

Energy: Common Good of Humanity?

Event summary

17-18 March 2023

The *Energy: Common Good of Humanity?* conference took place on 17-18 March 2023 in Paris, France. Organised by ENoP member **Gabriel Péri Foundation**, the aim of the event was to invite researchers, public and private actors from the energy world, trade unions, and representatives of institutions to work on better defining the contours and implications of this common good, in an approach that complies with the notion of public service.

759 million people in the world do not have access to electricity. In Europe, 35 million people suffer from energy poverty. While these figures were tending to decrease, inflation, climate change and the war in Ukraine are worsening the conditions of access to energy, a good that is essential for human development and the fight against poverty and inequality. Making energy a common good, free from the logic of commodification, speculation, hoarding and confrontation, would instead guarantee access to affordable energy for all.

This challenge is further complicated by the imperatives of the fight against climate change, which require us to move away from fossil fuels, to review our energy production and to question our needs. Since the Rio Convention in 1992, international climate negotiations have recognised the historical responsibility of the industrialised countries of the North for global warming. This responsibility is therefore differentiated. The same efforts cannot be expected from countries where entire sections of the population are living in submissive sobriety, and from those that have reached very high levels of consumption. In addition to proposing sectoral solutions, the 6th IPCC report questions for the first time our consumption and demand in the interests of equity and climate justice. By questioning the meaning of well-being and the means to achieve it, it proposes to initiate a targeted and collectively acceptable process of demand reduction that does not fuel injustice.

The countries of the South suffer more from the consequences of climate change, even though they contribute little to global warming. Yet, the necessary funding to enable the affected countries to cope is lacking. These countries, like Niger, must ensure their energy development, which requires access to resources, technology transfers and, consequently, international cooperation on all fronts, involving the historical actors in the North who have taken resources from the South since the colonial period. Global governance is not very effective against the dynamics of grabbing and plundering, and should be reformed to guarantee the energy sovereignty of all parties, to get out of climate-damaging free trade agreements and to organisereal cooperation. The energy transition cannot be achieved in the North by creating negative externalities, shortages and wars in the South and elsewhere. The European area is suffering from the failures of the political choices made over the last twenty years in favour of the market, deregulation and competition. By using the price signal as its sole compass, the EU has bet on gas, ignoring the fact that resources in the producing countries are drying up, that energy demand is growing and that prices will rise. On the wholesale market, electricity prices correlated to the marginal cost of production from fossil fuel - in this case gas - and boosted by speculation soared in summer 2022. The market is also holding back the energy transition by guaranteeing high prices for fossil industries.

In light of these failures, the Commission is presenting a reform aimed at saving the market by proposing contracts for differences. Other choices incompatible with the treaties and directives in force would have consisted in establishing a single buyer and even an integrated public monopoly putting an end to the European wholesale market. This very insufficient reform can nevertheless be a step towards new regulation and more radical solutions. The debates in the European Parliament will allow more significant alternatives to be put forward. But the public takeover of energy will first of all be the result of a popular struggle by workers in the sector, trade unions and users, such as is being waged today all over the world. They are advancing the idea of renationalisation and a public pole while raising the level of demand so that public ownership does not mean nationalisation of losses like in Belgium, but social appropriation, democratisation of the management of the sector and, ideally, at the European level, the creation of a consortium of national public companies, linked to a public financial pole, which would enable the control of technological choices to be maintained.

The importance of these issues requires in any case a calm and informed democratic debate that must also shed light on technological choices, the place of nuclear power in the energy mix, the development of intermittent energies and the electrification of industrial production requiring critical minerals. Political decisions must therefore be based on democratic debate and shared scientific information, in order to prevent mistrust in public expertise from becoming widespread and to ensure that public policies adapted to current challenges are implemented.