

Energy Justice in Underprivileged Neighbourhoods: Reimagining Energy Transitions Through Community Storytelling

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Abstract

Achieving just energy transitions in underprivileged neighbourhoods is essential for sustainable urban renewal yet remains difficult. Residents often face energy injustices due to unaffordable and inaccessible renewables. Structural inequalities further limit collective action and community cooperation, depriving inhabitants of the resources and opportunities needed to develop their capabilities. While energy justice literature addresses distributional, recognitional, and procedural inequalities, it often overlooks deeper constraints on people's agency. In response, this paper proposes storytelling as a creative and participatory method to strengthen agency in underprivileged neighbourhoods. Storytelling enables residents to imagine alternative futures, build shared narratives, and engage with energy transitions on their own terms. This conference paper offers an initial exploration of how this approach can inform future research in the Watersportbaan neighbourhood.

1. Introduction

Achieving fair and inclusive urban energy transitions is a pressing societal challenge, particularly in inner-city underprivileged neighbourhoods. While the energy justice literature addresses distributional, recognitional, and procedural inequalities, it often overlooks deeper constraints on people's agency. We argue that agency represents a critical "missing foundation" in the energy justice framework. It falls short in addressing structural barriers that constrain residents' capacity to act. In underprivileged neighbourhoods, where residents struggle with immediate survival needs, deteriorating housing conditions, social stigmatization, and uncertain futures, the ability to envision and participate in long-term energy transitions is severely limited.

Drawing on feminist ethics of care, we explore storytelling as both a methodological tool and a means to strengthen agency among marginalised communities. Storytelling can make energy systems more visible and relatable, democratise energy conversations by lowering barriers to participation, and help communities envision alternative futures beyond current constraints.

The empirical research is situated in the Watersportbaan neighbourhood in Ghent, Belgium, characterised by high-rise social housing, deteriorating living conditions, and planned large-scale redevelopment. Through exploratory fieldwork, we identify key narratives that reveal the complex socio-spatial dynamics shaping residents' relationship with energy systems and their capacity for engagement.

The scope of this paper encompasses two interconnected objectives: first, to establish the theoretical foundation for why storytelling represents a transformative tool that can address the agency deficit in current energy justice frameworks; and second, this paper aims to present our initial findings through a collection of key narratives that illustrate the complex socio-spatial dynamics limiting residents' energy agency, and demonstrate how storytelling can engage with and potentially transform these constraints. Rather than presenting definitive conclusions, this paper establishes the groundwork for future co-creation activities where these exploratory narratives will be developed into community storylines to eventually be meaningfully implemented into the neighbourhood energy transition plan, ultimately contributing to more just energy futures.

2. Energy justice

Energy justice is defined as “a global energy system that fairly distributes both the benefits and burdens of energy services, and one that contributes to more representative and inclusive energy decision making” (Sovacool et al., 2017, p. 677) 2017. The concept is rooted in environmental justice literature, which was initially used by researchers and activists to uncover the uneven distribution of environmental risks from hazardous facilities, disproportionately burdening people with lower incomes or people of colour (Carley and Konisky, 2020; Iwińska, Lis and Mączka, 2021). Energy justice is gaining popularity in academic literature (Jenkins et al., 2021). The concept has been widely used for energy scholarship in humanities and social sciences, as energy justice is a helpful concept for dissecting the different justice dimensions of various energy-related issues (Iwińska, Lis and Mączka, 2021).

Typically, energy justice literature deals with three tenets of justice. Distributional energy justice refers to the equal distribution of risks and benefits, procedural justice to open decision making processes, and recognitional justice to the recognition of underprivileged groups (Walker and Day, 2012). These tenets are deeply tied to another, as an inequitable distribution, a lack of recognition and limited participation can influence another, further (re)producing (energy) injustices (Schlosberg, 2004).

Higher risks of energy injustices are reported in relation to the energy transition. The transition may, at least on the short term, lead to higher costs, due to new investments in infrastructure or technology, causing distributional energy injustices. Higher costs may impact low income households more, who often already pay a larger share of their income on the energy bill (Walker and Day, 2012; Carley and Konisky, 2020). This may be compounded even more, as low income households are likely to live in lower efficiency housing, with outdated energy consuming technologies or heating (Walker and Day, 2012). Additionally, distributional injustice has been discussed in the context of employment losses in declining carbon-intensive industries, such as the coal mining industry (Carley and Konisky, 2020). Although clean energy industries are expected to create more job opportunities, those that currently hold jobs in carbon-intensive industries will still be deeply affected (Carley and Konisky, 2020).

Recognitional injustices are a consequence of social groups being overlooked and stigmatised. As Fraser (1995, p. 69) argues, a lack of recognition is foundational to distributional inequalities. Concerning energy transitions, processes or disrespect, stigmatisation and othering (Jenkins, Sovacool and McCauley, 2018) in policies, laws or professional practices cause vulnerabilities to stay invisible. This leads to the reproduction of marginalisation instead of the targeting of needs (Willand, Torabi and Horne, 2023) this study explores the role of trusted intermediaries in recognising and identifying hidden energy vulnerability. Hidden energy vulnerability is the propensity of households to experience harm from energy deprivation because their situation is not captured by common indicators of energy poverty or because they do not request help. Previous research has focused on data driven, systematic strategies to identify households in hidden energy vulnerability, however, there is little understanding of the opportunistic ways that affected households may be identified through intermediary social networks.”, “-container-title”: “Energy Research & Social Science”, “DOI”: “10.1016/j.erss.2023.103013”, “ISSN”: “22146296”, “journal-Abbreviation”: “Energy Research & Social Science”, “language”: “en”, “page”: “103013”, “source”: “DOI.org (Crossref. Epistemic injustice is a particular form of recognition-based injustice. It is the consequence of unfairly dismissed credibility due to prejudice, or of people lacking tools or concepts to understand or express their experiences. This results in specific forms and outputs of knowledge that often outweigh other valuable forms of knowledge, such as local or experiential knowledge (Gürtler, 2023).

Procedural justice refers to fair and equitable institutional processes, including access to information, access to (meaningful) participation in decision-making and access to legal processes (Walker and Day, 2012). Policies regarding the energy transition often remain untransparent, with little inclusion and participation in decision-making of various stakeholders, especially low income households (Stojilovska, 2023).

Energy justice offers a multifaceted framework to analyse and shape both the justice aspects of the current energy system and the transition to sustainable energy. While this framework has gained significant traction,

critics have pointed to several limitations of the framework as well, which are discussed below.

2.1 Limitations in the current application of energy justice & gaps in addressing structural inequalities

Several scholars have discussed the entailing limitations of the energy justice literature. Sovacool et al. (2017) criticise the field's western theoretical orientation and the too narrow focus on anthropocentric relations. Damgaard, McCauley and Reid (2022) argue that while energy justice is useful for analysing institutions and policy decisions, its focus on individual rights overlooks relationality and interdependence as core aspects of existence. It moreover lacks a strong theorization of responsibility (Damgaard, McCauley and Reid, 2022), an important gap as energy initiatives increasingly aim for more active energy citizenship (Beauchampet and Walsh, 2021; Biresselioglu et al., 2024). Bouzarovski and Simcock (2017) note the absence of spatial dimensions, proposing an explicit spatial focus through the concept of spatial justice.

Healy and Barry (2017, p. 452) point to a critical gap in the energy justice concept in addressing power relations: "While a number of scholars assert that politics is a critical component in the transitions approach, it is largely missing from much of existing analysis of socio-technical energy transitions and the energy justice literature". Halдар, Grillitsch and Bazaz (2024) critique the energy justice framework for neglecting human agency in socio-technical transitions, highlighting insufficient engagement with political economy paradigms that reproduce injustices.

Lee and Byrne (2019, p. 2) argue that the three-tenet approach fails to address the "political and economic forces that routinely produce energy injustice". By prioritizing "tailpipe problems" like accessibility and affordability, it neglects deeper structural and ideological factors, such as the bias toward large-scale technical solutions, distanced decision-making from local communities, technocratic interpretations of sustainability, and path dependencies, that perpetuate inequality. Similarly, Elmallah, Reames and Spurlock (2022) emphasise that current energy justice literature inadequately connects to policy and systemic change. They argue that energy inequities are caused by underlying structures and institutions, and that the energy justice framework falls short to challenge the capitalist roots of energy and climate injustice.

These critiques reveal that the current energy justice literature, while valuable, fails to adequately address structural power relations, spatial inequalities, and the role of agency in enabling or constraining participation in energy transitions. This is particularly true in underprivileged urban areas, where marginalisation is spatially and socially embedded (Verlooy et al., 2024). In the next section, we argue that agency is a missing yet essential foundation for a more just energy transition.

3. Agency, the "missing foundation" problem in underprivileged neighbourhoods

In this article we focus on complex inner-city neighbourhoods that have been characterised as underprivileged, due to a lack of access to resources and opportunities and compounding processes of marginalisation (Counted and Newheiser, 2023). We emphasise how structural barriers in underprivileged neighbourhoods affect people's capacity to act. The literature elucidates that structural injustices can lead to a lack of a sense of agency, resulting in a sense of powerlessness (Gaupp, Constantino and Pereira, 2023). We argue that agency represents a crucial "missing foundation" in energy justice discourse, particularly in underprivileged contexts.

This absence of agency is embedded in geographically differentiated so-called "opportunity structures" (Roberts, 2009; Bouzarovski and Simcock, 2017), that constrain residents' capacity to envision and participate in neighbourhood energy transitions, ultimately leading to energy injustices. In underprivileged neighbourhoods, socio-material inequalities manifest in several ways: low-income inhabitants more often occupy poor quality, low energy efficiency housing, in need of retrofitting and equipped with outdated heating systems (Bouzarovski and Simcock, 2017). Without the financial means to improve energy performance, residents are effectively locked into energy-poor conditions.

Beyond material deprivation, socio-spatial factors further restrict agency. Dense urban morphologies, resulting

in a limited availability of public space and private space, and a high proportion of renters, can collectively restrict the opportunities for integrating renewables (Middlemiss and Gillard, 2015; Knox, 2019; Derkenbaeva et al., 2022; Verlooy et al., 2024). In addition to these constraints, the literature highlights how misrecognition and the stigmatisation of disadvantaged areas contributes to their neglect in policy and planning processes (Hastings, 2009; Walker, 2009). These neighbourhoods are often associated with negative, stigmatised identities, which not only affect how they are served, but also how residents perceive themselves and their communities. The internalization of stigma can lead to community disengagement, reducing levels of civic participation and weakening connections both within the community and with outsiders (McNamara, Stevenson and Muldoon, 2013). The socio-spatial contexts in underprivileged neighbourhoods are not just backdrops but active components shaping what people perceive as possible. Marginalisation in these contexts may lead to a diminished sense of agency, but it can also constrain the imagination of the underprivileged, making it more difficult to envision alternative future trajectories. Poverty impacts people to focus on short-term goals to secure 'basic' necessities to survive (Counted and Newheiser, 2023). This results in lower expectations for the future, which may be particularly problematic in the context of energy transitions, projects that inherently rely on long-term visions. Moreover, residents are frequently left out of energy-related initiatives due to limited access to relevant information or decision-making processes, which are typically dominated by institutional actors. This disconnect reinforces the exclusion of those already disadvantaged and limits their ability to shape or benefit from local transitions (Walker, 2009).

Finally, these issues are often compounded by risks of displacement. Urban regeneration and energy transition initiatives, when not carefully designed, can fuel gentrification pressures and lead to the exclusion of long-term residents (Golubchikov and O'Sullivan, 2020). In this context, energy transitions risk reproducing spatial and social injustices, rather than resolving them.

To conclude, in underprivileged neighbourhoods, agency – the capacity to make purposeful choices and shape outcomes (Gaupp, Constantino and Pereira, 2023) – is absent and undermined. However, agency is crucial in transformation processes (Westley et al., 2013). At the individual level, agency is shaped by self-awareness and self-knowledge (Novalia et al., 2020). Agency becomes most powerful when it transcends the personal and becomes collective. When individuals pool their knowledge, skills, and resources to actively shape their shared future they can form "transformative agency", which can trigger large societal change (Gaupp, Constantino and Pereira, 2023).

Despite this, current energy initiatives have largely overlooked the role of agency, limiting just transitions. While initiatives such as Renewable Energy Communities (RECs) and Positive Energy Districts (PEDs) claim to enhance participation and tackle energy poverty, their capacity to do so in marginalised contexts remains limited. Although these models promote prosumership and community involvement (Hanke and Lowitzsch, 2020), their implementation often fails to reach those most affected by energy injustice (Hanke, Guyet and Feenstra, 2021). Hanke, Guyet and Feenstra (2021) refer to the "romanticised narrative" of energy communities, while they overlook structural challenges underprivileged communities may face for benefiting from these initiatives. They report that general outreach activities, as well as engagement with underprivileged groups fall short, due to a discrepancy between the recognition of these groups' specific needs and the actual implementation of tailored communication and engagement strategies. Goedkoop and Devine-Wright (2016) emphasise that a crucial step is frequently overlooked: the need to build mutual trust. On the one hand, there is often a lack of confidence in the capacities and agency of residents; on the other, insufficient support from developers or governmental actors can further erode cooperation.

We conclude, based on the research by Hanke et al. (2021), that while energy justice frameworks have thoroughly explored issues of distributional, recognition, and procedural inequities, they have paid too little attention to the deeper constraints on people's capacity to act, particularly in underprivileged neighbourhoods, where limited agency fundamentally hinders participation in energy transitions. This argument is supported by Damgaard, McCauley and Reid (2022) who argue that for the concept of energy justice to apply, it should emphasise the nec-

essary interconnection of rights, responsibility and agency. This integration is particularly relevant for addressing energy vulnerability, as it acknowledges that enhancing agency requires not just recognizing rights but also enabling responsibilities and capacities for action. Just energy transitions require a focus on people's agencies and relations (Sol Cueva, 2025).

4. Researching with care: a narrative approach

Just energy transitions require a fundamental shift in thinking and practice, driven by collaborative and proactive decision-making processes (Williams and Doyon, 2019). Advancing energy justice requires centring historically excluded voices and prioritising bottom-up perspectives (Elmallah, Reames and Spurlock, 2022). This entails restructuring institutional systems, including how research funding is distributed, how scholarly work is published, and the methodologies employed in energy research, in order to support inclusive and equitable transitions. It requires transformative and emancipatory approaches (Elmallah, Reames and Spurlock, 2022).

We advocate for inclusive, creative, and participatory approaches to energy futures, engaging more directly with everyday lived experiences. Strengthening transformative capacity requires participatory co-creation that recognises individuals as agents of change (Ziervogel, Cowen and Ziniades, 2016). Co-producing knowledge helps overcome stigma by sharing local experiences and leveraging individual actions (DellaValle and Sareen, 2020). True participation treats stakeholders as knowledge holders and experts, valuing diverse wisdom beyond tokenistic involvement (Turhan, Şorman and Larsen, 2018). This may slow development but offers a more equitable pathway to energy justice.

This connects to researching with care, a feminist approach to knowledge production that foregrounds responsibility, relationality, and attentiveness to those being researched (Brannelly, Barnes and Tronto, 2022). This is vital in marginalised contexts, where information is often extracted from communities without return. Residents in marginalised neighbourhoods frequently experience epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007), where their knowledge and experiences remain invisible due to a lack of interpretive frameworks. Researching with care aims to turn these injustices. It centres on marginalised voices, with experiential and local knowledge at the core of research. By placing lived experiences of oppression, marginalization, and resistance at the centre of knowledge production. Furthermore, it emphasises the need of the researchers recognizing conducting research is itself entails responsibilities, that it should strive towards social change. This requires participatory research methodologies that aim to include the voices of people who have been silenced, muted or devalued (Brannelly, Barnes and Tronto, 2022).

4.1 storytelling for underprivileged neighbourhoods

Against this backdrop, we turn to storytelling as a method that, unlike more traditional single disciplinary interpretative lenses, can reintroduce the messiness of thought, belief, action, emotion and value in living together in the technological world. Storytelling starts from the narratives people craft about their lives, embraces complexity and foregrounds the interconnections between people, places, and experiences. It offers a pathway towards epistemic justice (Brannelly, Barnes and Tronto, 2022).

Storytelling holds methodological and transformative value. It can serve as a tool to stimulate agency among residents (Jørgensen, 2022; Ortiz, 2022) because it enables communities to challenge stigmatised identities and to envision alternative futures (Goldstein et al., 2013; Ortiz, 2022). As energy concepts increasingly emphasise decentralised systems and active citizenship, storytelling helps transform community members from passive consumers to active agents. As Sol Cueva (2025) research with market vendors demonstrated, participants in the storytelling game portrayed themselves as active agents, involved in designing and troubleshooting energy systems, reflecting a shift toward more empowered roles in energy transitions. At the same time, storytelling is a powerful methodological tool for researcher as it can mobilise for social change. In this way, storytelling serves a dual purpose: it contributes to strengthen agency at the community level while also providing a participatory, relational method of research, that aligns with the ethics of care (Brannelly, Barnes and Tronto, 2022).

Storytelling emphasises the act of crafting, of the performance, how a story evolves, based on audience, purpose, and context, and how that can be told in different ways, depending on the context (Sol Cueva, 2025). There are several reasons why storytelling can be an interesting method for just energy futures. Stories are more fixed data points, they help to communicate, influence or engage with different audiences (Moezzi, Janda and Rotmann, 2017).

First, storytelling can emphasise the relational nature of energy and highlight the social dimension of too one-sidedly approached technical systems. Current visions of energy futures often rely on computational models and expert-driven, technocratic methods centred on economic trends and infrastructure. These narrow approaches can exclude diverse voices and result in incomplete, homogenised visions. In response to growing dissatisfaction with these dominant representations, storytelling signals a broader epistemological shift, away from abstract experimentation, expert-driven narratives and a focus on technological innovations. Instead, storytelling can be a tool that can capture the complexities of energy systems and transitions and its interconnection with everyday life (Sol Cueva, 2025). Stories can connect energy with the lived experiences, emotions, aspirations, and struggles of underprivileged communities, enabling a deeper understanding of how infrastructures, fuels and technologies are (and will be) produced, provided, used, and perceived within a given society (Sol Cueva, 2025). This helps to understand that energy use is socially and culturally situated, and that people use energy in different ways depending on their lives, habits, and needs. Yet many policies and technologies treat everyone the same, as if one solution fits all. Interventions respond to a particular way of "the problem" with energy use, instead of looking at how systems could better support daily life. Stories challenge this, understanding energy use in different contexts, and supporting better design interventions (Lockton, Renström and Bowden, 2014).

A second advantage of storytelling is its ability to make energy more visible. Since energy is often perceived as hard to grasp, stories can help to ground it in tangible experiences, helping people to "see energy" (Miller et al., 2015) and bringing policies closer to the public. Moreover, stories offer what Miller et al. (2015, p. 67) call "linguistic currency", to discuss technical issues in more accessible ways. This creates lower-threshold platforms for participation, engaging underprivileged communities in "speaking energy" (Miller et al., 2015, p. 67). Energy literacy significantly impacts public acceptance and participation in transition initiatives (Awolesi, Salter and Reams, 2024).

Third, storytelling has the power to bring people together by creating space for a multiplicity of voices and perspectives, challenging current "mess first, fix later" approach often seen in energy policymaking (Turhan, Şorman and Larsen, 2018). It helps to focus on the neglected things, and to include marginalised perspectives to share counter-narratives (Sol Cueva, 2025). Miller et al. (2015) emphasise that stories can open the conversation to participation by people who may not otherwise feel competent, which can help bring together a wide range of knowledge, insights and perspectives. This helps to democratise the conversation on energy transitions (Sol Cueva, 2025). Furthermore, storytelling holds interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary value. It can engage diverse people with different kinds of knowledge from various fields and with different roles, such as policymakers, industry representatives, and community members (Winkel, 2018; Sol Cueva, 2025). In doing so, storytelling blurs the boundary between lived experiences and expert data (Ottinger, 2017). Storytelling can moreover be a valuable method for bringing communities closer together and building a shared identity. Different stories can contribute to build a collective narrative, that provides insights into the beliefs, values and lived experiences of a community (Miller and Bridger, 2019; Sol Cueva, 2025). In that sense, storytelling can facilitate collaboration. When communities engage in storytelling, they also engage in mutual learning, about their community, technologies and energy practices (Sol Cueva, 2025). This process can support community building (Smith et al., 2017), fostering a sense of collective ownership.

Fourth, storytelling highlights the significance of local contexts in shaping energy systems (Sol Cueva, 2025), which is gaining more and more attention in current policy frameworks, such as Positive Energy Districts (Derkenbaeva et al., 2022), that however have difficulty being implemented in more underprivileged areas (Hearn et al., 2022; Verlooy et al., 2024) due to systemic socio-economic inequalities and socio-spatial complexities. In that light, storytelling can be a tool that helps to anchor energy transitions in local realities (Devos, De Blust and

Desmet, 2018), making it a valuable approach for addressing the implementation gap in marginalised areas. As Devos, De Blust and Desmet (2018, p. 7) argue, “narratives can be a powerful tool to bridge the gap between social and spatial research and local knowledge”.

Fifth, storytelling can support imagination, helping underprivileged communities to envision alternative future trajectories (Sol Cueva, 2025). By adopting more fluid and non-linear conceptions of time, storytelling may enable communities to transcend their current constraints or circumstances. It enables them to envision new possibilities, reconnect with past aspirations, and envision radically different futures (Moezzi, Janda and Rotmann, 2017; Sol Cueva, 2025). This ability is particularly valuable in energy futures research, where the aim is often to envision transformative changes (Sol Cueva, 2025).

5. Case Study Watersportbaan

Dedicated to performing doing care-full research, we distance ourselves from social sciences that decontextualise research. Knowledge is inherently situated, rooted in the relational and material conditions that make it possible (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). As such, our research does not begin from pre-defined “gaps” in the academic literature. Instead, we align with the view that meaningful research questions often arise from “the real life of affected people”, (Brannelly, Barnes and Tronto, 2022). From 2024 till 2025 we have indulged in our case study Watersportbaan, in Ghent, Belgium, having conversations with inhabitants, social welfare workers, energy experts and government officials.

Watersportbaan houses social tenants in high-rise modernist apartment blocks constructed in the 1960s. Residents face ongoing marginalisation and stigmatisation, compounded by deteriorating living conditions. Many of the apartments are in urgent need of renovation, with upcoming redevelopment plans likely to result in large-scale displacement and uncertain housing situations. Additionally, the area is marked by significant challenges related to liveability. Increasing reports of garbage accumulation, crime, feelings of insecurity, noise pollution, squatting, substance abuse, mental health issues, and homelessness reflect a growing sense of social and infrastructural neglect. Furthermore, people working and living in the neighbourhood have highlighted a sense of isolation, partly attributed to the design of the high-rise housing blocks, which limit opportunities for interaction between neighbours. This is further exacerbated by the deteriorating state of public spaces, which lack accessible, welcoming communal or meeting areas. Consequently, the area is characterised by low levels of social capital, foundational for collective action (Ziervogel, Cowen and Ziniades, 2016).

Transformative changes are planned in Watersportbaan, including the construction of a fossil-free heat grid and renovation and demolition of the social housing blocks, leading to large scale relocations of current inhabitants. A visioning plan for the area has described several ambitions that may contribute to transform the neighbourhood to a fossil free environment (Vervloesem et al., 2024). One of the ambitions is to further research and set up a collective heating network on residual heat. Currently this plan, despite still being in an early phase, is initiated by large scale institutions in the neighbourhood, such as the hospital, university campus and the social housing association. In addition to this, the plan envisions the sharing of locally produced renewable energy across the neighbourhood, potentially through the creation of an energy community that enables more equitable distribution. Moreover, the energy transition is seen not merely as a technical or environmental shift, but also as a social lever: a means to empower residents and encourage energy-conscious behaviour. Despite these promising ambitions, such as creating an energy community (Vervloesem et al., 2024), interviews lay bare that there are multiple challenges that may come across in the energy transition of the area.

In Watersportbaan, the energy transition is currently run by large institutional stakeholders that are residing in the area, planning a heating network. However, this risks occurring “over the heads” of residents, with little genuine involvement from those most affected. The social complexities surrounding energy transition and energy poverty remain largely invisible to the institutional frontrunners currently leading renewable energy initiatives in the area. These organizations demonstrate limited insight into residents' actual needs, wishes, or capacities,

often underestimating the potential contributions residents could make if meaningfully engaged. Simultaneously, social welfare workers emphasise that for many residents, the energy transition feels like a distant concern, far removed from their immediate challenges and daily realities. The persistent stigmatization of the neighbourhood and its residents further complicates engagement efforts. As we have discussed above, this can lead to community disengagement and undermine solidarity (McNamara, Stevenson and Muldoon, 2013).

5.1 Situating the research in Watersportbaan

Watersportbaan's current energy future is mainly determined by institutional stakeholders, with residents having little say in their neighbourhood's energy transition, leading to institutional stakeholders overlooking their social realities and impact of the transition on daily life. A storytelling approach emerged as a fitting and necessary method to make visible the complex, situated experiences of underrepresented communities and to democratise energy transition discourses.

To set up storytelling as the research methodology, we follow a similar approach as Devos, De Blust and Desmet (2018) that is based on three iterative phases: 1) identifying narratives, 2) co-constructing storylines and 3) strategic implementations. For the scope of this conference paper, we will focus on the first step, identifying narratives.

As Devos, De Blust and Desmet (2018) describe, entering a neighbourhood requires exploratory research to "get a grip" on its conditions. This was done as part of the CO2PED research project, by conducting interviews, workshops, and organising neighbourhood walks (2024-2025). Based on this, we identified community narratives (phase 1) in relation to energy transitions. These narratives are constructed on 'meta' themes that consistently emerged during the various conversations we had in and about the neighbourhood. They provide a lead for further research and dialogue in the next stages of the CO2PED research project in co-constructing storylines and strategically implementing storylines (phase 2 and 3). In the next section, we deconstruct five narratives from Watersportbaan, connecting them to energy injustices. Drawing on our theoretical framework, we argue that storytelling holds significant potential in addressing the injustices that these narratives lay bare, by enhancing community agency.

5.1.1 Identifying narratives in Watersportbaan

5.1.1.1. narrative 1 – lacking neighbourhood services and meeting spaces

One of the dominant narratives emerging from the exploratory fieldwork in Watersportbaan revolves around the lack of neighbourhood services and meeting spaces. Residents and social welfare workers repeatedly mentioned the absence of places where people can informally gather, share experiences, or simply spend time together. This lack of shared space not only limits opportunities for building social cohesion but also contributes to a broader sense of fragmentation and isolation in the neighbourhood.

Interestingly, the presence of a collective laundromat, one of the few (semi)public spaces in the area, is a narrative that can spark conversations. This symbolises a dependency on shared facilities, reflecting the broader housing model idea in the neighbourhood that is built around collectivity and sharing. However, more and more, this collectivity is disappearing. The laundromat also highlights the everyday use of energy, embedded in routines, which opens up avenues for discussing energy as part of daily life. The laundromat furthermore offers a space for casual encounters and conversations in a rather isolating neighbourhood. However, criminal activity is increasing around the laundromat, moreover, washing here is quite expensive. Therefore, the space is losing its popularity. These seemingly mundane moments reveal deeper socio-spatial dynamics: the limits of public infrastructure, the social consequences of housing precarity, and the reliance on collective systems in a context where collectivity is not meaningfully supported.

Storytelling can make visible the relational and situated nature of energy, revealing the complex interconnection of energy with everyday life. Current energy transition models tend to rely on abstract simulations and expert-led forecasting tools, which overlook the complexity of people's everyday realities (Sol Cueva, 2025). In contrast, storytelling allows us to explore how people in Watersportbaan use, experience, and interpret energy

differently, shaped by their specific housing conditions, cultures, socio-economic situations and socio-spatial situations. Furthermore, researching with care aims to make visible what is often made invisible and devaluated, such as washing as housework.

5.1.1.2. narrative 2 – deburdening social renters

Another dominant narrative used by policymakers, the housing corporation or energy experts is the need of deburdening the inhabitants, by reducing the responsibilities, pressures, or expectations placed on them. The planned implementation of a heating network, while intended to contribute to more sustainable energy provision, is mostly discussed in highly technical terms, dominated by expert-led discourse and engineering logic. Residents so far have not been involved in this process. They argue that social renters must be completely deburdened, however, this has contributed to the idea that that energy systems are “not for them to understand or question”, and that “experts know best”.

This approach can be seen as patronizing. It risks underestimating the knowledge and capacity based on lived expertise of local inhabitants. This technocratic approach ignores the socio-cultural dimensions of energy use, reducing residents to passive recipients of infrastructure rather than active participants in shaping their energy futures. As a result, engagement can be discouraged, with eroding agency as a consequence.

Storytelling can help to reframe the technical conversation, to make energy more visible and relatable, not as an abstract system, but as part of everyday life. In a neighbourhood where many feel excluded from formal planning processes, this is particularly important. Stories about comfort, cold, control, costs or worries can help residents to articulate their needs, experiences, and priorities. These stories surface understandings of energy systems that are often dismissed as anecdotal and irrelevant, yet they are important for designing just interventions. Moreover, storytelling resists the potential patronising logic of deburdening through valuing input based on local experiences.

5.1.1.3. narrative 3 – lacking sense of collectivity

There is a narrative in Watersportbaan of lacking collectivity, which limits the neighbourhood's ability to engage in community-driven energy transitions. As we discussed earlier, Watersportbaan is marked by limited meeting spaces and a lack of infrastructure that boosts social interaction. Residents and social workers repeatedly spoke of a widespread sense of disconnection, not only from one another, but also from the future of the neighbourhood. This is closely tied to the morphological layout of the area: high-rise social housing blocks with vertically compartmentalised corridors limit interaction between neighbours. The declining public space contributes to feelings of isolation and disconnection. Both inhabitants and other stakeholders involved in Watersportbaan feel that this neighbourhood is isolating, which, as a result, undermines social cohesion, vital for collective agency.

At the same time, Watersportbaan has evolved into what might be described as a marginalised tenant enclave. Residents live in deteriorating apartments, with outdated energy infrastructures. They face social stigma attached to poverty and public housing. Coupled with the looming uncertainty of future renovations and possible relocation, this erodes place-based attachment. With little sense of belonging and minimal incentive to engage in collective projects, it becomes increasingly difficult to imagine a shared energy future.

In this fragmented social context, storytelling holds transformative potential. It can create inclusive spaces for dialogue where a multiplicity of voices and perspectives are not only welcomed but actively shape the conversation. Stories open up energy conversations to those who may not feel competent to participate, thus lowering the barrier to engagement and democratising the discourse. Storytelling enables residents to build a collective narrative that reflects shared concerns, values, and hopes. In doing so, storytelling can function as a community-building practice in Watersportbaan, capable of strengthening collective identity and agency.

5.1.1.4. narrative 4 – “no man's land”

The area in Watersportbaan has been narrated as being a “no man's land” (Vervloesem et al., 2024). The neighbourhood's isolating feel, as described above, due to lacking services, high rise fragmentation, and neglected

public space in between the high-rise towers. However, due to its morphology, multiple opportunities arise for sustainable energy infrastructures.

Beyond the physical landscape, this “no man’s land” narrative also reflects deeper mismatches. There is a disconnect between local needs and the objectives of supra-local actors involved in neighbourhood transformation. Large stakeholders, including housing providers and policy institutions, often pursue energy transition goals, such as the implementation of heating networks or district-wide retrofits, without grounding them in the realities of local life. As a result, energy-related decisions are driven by abstract targets or financial incentives, while local knowledge and everyday energy needs remain undervalued or ignored. Social welfare organisations, which could potentially play a key bridging role, face limitations: energy transitions are treated as technical domains outside their expertise, and they lack the resources, time, and mandate to engage meaningfully.

In this context, storytelling can be a method that can re-anchor energy transitions in local realities, showing that neighbourhoods are not “blank slates”. Storytelling helps to bridge the gap between expert-led visions and local, experimental knowledge, creating space for residents, social workers, and overlooked voices to express their energy needs and aspirations in accessible ways. Storytelling supports the significance of place in shaping energy systems, enabling to approach energy transition in a context-sensitive way. Moreover, by allowing for diverse perspectives and counter-narratives to be shared, storytelling challenges power asymmetries. It can help build mutual understanding among residents, social actors, and institutional stakeholders, creating a common ground where collaboration becomes possible.

5.1.1.5. narrative 5 – living in limbo

Another dominant narrative that emerged during our fieldwork in Watersportbaan relates to the difficulty of involving residents in shaping the energy future of their neighbourhood. As the literature suggested, poverty tends to orient people’s attention toward short-term survival, making it harder to invest in or even imagine long-term goals. This disengagement is further deepened by the uncertainty surrounding large-scale renovation and relocation plans in the neighbourhood. The apartments in Watersportbaan are in urgent need of renovation. Many residents of social housing live with the expectation that they may soon have to move, as their homes are scheduled for demolition or upgrading. This “living in limbo” creates a fragile connection to place and very little incentive to participate in decisions that shape the future of the area.

In this context of uncertainty and the resulting disengagement, storytelling can offer more than just a method for collecting data, it can be a tool for reclaiming imagination and reconnecting people to future possibilities. Storytelling can allow communities to envision alternative trajectories beyond their current constraints. Especially when people are “living in limbo,” storytelling provides a way to move beyond linear conceptions of time, empowering residents to hold on to past aspirations, interpret the present differently, and creatively imagine new futures.

Storytelling can help to break through deterministic narratives of decline. It can revisit hope, shifting the focus from imposed futures toward those imagined by the community itself. Whether grounded in actual life experiences or speculative scenarios, stories can inspire agency and support a sense of ownership over the future, even in a context marked by displacement and instability.

5. Conclusion & planned research

This paper examined energy justice limitations in addressing structural barriers faced in underprivileged neighbourhoods during energy transitions. While the three-tenet approach offers a valuable framework, it often overlooks the foundational issue of limited agency in marginalised communities. In these neighbourhoods, residents face compounding processes that restrict their capacity to envision and participate in energy transitions: socio-material inequalities manifest in poor housing conditions, dense urban morphologies limit renewable integration opportunities, stigmatization leads to community disengagement, and institutional stakeholders often

implement initiatives with limited understanding of residents' needs.

Guided by feminist care ethics, our research in Watersportbaan (Ghent, Belgium) reveals a significant disconnect between institutional energy transition ambitions and local realities. We propose storytelling as a transformative methodology that can strengthen collective agency by emphasizing energy's relational nature; making energy more visible and accessible; creating platforms for multiple voices; highlighting local contexts; and supporting the imagination of alternative futures. Storytelling positions community members as active participants rather than passive consumers, bridging the gap between transition plans and local knowledge.

This paper only describes the first stage of a research trajectory that will unfold in future research in Watersportbaan. We identified five key narratives in this neighbourhood—lacking neighbourhood services, disempowering deburdening approaches, eroding collectivity, a "no man's land", and uncertain living conditions—that erode community agency. We highlighted how storytelling may counter these dominant narratives. In the second phase of our research, we plan to use these narratives as conversation starters, co-constructing storylines with inhabitants, aiming to eventually strategically implement them into the neighbourhood transition plan. Based on the personal stories and experiences of residents we have collected by initiating low-tech actions, we aim to break stereotypes and narrow the gap between the policy makers, social housing associations and energy experts initiating the energy transition of Watersportbaan.

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