

People-Powered or State-Controlled? Examining the Reality of Public Engagement in Just Transition Governance in Three Coal-Dependent Regions

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Abstract

Background: The Just Transition (JT) framework, which aims to support regions transitioning away from coal-dependent economies, emphasizes the role of public engagement in a just energy transition governance and recognizes it as a key policy approach especially in regions dependent on coal. However, public engagement strategies have been implemented in varying degrees across the various European regions undergoing energy transition. This research examines the governance models and public engagement dynamics in such three coal-dependent regions: Western Macedonia (Greece), Silesia (Poland), and Stara Zagora (Bulgaria). These regions, with their distinct political, social, and economic contexts, offer insight into the role of public engagement in the Just Transition process as well as the level of engagement that the public has had so far. While Silesia stands out with its participatory governance model, both Western Macedonia and Stara Zagora reflect a top-down approach marked by limited public involvement, state control, and challenges such as political instability and corruption. This contrast underscores the varying degrees of public participation and the resulting impact on the success and acceptance of energy transition policies in these regions.

Theoretical Framework

This study utilizes the political ecology and governance literature, along with interviews with experts from the quadruple helix, to understand the dynamics of public engagement in Just Transition processes. Newell and Simms' (2020) political economy of rapid transitions and Boateng et al.'s (2023) framework on political ecology offer fundamental insight into how power structures, state control, and public participation intersect in the Just Transition process. Furthermore, theories of participatory governance suggest that meaningful community involvement not only increases the effectiveness of policy implementation but also fosters trust between policymakers and the public, creating an environment more conducive to long-term sustainability goals. The literature analysis highlights the differences between people-powered and state-driven initiatives in shaping equitable and sustainable energy transitions (Newell & Simms, 2020; Boateng, Bloomer, & Morrissey, 2023). It also notes the effectiveness of bottom-up or hybrid models, compared to a top-down approach (Topaloglou & Ioannidis, 2022). These theoretical frameworks serve as a foundation for understanding the power dynamics and institutional constraints shaping the engagement of European local communities in Just Transition initiatives.

Empirical Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design, analyzing 42 in-depth, structured and semi-structured interviews with experts across the three regions from the quadruple helix, including a diverse range of members of society, such as local government representatives, community leaders, NGOs, members of academia and other key actors. The interviews provide empirical data that highlight the dynamics of public engagement, the impact of governance models, and the barriers to effective Just Transition. A comparative approach is used to identify common themes, differences, and patterns in the experiences of public engagement in these coal-dependent regions. This data is examined together with findings of the existing literature on coal transitions and governance (Janikowska, 2023; Sitek & Chmielewska, 2022). By integrating qualitative insights with theoretical perspectives, the research seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of the factors influencing public participation in coal transition policies. The methodology aims to capture both structural and perceptual dimensions of Just Transition, shedding light on how different governance models influence the public's perceptions and sentiments towards transition policies. Additionally, this study takes into account historical and institutional factors that have shaped each region's approach to public engagement, allowing for a clearer understanding of the challenges and opportunities in each case.

Findings and Discussion

The findings highlight differences in public engagement and governance structures across the regions. In Silesia, a robust bottom-up model prevails, where local

stakeholders—governments, civil society, and businesses—collaborate actively in decision-making, leading to just transition governance having greater alignment with local needs. This participatory approach, despite challenges, has been crucial for fostering social acceptance of the transition. The presence of strong local governance structures, along with a well-established culture of civic participation, has contributed to a higher sense of legitimacy for energy transition policies (Sitek & Chmielewska, 2022; Newell & Mulvaney, 2013).

Conversely, both Western Macedonia and Stara Zagora exhibit a top-down approach, with decisions largely directed by each country's central government authorities. In these regions, public engagement is often limited to virtual platforms or tokenistic initiatives, which lack real substance and fail to involve communities in meaningful ways. This disengagement, in the case of Stara Zagora, has been exacerbated by political instability, where the shifting political landscape hinders the implementation of consistent and effective transition policies. The lack of stable political leadership has further weakened trust in government-led initiatives, leading to skepticism among local communities regarding the viability of Just Transition programs. (Janikowska, 2023).

Corruption emerges as a significant challenge in both Western Macedonia and Stara Zagora, undermining trust in institutions and diverting resources away from effective Just Transition initiatives. Furthermore, economic disparities between urban and rural populations in these regions have led to uneven distribution of transition benefits, exacerbating social inequalities and deepening public distrust towards centralized policy decisions. The interviews highlight that these corrupt practices contribute to the inefficacy of public engagement strategies, as they result in resource misallocation and hinder the development of fair and sustainable solutions for these coal-reliant communities.

The lack of a coherent, supportive government policy in Bulgaria, and the lack of extensive public participation in Western Macedonia stand in contrast to the more stable governance in Silesia, where local engagement is seen as essential for fostering social trust and for achieving a just energy transition (Topaloglou & Ioannidis, 2022, Simon, & Kalandyk-Kołodziejczyk, 2011). The research also notes the importance of transparent communication strategies during the transition process, as open and inclusive communication practices form a sense of legitimacy for the measures taken. Whereas on the other hand the spread of misinformation leads to the transition policies having very little support from the public.

Conclusions

This study aims to highlight the differences, successes and shortcomings in incorporating public participation in Just Transition governance in these three, coal-dependent regions. It showcases the contrast between Silesia's participatory, bottom-up approach and the top-down, state-controlled models of Western Macedonia and Stara Zagora, both in terms of the feelings and perceptions of the public regarding green transition policies as well as in terms of their effectiveness. The study suggests that a participatory framework is necessary for fostering sustainable and socially inclusive outcomes in such regions. Future research should explore the mechanisms through which local empowerment can be scaled up, particularly in contexts where state control is dominant, and explore the possibilities offered by digital tools and other such emerging technologies. Innovative engagement strategies have a great potential for application in governance policies. The ultimate goal of a successful, socially accepted and long-lasting Just Transition framework requires a transparent decision-making process, which gives the public both the necessary information and a voice to become a part of the transition governance.

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