Complexity of concern: Social acceptance of wind energy and the inevitability of dissensus

Complexity of concern: Social acceptance of wind energy and the inevitability of dissensus
The concept of ‘acceptance’;
Drivers of opposition/acceptance;
The goal of acceptance strategies?
The need for some fresh thinking...
The Concept of Social Acceptance
(after Wustenhagen et al 2007)

Social Acceptance of Wind Energy

Community acceptance
Related to the acceptance of specific wind energy developments by host communities.

Socio-political acceptance
Related to acceptance of wind technology as a viable energy source and supported in government policy and by the general public.

Market acceptance
Related to the acceptance of wind technology by investors, financial institutions and consumers of electricity.
Social acceptance has been an invaluable concept for focussing on the ‘problem’ and its elements. Batel and Devine Wright (2013) and the language of acceptance;

- ‘Acceptance’ justifies, legitimises and reproduces the top-down perspectives
- It largely focussing on objectors;
- It neglects terms such as support, uncertainty, resistance, or apathy.

This also tends to prioritise the consenting process, not long term relationships,

It this allows ‘winners’ rather than a settling of differences

Are there alternatives or supplements to the concept’?
Opposition to wind energy projects is driven by:

- **Health and environmental impacts;**
  - Concerns over visual, bio-diversity, well-being impacts on local area etc;

- **Fairness of decision-making process;**
  - Lack of trust in developers, regulators and the transparency of the consenting regime;

- **Perceived distribution of costs and benefits;**
  - Fear that external companies accrue key benefits, while local communities bear main costs;
Scale-acceptance trade-offs?

- Multi-national power company.
- Part-local ownership in externally driven project.
- Locally owned project in restricted private ownership.
- National Co-operative, with no geographic focus of shareholders.
- Local Co-operative drawn entirely from host communities.
Multi-level scales of concern and governance

- Multi-scalar influences on energy governance and the drivers for wind energy. For example in the UK:
  - Global energy/climate concerns
  - EU targets;
  - Energy as a UK national issue;
  - Reliance of devolved administrations for delivery of renewables;
  - The ‘territorialisation’ of energy through the municipal planning process;
  - Local site battles aim to reframe level and scale of concerns.

- Apart from local site disputes, the spatial dimension of energy policy/governance is largely undeveloped.
The normative goal of policy remains consensus, although this is rarely, if ever found.

Dissensus across spatial scales of governance and project size, yet acceptance tends to be focused on individual projects.

Dissensus across and between many key stakeholders, yet attention is largely focussed on objectors;

Intricacies and influence of local cultures and contexts.
Community acceptance increasingly looking like it will define the ultimate level of wind energy across Europe;

The situation seems to be getting worse rather than improving;

Responses seem ad hoc (e.g. Community benefits)

We don’t really know what is working, what isn’t?

Weak links between energy and planning policy

Timeframes seem inadequate;

Institutions, cultures and practices seem to be inadequate to the challenge of community acceptance.

How can we stimulate innovation and experimentation?
Re-thinking acceptance?

- Replace acceptance with ‘Transition’ as the central focus of research enquiry and policy;
- Engage more stakeholders, as different scales and chronologies;
- Explore the appropriate use of authoritarian, competitive and collaborative processes.
Increasing structuration of activities in local practices

**Socio-economical Landscape**
- Pressure creates ‘Windows of opportunities’

**Socio-economical Regime**
- Industry
- Policy
- Science
- Culture
- Technology

**Markets**
- Existing socio-economical regime is ‘dynamically stable’.
- On different dimensions there are ongoing processes

**Science**
- New socio-economical regime is ‘dynamically stable’. On different dimensions there are ongoing processes

**Policy**
- New regime influences landscape

**Technology**
- Niche stabilization
- New configuration breaks through, taking advantage of ‘windows of opportunity’. Adjustments occur in socio-economical regime
- Elements become aligned and stabilize in a dominant design. Internal momentum increases.

**Niche Innovations**
- Experiments: Learning processes take place on multiple dimensions (co-construction).
- Small networks of actors support novelties on the basis of expectations and visions.

(Based on: Geels & Schot, 2007)

‘Acceptance’ as a Transition issue

- Reinforces energy as socio-technical system;
- Helps focus on the need to foster innovation niches for approaches to acceptance;
- Awareness of the influence of the regime to be open to such experiences;
- Gives rise to concepts such as:
  - Tension: mismatches between the regime and the landscape
  - Stress: internal mismatches within the regime
  - Pressure: mismatch from niches upwards
- The need for a long term vision, careful management and scope for innovation

*Frantzeskaki and de Haan*
Elements of a better approach to community acceptance

- National Energy Vision and Policy context
- Long term Acceptance Strategy
- Community initiatives
- Corporate Responses
- Regulator Driven Strategies
Some suggestions...

- **Government Actions:**
  - A 30 year national transition plan- structures, cultures, practices
  - Local transition plans
  - Community energy strategy
  - A focus on trust building in policy and decision making

- **Regulator Actions:**
  - Transparent decision-making with adequate opportunities for voice, in which all are respected;
  - Linking planning policy with energy policy;
  - Compulsory local share offers;
  - Community benefit register;
  - Rethinking ownership of wind as an asset?
Some suggestions...

- **Corporate actions:**
  - Recognising, mitigating and avoiding local impacts;
  - Promoting innovation through competition for sites: Community wind auctions;
  - Greater self regulation or accreditation?

- **Community actions:**
  - Local advocacy and links to sustainability strategies (e.g. Transition Towns, LA21);
  - Promotion of Co-operatives and community asset transfers;
  - Increased use of intermediary bodies;
  - Deliberative processes for local energy strategies.
Final words

- Is acceptance still a useful concept;
- How can we conceptualise and manage the complexity of acceptance;
- What are the implications of rejecting consensus and recognising the inevitability of dissensus;
- Using Transition Studies to reframe ‘acceptance’ issues.
Thank you