

Considering proximity as a driver of energy citizenship in policy making

The European Green Deal stands as a visionary roadmap for a sustainable future. At its heart lies a commitment to place citizens at the forefront of the EU's climate and energy transition, empowering them to actively participate in the development and implementation of policy measures.

Energy citizenship can manifest in various settings, whether on an individual or communal basis, spanning local, regional, or national levels, and extending to virtual platforms and translocal networks. Policymakers play a vital role in facilitating the emergence and development of energy citizenship across space and governance levels. To do this effectively, it is important for them to consider different types of proximity as drivers of green energy transition actions. **The GRETA project identified various proximity-based contributions to foster energy citizenship. It is directed towards policymakers operating at the local, regional, and national levels, irrespective of their specific jurisdiction.**



The GRETA project understands proximity as **a means to engage in meaningful and fruitful relationships and as a condition for mutual learning and knowledge exchange**. This does not necessarily imply **spatial proximity**, for example, a shared space like a neighborhood that shapes similar conditions for energy production and consumption. Proximity can also take the form of **policy proximity** (e.g., a specific policy context that encourages the emergence of energy citizenship), **social proximity** (e.g., a vibrant community where people share similar social needs, possibly across space), **technological proximity** (e.g., people sharing the use of a specific technology that enables energy citizenship engagement), and **economic proximity** (e.g., similar market conditions) (see FIGURE 1).

To foster the emergence of energy citizenship, policymakers at various governance levels (local, regional, and national) should promote interaction through diverse forms of proximity.



spatial proximity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • shared spaces like neighbourhoods shape similar conditions for energy production and consumption • physical proximity between people, between people and the sources of energy, and between municipalities' underlying (infra)structure and citizens
social proximity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a vibrant community where people share similar social needs • defines relationalities connecting the members of local communities considered as energy citizens as well as the proximity between people and institutions
technological proximity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • people sharing the use of a specific technology that enables energy citizenship • proximity with technologies and digital solutions • data informing better energy behaviours, enabling small-scale solutions and capitalizing on investments made in renewables
economic proximity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • similar market conditions • market, sustainability and economic factors • conditions of convenience for the energy system, utilities and end users, supported by the proximity among producers, distributors and consumers
policy proximity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a specific policy context that encourages energy citizenship emergence • management and planning measures (along with more general measures such as taxation and technological innovation) • providing guidance to establishing and supporting energy citizenship

FIGURE 1
Types of proximity and their meanings

STRENGTHENING ENERGY CITIZENSHIP BY INTEGRATING TYPES OF PROXIMITY INTO EVERYDAY POLICY FRAMEWORKS

Energy citizenship involves citizens actively engaging with energy systems, either individually or collectively, across multiple levels, including local neighbourhood initiatives, regional endeavours, national involvement, and even transnational participation in both physical and digital domains.

For the successful contribution of energy citizenship to the energy transition, it is crucial that policies at various levels of governance do not contradict each other, either partially or entirely. Different types of proximities exist at the local, regional, national, supranational, or virtual levels and should be promoted through a coherent and integrated policy framework. Encouraging multiple types of proximity can facilitate the successful emergence of energy citizenship.

Spatial proximity refers to people sharing a space such as a neighbourhood or a building block, while **social proximity** refers to shared social needs of people as part of a vibrant community. To encourage energy citizenship based on these types of proximity, neighbourhood-based programs or spaces for knowledge sharing (at the local level) between residents of a certain area, stakeholders, and policymakers can be used. The local level of governance plays a crucial role in facilitating these types of proximity, but regional or national levels can also support spatial proximity, e.g., by providing funding for regular (digital or physical) spaces for

knowledge sharing (see GRETA POLICY BRIEF #2). Virtual spaces can support the emergence of energy citizenship beyond spatial proximity, capitalizing on the social proximity of people sharing similar needs or social values.

Technological proximity, as well as **economic proximity**, refers to sharing similar conditions – in terms of technological features (e.g., sharing a certain technology) or market conditions, respectively (e.g., sharing a market). The emergence of energy citizenship based on these types of proximity could be supported with structural funds and implementation plans aimed at promoting the adoption and diffusion of specific technologies, for example, at the regional or national level of governance. Policymakers can engage in coordinating and networking activities, as well as providing public procurement mechanisms for territorial partnerships that encourage energy citizen initiatives utilizing these technologies.

Policy proximity can be encouraged by policies that enable individuals to propose projects or shape a supporting policy environment. This concept applies to all levels of governance. To ensure consistent policy frameworks across the local, regional, national, supranational and virtual levels, the supranational level of governance plays a crucial role. This is evident, for instance, in the transposition of EU laws into national contexts.

RECOMMENDATION

Establish a coherent policy framework across levels of governance that integrates the role and effects of different types of proximity to strengthen relationships and encourage energy citizenship in its various forms.



FURTHER READING

Massari M., Boulanger S.O.B., Longo D., Turci G., Pagliula S., Coleandro G.F., Ruggieri B., Abel D., Schlindwein L. (2022). Taxonomy of geographical levels and drivers for energy citizenship emergence. D5.1 of the Horizon 2020 project GRETA, EC grant agreement n°101022317, Bologna, Italy
https://projectgreta.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/GRETA_D5_1_Taxonomy-of-geographical-levels-and-drivers_v1_0.pdf



CASE STUDY EXAMPLE

UR BEROA – energy efficiency-driven cooperative

UR BEROA is an energy cooperative formed by the residents of a small neighbourhood in San Sebastian, Spain. It was established in 1985 and supplies domestic hot water (DHW) and community heating to its members. The cooperative currently comprises 550 members and provides its services through district heating based on a cogeneration system.

The emergence of UR BEROA relates to spatial proximity on the local neighbourhood level, as well as technological proximity, which involves sharing certain technologies in this case, for hot water and heating. Moreover, the pilot study builds on the social proximity of a high-

income neighbourhood with reduced social mix and low unemployment.

UR BEROA is a well-established energy cooperative with a lengthy track record. Policymakers at the regional and local levels have actively supported UR BEROA by providing financial assistance for various technological projects aimed at achieving a higher degree of decarbonisation within its system. More recently, the policy framework explicitly promotes the formation of energy communities and greater citizen participation in the energy system, emphasizing the significance of policy proximity.



CASE STUDY EXAMPLE

Coopérnico – renewable energy-driven cooperative

Coopérnico is a renewable energy cooperative that crowdfunds solar photovoltaic installations and the only non-profit energy trader in Portugal, providing an example of economic proximity.

The case study encompasses the local, regional, national and supranational levels of energy citizenship emergence. The cooperative's structure is polycentric and distributed, with its members acting as gatekeepers in their respective communities. The local and regional levels are where the cooperative's active members primarily operate, highlighting the role of spatial proximity in energy citizenship activities. Simultaneously, Coopérnico aims to influence the political restructuring of the energy system at the national level.

In 2019, policymakers on the national level of governance in Portugal facilitated energy citizenship emergence by introducing modifications to the self-consumption regime of renewable electricity to support Renewable Energy Communities (RECs), individual/collective self-consumption, and peer-to-peer (P2P) energy trading. This was done in the context of the transposition of the 2018 EU Renewable Energy Directive (RED II) into an enabling national regulatory framework. Similarly, in 2022, the transposition of the Electricity Markets Directive on CECs (Citizen Energy Communities) took place. These examples illustrate the importance of policy proximity in successful energy transition efforts.

ABOUT THE PROJECT GRETA

GRETA aims to foster energy citizenship emergence by enhancing awareness and removing policy barriers within the European Union. Its primary objective is to comprehensively investigate the conditions and challenges associated with energy citizenship to derive policy recommendations and policy tools to implement a just and green energy transition, ensuring inclusivity for all. The project focuses on the relationship between energy citizenship behavior and the socio-political context, in which people engage in GGreen Energy Transition Actions. GRETA particularly highlights the crucial role of policies in facilitating and empowering these activities.

Based on empirical research, the project offers various policy recommendations in a set of six policy briefs to facilitate the engagement of citizens in current energy transition efforts. The empirical research draws on data from a multinational survey with approximately 10,000 participants across 16 EU countries, as well as six case studies conducted in Italy, Spain, Portugal, Germany, and the Netherlands.

FURTHER INFORMATION
projectgreta.eu

