Unlocking energies, unpacking the entanglements and temporalities of local initiatives

Alain Nadaï

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Editorial for the Special issue

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Alain Nadaï[1]
Interdisciplinary social scientist, CIRED-CNRS, Nogent -sur-Marne, France
nadai@centre-cired.fr

Alain Nadaï is an interdisciplinary social scientist at CIRED, the International Research Centre on Environment and Development, part of the French CNRS. His research activity focuses on environmental controversies, landscape policies and energy transition policies and processes.

Abstract

Local initiatives in the energy climate field have gained importance, visibility and support in many countries. Political agendas have been flagging localism as a key to success for energy transitions. While encouraging the involvement of multiple constituencies in energy transition processes on various scales, policy frameworks have been evolved to increasingly mirror a neoliberal agenda, relying on business models and the construction of new markets. The composition of and the direction taken by energy transition processes under such a new configuration, as well as their implications as regards to social justice and sustainability on various scales, still have to be explored.

This special issue proposes longitudinal explorations of local energy transition processes in time, in order to critically examine their entanglements as well as their social and environmental implications.

Key Words : Climate-energy; local initiatives; entanglements; justice issues

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[1] Corresponding author: Alain Nadaï – Centre International de Recherche pour l'Environnement et le Développement - Jardin Tropical, 45 bis, Avenue de la Belle Gabrielle, 94736 Nogent -sur-Marne Cedex, France - Tel. 33 (0) 1 43 94 73 87 – nadai@centre-cired.fr

In their concluding statement to the recent Paris scientific conference – Our common future under Climate Change (OFCC) (July 2015)[2] – which preceded the Paris Summit on Climate Change (CoP 21), scientists from around the world have acknowledged our entrance into a new phase as regards to climate change issues : Climate Change and the 2°C threshold could be considered as part of (stabilized) scientific facts and the time had come to exploring actual solutions to GHG mitigation. The recent Paris agreement[3] has confirmed this entering into the time of action, which the energy transitions are part of.

The way in which these energy transitions are approached by governments and non-governmental actors has itself been transformed within less than a decade. The inability of States, during the Copenhagen Summit (2009), to agree on a legally binding agreement to meet the 2°C threshold had triggered a renewed commitment from non-state actors and networks. Local initiatives in the energy climate field have gained importance, visibility and support in many countries. Political agendas have been flagging localism as a key to success for energy transitions in several countries. They encouraged the involvement of multiple constituencies in energy transition processes on various scales.

In the meantime, as we hereafter detail it, policy frameworks were evolved to increasingly mirror a neoliberal agenda, relying on business models and the construction of new markets in order to foster the development of new energy technologies.

The composition of and the direction taken by energy transition processes under such a new configuration, as well as their implications as regards to social justice and sustainability on various scales, still have to be explored.

This special issue follows suit with debates in this and other journals about the reach and limits of local energy transition processes, their social and environmental implications and their entanglements. It proposes longitudinal explorations of such processes in time, in order to critically examine these issues and discuss the potential and the 'just sustainability' of these processes.

In what follows, we quickly introduce the reader to these changes and issues, before presenting the papers composing this special issue and discussing their outcomes.

The rise of local initiatives

Since the beginning of the nineties, so-called 'community', 'local' or 'territorial' initiatives in the domain of climate energy have been developed. In certain countries, such as UK and Germany, the number of rural initiatives has become very significant (Burch, S., 2010; Seyfang, 2010; Seyfang & Smith, 2007; Seyfang et al., 2013; Middlemis and Bradley, 2010; Walker & Devine-Wright, 2008). In other countries, such as France, the number is lower, albeit growing rapidly (Yalçın-Riollet et al, 2014; Nadaï et al. 2015).

National and transnational networking of local initiatives - such as the Convention of Mayors (EU) (CoM, 2009), the CLER - Network for the Enegry Transition (France), the Network for 100% ReN Regions (DeEnet 100% Regionen - Germany) - have also developed since the nineties and gained institutional recognition. Aside from their input in devising policy frameworks, they provide 'local authorities' with arenas for networking, exchanging practices, returns on experience and means for capacity building. New ways of 'commoning' around energy are emerging (Moss et al., 2014). They renew the way in which energy is approached and practiced, bringing it into relation with an enlarged, more collective responsibility and closer to market initiatives and practice.

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[2] CFCC15 Scientific Committee, 2015, Our Common Future under Climate Change Outcome Statement, July 10? Paris, CFCC15 Scientific Committee, http://poolo.kermeet.com/Data/kmewexV7/block/F_bedaa0dbe3d01a517f0fa7eb11d4b1a4559fae1ae868b.pdf

[3] https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/english_paris_agreement.pdf

The rise of policy localism

While local initiatives have gained political status and a role, policy discourse has also evolved, sometimes asserting the role of local communities / territories / authorities as central actors in the energy transition. Policy programmes have bounced on the ongoing political structuration of rural territories in this domain, sometimes calling for the replication of innovative experiences through standardization, exemplification or demonstration. The role of local authorities in contributing to innovative ways of addressing climate energy issues has been both acknowledged and debated (Amin, 2005; Geoghan, 2009; Marvin & Guy, 1997; Purcell & Brown, 2005; Walker & Devine-Wright, 2008; Walker et al., 2010). Pointed to has been a purported policy of 'localism' that is being developed in certain countries, including France and the United Kingdom, yet with without a steady resolve with respect to political changes and cycles (Nadaï et al. 2014, Catney et al., 2013, Walker et al., 2008, 2010). The term indicates a policy rhetoric and practice that praises and foregrounds the 'local' as the optimal scale for climate energy action.

The rise of policy localism has been accompanied by a change in policy programmes and modes of support to local energy projects. In some countries, such as the United Kingdom, this has resulted in a market-based approach to energy policy and a reduction in the overall financial support to local climate energy initiatives (Catney et al., 2013; Park, 2012; North, 2011). Policy programmes embracing a neo-liberal approach to energy policy have framed local communities as individualised, structured, competent if not competitive entities, morally responsible and accountable for their destiny, and possessing a capacity for self-regeneration (Amin, 2005; Geoghan, 2009). Feed-in tariffs, for instance, started to be replaced by other market-based instruments such as primes over price or repayable loans for supporting local experiences (Catney et al., 2013, FR 2015). In certain cases, an emphasis has also been placed on citizen /third-part financing of new energy technologies, such as cooperative developments, crowdfunding or other ways of collective financing, etc. While these evolutions have taken place at a moment when EU authorities invoked the (market) maturity of some renewable energy technologies (wind power) in order to evolve ReN policy (from feed-in tariff to auction or prime over price - EU, 2013b and c), they may also be regarded as a way for states to cope with the reduction in their resources and financial capacity to support the development of climate energy projects.

A new phase coming up?

To put it in a nutshell, these evolutions may result in what could be regarded as an ongoing new phase, in which: 1) local initiatives become multiple; 2) their extension and their institutional recognition take place in countries other than UK and Germany, where they were first broached; 3) local initiatives develop new articulations to market and market-making, and 4) local initiatives develop new ways of 'commoning' around energy. Put differently, we may wonder whether a change is occurring in the institutionalisation of local initiatives by which the 'local' is supposed to endorse a new role in the domain of climate-energy action, passing through business/economic models and market, and weaving them together with innovative ways of commoning around energy. Public policies and local initiatives have to find their way in these new articulations.

Justice and equity issues

Such a change cannot come about without raising issues of justice and equity. Such issues have recently been addressed in the field of energy (Sovacool, 2013, Hall et al., 2013;

Jenkins, 2016). They have been analysed in relation to the recent rise of policy localism in UK energy policy (see supra), indicating a redefinition of what 'local', 'social cohesion' or 'community' mean, which has paved the way to a reduction in financial and policy support to community structuration and increased inequalities in the conditions for access to this support. It therefore seems worth exploring the extent to which these apply to other policy contexts. For instance, Nadaï et al. (2015) have suggested that a framing slightly different from the UK neo-liberal and market framing might be at work in emerging French policy localism, one that seizes French local climate energy initiatives as potential levers for green growth and technological demonstration policies.

Exploring entanglements and temporalities

While such differences in policy / political approaches to localism are meaningful, there is always the possibility that local initiatives will make their way in the midst of adverse policy settings, leaning on multiple scales of action, support and networking in order to develop themselves. It has been suggested that the structuring of such initiatives has a history going back to a time before the rise of climate energy issues (Nadaï et al., 2015) and relies on processes that weave together multiple dimensions (spatial, material, socio-institutional, political, market, etc.) in rather singular and contingent ways (Rydin et al, 2014). In-depth longitudinal case studies are useful in understanding both the processes of emergence of local initiatives, the re-articulation between policy support and market, and how we (and governments) might learn from them in a period in which these initiatives are becoming numerous, a process of learning that might not start from or through the transfer of solutions or outcomes as if they were generic recipes.

The Special Issue takes a close look at the entanglements and temporalities of some emergence processes of local initiatives, and at the recent history of two networks of local initiatives, in order to explore these issues. It gathers together five papers.

Three of them are cases studies of local development of renewable energy projects in France and Germany. Béatrice Cointe traces the emergence of a successful local photovoltaic project in South-West France (les Fermes de Figeac, operational since 2011), which is driven by a local agricultural cooperative relying on a tradition of mutualisation. The project comprises about a hundred of local farmers, who rent their roofs for installing PV panels and so have become energy producers and shareholders of the PV-project company. The author explores how supporting policies – the feed-in tariff and its associated procedures – have been progressively turned into a tool for territorial innovation and development, and how the mutualisation that is constitutive of the local cooperative is organised at the core of the project and has become part of the construction of market-access, profit maximisation and redistribution. The case study thus follows the detailed technical and relational work of constructing politics and local development out of a market instrument through negotiation and trials at all steps of project development. As the author points out, while most of the elements that have been identified as critical success factors for community projects in the literature pre-existed this project and made it possible, it did not emerge directly from these pre-existing capacities and resources. Instead, the trials that shaped the project also transformed these capacities and resources, and created new ones.

Most interesting is the fine-grained description of the way in which the concepts of justice, solidarity and equity associated with 'mutualisation' were translated into the project by the local cooperative. As the author states, this work amounted to a reinterpretation of the feed-in tariff as a 'policy device intended to accelerate the large-scale deployment of photovoltaics without incorporating concerns over territorial redistribution or equity'. Reinterpretation is at work in all the tensions with established procedures that the author describes (selection of participants, grid connection, negotiations with banks). These tensions

also testify to the extent to which the project is entangled in multiple scales and networks (grid-connection, purchase agreement, mass market for electricity, national and European policies and policy objectives, etc.). This shows that the project's 'local character […] is, in fact, protected and made possible by these wider entanglements'. Ultimately, as the French feed-in tariff rests upon a longstanding conception of electricity as a public service embedded in price-setting practices (including per-equation, the equalisation of electricity prices across the French territory), the tension between the French feed-in tariff and mutualisation could as well be interpreted as being about reconciling two different conceptions of equity and modalities of redistribution. Thus the case study brilliantly highlights and problematises the entanglements through which a specific conception of equity is enacted in a project and redistributive concerns are incorporated into an economics-centred policy device.

Both Edith Chezel and Alain Nadaï, and Antoine Fontaine and Olivier Labussière, focus on case studies of scaling up of renewable energy projects, addressing the relation between scaling up renewable energy development and justice. Chezel and Nadaï focus on the successful collective development of citizen wind parks in the German district of Northern Friesland, a well-known example of citizen-funded wind power development, and on the failed attempt at expanding this approach through planning in the federal state of Schleswig-Holstein (of which Northern Friesland is a part). The authors follow in fine detail the careful, step-by-step, collective structuring of public participation and financing in the development of local wind parks in Northern Friesland. They point out a shared sense of 'fairness' that results from these practices and is part and parcel of what they term a 'wind power assemblage'. Fairness, which weaves together and balances the three dimensions of justice (distributive, procedural and recognition), is characterised as deeply empirical. It results from a balance between practical capacities and distribution of opportunities. Turning to Schleswig-Holstein, the authors point out justice issues in the government attempt to scale up this experiment through planning. Tensions arose in certain communities over the right to take part in the development of wind power that blocked the overall planning process. These difficulties evince issues in the distribution of opportunities and in the recognition of potential differences between territories. The case study thus shows how hard it is to strike the balance between the different dimensions of justice in the scaling up of renewable energy, and hence how such a balance is embedded in local practices and socio-spatial configurations. It also suggests the challenge that these tensions present when we seek to derive good practices from local experiments.

Fontaine and Labussière describe the development of community-based solar experiments, the 'centrales villageoises' in south-eastern France (Rhône-Alpes region). Developing collective PV projects in France is challenging because French institutions – that is, the procedures associated with the granting of feed-in tariff, grid connection authorisation, bank loans, etc. – are made for individual projects (one person, one roof, one production unit). In this context, projects that pursue more-than-individual development and investment strategies have to experiment with their assembling in innovative ways, as already illustrated in Cointe's paper (cf. above). The authors propose a slightly different perspective on the development of collective renewable energy projects. They focus on what they call the assembling of the solar resource – the practices of assembling all the afferent materialities (panels, roofs, buildings, grid connection, landscapes, and so on) – engaged in turning solar radiation into usable energy. With fine-grain attention, they describe these practices, particularly their potential to associate the solar resource with the dimension of a common good by granting materialities a shared status (shared roofs, shared investments, shared risks and gains). Relying on a Deleuzian distinction between ways of assembling (growth/decrease) that are based on dimensions and relations (aggregating) versus ways that are based on metrics and directions (granulating), they show that the former, because they prioritize relations over individualisation, leave more flexibility for succeeding in both collective

ventures and the assembling of multi-dimensional, more sustainable PV projects. In a way, this paper echoes Cointe's results about the challenge of collective ventures in ReN development in France and the multiple, multi-scalar, entanglements on which 'local' energy projects rely in addressing this challenge. However, in placing the emphasis on the solar resource, the authors show how assembling collective projects is closely articulated with assembling a just landscape (Mitchell, 2003) that fairly redistributes benefits from PV development and incorporates dimensions of equity, justice and sustainable development; what Agyeman and colleagues have called 'just sustainabilities' (Agyeman, 2003).

Cyria Emelianoff and Carol Wernert propose a more historical and political perspective. They analyse the factors that have motivated local energy production and transition in the border city of Metz (France), which inherited a municipal energy company founded during the German annexation. The case study analyses the local geopolitical and historical process by which energy became a municipal resource and its production was expanded, in the teeth of the French centralized energy system. Geopolitics is here defined as '[the] rivalry for power over territories or populations […]' in relation to contested infrastructure projects, either because of their environmental, landscape or economic impacts, or because they serve electoral strategies. While the municipalisation (municipal management by a local company that is entirely or partially public owned) of the production and distribution of energy has chiefly been analysed at the national/international level, and staged as an attempt of public ownership and energy democracy (energy justice, distributed power, energy self-sufficiency, etc.) in the face of neoliberal globalization, the case of France, and of Metz as a border municipality, sounds peculiar because the opposition to municipalisation comes from French public operators, defending equality of access and low energy prices. In this context, the authors show that the driving force for renewable energy production in Metz, and of the resistance to energy centralization, was the safeguarding of municipal energy management because it has always underlain the local finances, the capacity for the municipality to act and the tenure of the mayors. They also show that, through political and municipal networks, the struggle plays itself out at a local and a national level, fostering institutional changes, and that the power and benefits conferred by the control of energy production, a central dimension of energy justice, have not been better shared than at the national level. This contribution brings a historical and transnational perspective to the special issue, showing how important the underlying national institutions and politics are when it comes to understanding local energy change. It also underlines the fact that local territories often engage in climate energy action for reasons and motivations other than sustainability, a point which had been emphasized in other case studies (Nadaï, et al., 2015) but not from such a geopolitical angle. The emphasis on the quest for political power through energy developments and control, justifying this original geo-political perspective on a 'local' case study and its consequences for the (limited) justice dimensions of local energy developments should warn us again against idealising the 'local' as a scale for political action.

Pia Buschman, Peter Moser, Alain Nadaï and Yannick Régnier propose contributions based on two practitioners' viewpoints (Moser and Régnier, with the help of two academics, Buschman and Nadaï) on the way in which they manage a national network of local initiatives (the 100%-Regions network [Germany] and the CLER-network for the energy transition [France] respectively), describe its build-up process and consider of issues of justice. The close-up of these two networks supports, if only to a limited extent, the view that local initiatives are entering a new period. It shows important differences between the two countries, and points out a remaining unevenness and a stop-and-go in public policy support for local initiatives. In this context, the paper proves how decisive the art of these intermediaries is, their tinkering with multiple types of supports and scales of networking in order to maintain continuity. While the description displays networks that somewhat crisscross academic categories and borrow from both transition management *and* grassroots

descriptions (especially for the German network), they also show that these networks have inspired or are inspiring national policies in multiple ways: directly, by accessing policy arenas and contributing to policy making; or indirectly, by publicising beacon experiences that stretch boundaries in how far territories can go in taking charge of climate-energy issues. Interestingly, as the authors point it out, motives or ends of action are only reflectively, after probing, related by the practitioners to ideas of justice, and only then can they be identified as markers of action or ends. This is consistent with analyses of other networks (community energy projects, transition network initiatives) in the literature, underlining that justice issues appear to be seldom explicitly discussed or flagged in practice because of fear of division or confrontation. This restraint, however, contrasts with the centrality of dimensions such as 'mutualisation' and 'fairness' described in other papers of the special issue, suggesting that it may be more the *ideas*/ *language* rather than the dimensions of justice (except for distributive justice) that fail to consort easily with the level of practice. Justice issues thus seem in any case bound up with a politics of assembling, either as a marker of federative action (all fighting for justice) or as a potentially divisive issue.

Taken together, the papers in this special issue afford an unprecedented view of the joint construction of economic and political engagements around local energy projects and the related justice dimensions. They first show in great detail *how* these entanglements are developed as these 'local' initiatives emerge. The multi-dimensional and multi-scalar character of these entanglements has been pointed out in the literature (Rydin et al. 204), but this has mainly been adduced as a feature of local initiatives and in a static perspective. The case studies gathered here provide a new perspective as they follow the *making* of these entanglements *in time and space*, allowing for a critical perspective on the intersection between market and political engagement at work.

First, it is in the detailed description of the trials and probings that these initiatives have to face that we can see the way in which shared political values are upheld and eventually integrated at the core of socio-material assemblages. It is because the papers propose *longitudinal* case studies that we can see and follow the work and practices of project making, which allows for a political dimension to be inscribed in the core of these local initiatives.

Secondly, so-called 'market-based' approach to energy policy (cf. supra) is here described in somewhat greater depth than usual, allowing us to see their detailed influence and impact on the making of ReN projects. The market approach under consideration here appears multi-dimensional, so that speaking of 'market' or 'market instrument' in the singular, as has been underlined elsewhere, makes little sense: there are many types of markets and markets can convey multiple values (Grandclément et al., 2018; Geiger at al., 2015). So too for economic instruments such as the feed-in tariff, the main 'economic instrument' for renewable energy policy. The work of the French feed-in tariff shows that it is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it clearly prioritizes individual over collective ventures, hence conveying a neo-liberal type of framing. On the other hand, it endows local actors with power of negotiation by granting them with a long term, stable revenue from ReN projects. It thus imposes on local projects an individual and economic framing while granting them the power of negotiating its curbing in order to construct a political engagement. Such a double dimension reflects the struggle between free-market ideology and innovation-based policy that overarched its political adoption at the EU level (Cointe and Nadaï, 2018; Nadaï and Cointe, In Press), testifying again to the multi-scalar entanglements of local processes.

Thirdly, these longitudinal case studies also put the territorial dimension of local initiatives in a new light. We can follow the ways in which the collective or landscape dimensions of these projects are maintained throughout their development and eventually inscribed (or not) in the core of these initiatives. The care and the determination necessary to carry through the articulation between the economic, political and territorial dimensions, and

to write them into the materialities of the projects, explains the difficulty incurred in attempts to scale up these initiatives. Tsing has defined scalability as the 'ability to make projects expand without changing their framing assumptions', which usually calls for reducing things or processes to one or very few of their dimensions. Scalable accounts, she argues, are decisive in performing an 'interplay between scalable and nonscalable in forms of capitalism in which scalable accounting allows nonscalable labour and natural resource management', that is, forms of capitalism 'in which wildly diverse forms of work and nature are made commensurate - for capital' (Lowenhaupt Tsing, 2015: 38). The accounts presented here are sufficiently fine-grained to display 'the work it takes to create scalability' (Lowenhaupt Tsing, 2015:38), be it in attempts at augmenting the size of a project or at scaling up the process of producing projects through institutionalisation and planning. Such a perspective presents a profound challenge to the purported notion of 'global niche' based on the idea that learning from local experiences could be scaled up by being standardised and detached, so as to travel and be applied elsewhere (Geels and Deuten, 2006). It militates for a type of scaling up through encounters and dissemination more respectful of the multidimensionality and the singularities of each situation, that is, one closer to (Deleuzian) 'aggregating'.

Last but not least, the case studies point out a peculiarity of justice issues in these processes and socio-technical assemblages. Justice issues are in many ways central in the making of these initiatives and networks of initiatives. They are present in the construction of their economic, territorial, spatial and landscape dimensions, and also in the articulation of these dimensions. They are essential for the success, the cohesion and the durability of these initiatives. Yet they are not asserted in the language and through the idea of justice, or are done so only reflectively, after probing. The observation has already been made that justice issues, even when they are marked by the network discourse, are not always made explicit on the ground (for example, Bailey and Darkal 2018). One assumption is that justice considerations, since they presuppose the existence of differences, might convey a divisive potential unless they are flagged as a federative marker of the network. In any case, this suggests that there is a tension between the invocation of justice issues and the politics of assembling a network, and thus that justice issues seem bound up with a politics of assembling. A point that needs to be explored further.

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