needs and conditions change. It is precisely for this type of problem that the consultation model—in its broader sense, as ongoing stakeholder dialogue—is designed: actors meet, share perspectives, and co-create solutions in several steps.[4],[5]

Paradoxes in the Energy Transition

Paradox theory offers an analytical language to understand and manage the tensions that arise in consultation processes. The core insight is that conflicting yet legitimate demands not only coexist but are persistent and mutually dependent.[7],[17]

In the energy transition, we see this in the conflict between global climate goals and local habitats: both are reasonable, both have strong interests behind them, and both

are hard to compromise away. The paradox perspective therefore rejects the idea of ‘solving’ the conflict once and for all.

Instead, it proposes cyclical, open trade-offs where actors acknowledge the tension, negotiate priorities, and adjust solutions over time.[7] This requires processes that are transparent and iterative rather than closed and linear.

Legitimacy as a Practical Governance Tool

Acknowledging the tension is not just a normative gesture; it is a practical strategy for building legitimacy. When citizens see that their input actually influences site selection, design, and benefit-sharing, trust in the process increases.[2]

Legitimacy theory clarifies what this means in concrete terms: pragmatic legitimacy is about stakeholders experiencing tangible benefits, moral legitimacy about the perceived fairness of cost and benefit distribution, and cognitive legitimacy about the process appearing understandable and reasonable.[8]

These three dimensions are not abstract ideals but practical indicators that can be monitored in every energy plan.

From Consultation to Co-Creation

The stakeholder approach ties theory to governance in practice. It assumes that value creation for stakeholders is not an add-on to strategy but its core.[15] In complex issues like the energy transition, this means integrating stakeholder perspectives into decision logic from the start, rather than treating them as ‘referral bodies’ at the end.

It is a shift from consultation to co-creation, where organizations not only ask what actors think but build structures that make them co-owners of both the problem and the solution.

Energy Communities as an Institutional Solution

This is also the foundation for energy communities as an institution: they operationalize the insight of paradox theory by creating a form where conflicting demands can coexist and be balanced over time.

The normative framework for energy communities already exists in EU law. 'Renewable Energy Communities' (REC) are defined in Article 22 of RED II as open, voluntary, and autonomous legal entities with the primary purpose of creating environmental, economic, and social benefits locally—rather than financial profit.[9]

'Citizen Energy Communities' (CEC) in the Electricity Market Directive Article 16 simultaneously open up for a broader range of activities: production, distribution, supply, storage, energy efficiency, and charging services.[10]

The revised Renewable Energy Directive (RED III) further strengthens ambition and highlights the role of energy communities in, for example, district heating and so-called renewables acceleration areas.[11] Practical interpretations and guidelines compiled by REScoop.eu clarify the differences between REC and CEC and which activities can be carried out, and are useful for policy translation from EU level to local application.[16]

Local Value, Shared Ownership and Increased Acceptance

The crucial point is that energy communities shift planning logic from late consultation to early co-creative institution. Citizens, small businesses, and municipal actors share ownership and governance, creating local benefits that are visible, measurable, and fairly distributed. New empirical evidence shows that joint or shared local ownership significantly increases acceptance through mechanisms of energy justice: fair involvement, fair distribution of benefits, and manageable perceived consequences.[12]

In the Swedish context, new cases show that publicly driven initiatives risk reducing citizens to passive participants, which means that energy communities should be designed to combine representative capacity of municipal actors with real direct participation: capital contribution models, voting rules, transparency requirements, and clear feedback between citizens' input and decisions.[13]

Three Levers for More Legitimate Energy Planning

Three key shifts become central in energy plans.

The first shift is front-loading dialogue before site selection: PBL consultations should improve decision-making and reduce appeals by activating stakeholders early.[4,5] The

practical effect is cognitive legitimacy, meaning that the process becomes understandable and reasonable, not just formalistic.[8]

The second shift is translating consultation into institution: energy communities turn participation into co-ownership and co-governance. Here, both pragmatic and moral legitimacy are addressed through local economic benefits, shared responsibility, and transparent rules for benefit-sharing, within the REC/CEC framework.[9],[10]

The third shift is measurable energy justice and feedback: continuously documenting 'this was said—this was decided—here's why' in every major trade-off on location, design, compensation, and ownership structure, which addresses the procedural shortcomings repeatedly identified in research.[2],[12],[14]

Conclusion: From Consultation to Co-Ownership

Energy plans anchored through early dialogue and formalized via energy communities go beyond listening—they distribute power, responsibility, and benefits. The paradoxes around climate benefits and local values do not disappear; but when they are acknowledged and managed within institutions that make citizens co-owners, they become bearable and productive. And that is precisely where energy communities meet the original purpose of the consultation model: to make complex issues manageable through inclusive processes that endure over time.[4],[9]

Footnotes

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