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The New Moral Demands of Energy Actors: Justice as an Evaluation Concept and an Organization Principle

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ABSTRACT

'Energy justice' has become a concern of professionals who are involved in the energy transition. However, many professionals in the energy domain seem to have difficulty understanding this concept, as it does not fit well into their institutional context. We will present a framework for understanding justice that allows energy actors to cope more effectively with energy justice. This framework, which is based on a re-articulation of the three tenets of energy justice, introduces justice both as an evaluation concept and as an organization principle. It further allows energy actors to navigate the normative uncertainties that characterize the energy transition.

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1. Introduction

In the transition toward a sustainable energy system, many practitioners are involved. These 'energy actors' include decision-makers from different governmental levels, technical experts, and stakeholders from industry and NGOs, representing a broad category of organizations with roles supporting or implementing technologies that facilitate the energy transition (Van de Grift & Cuppen, 2022; Walker et al., 2011). To an increasing extent, these actors are confronted by societal opposition against energy projects, which manifests that the introduction of new energy technologies entails a redistribution of costs and benefits and challenges existing values and normative claims (Batel & Devine-Wright, 2018; Cuppen et al., 2019; Metze, 2013). In response to these emergent moral concerns, the notion of energy justice was introduced a little over a decade ago (Jenkins et al., 2014; McCauley et al., 2013). Since then, this notion has gained prominence also among practitioners. However, while the relevance of changing the energy system in a way that can be seen as just is widely acknowledged among energy actors, it seems to be unclear what 'justice' precisely means, and how it relates to their daily work.

This paper aims to elucidate the workings of 'energy justice' in a way that it becomes a concept that professionals in the domain of energy can effectively deal with. To do so, we will first describe the institutional context that structures the actions and decisions of energy actors in [Section 2](#). This institutional context

discourages actors from actively engaging with moral concepts such as justice, which explains the somewhat ambiguous uptake of energy justice in the energy transition.

In [Section 3](#), we will make a theoretical excursion. We will introduce two approaches to justice, based on the work of Amartya Sen (2011), that respectively relate to justice as a theory-based concept and the role of institutions in overcoming injustices. Moreover, this section will sketch out the energy transition as a *social experiment* that is characterized by the presence of *normative uncertainties*, which implies that institutional practices and norms are to be recalibrated to correspond with new justice demands. [Section 4](#) will introduce a framework that will help energy actors recognize and get to grips with the moral demands of the energy transition. We will do so by introducing an ‘ecology’ of energy justice, which is constituted by the interconnections between the different elements and tenets of energy justice. [Section 5](#) presents some final reflections on the added value, but also the shortcomings of our framework.

2. The Use of Energy Justice

In academia, the notion of ‘energy justice’ has become widely used (Van Uffelen et al., 2024). Especially, the tenets of environmental justice developed by Schlosberg (2009) have found their way as the tenets of ‘energy justice’, which have also been adopted in policy circles. For instance, in the Dutch context, which is the focus of this paper, the relevance of justice for the energy transition has been expressed in a number of influential policy reports.¹

At the same time, we have observed in our interactions with energy actors that they appear to be struggling with ‘energy justice’.² These actors are not just policymakers at different administrative scales but also include professionals working at energy companies, regulatory bodies, consultancy firms, NGOs, etc. Our observation that so many actors were puzzled by the notion of ‘energy justice’ motivated us to write this paper, in which we aim to explain why it is hard for energy actors to engage with the concept and to provide an understanding of ‘energy justice’ that helps them contextualize their daily activities with regard to energy justice. In what follows, we describe two reasons why energy actors appear to struggle with ‘energy justice’, namely, related to the colloquial use of the term (2.1) and the institutional embedding of energy actors (2.2).

2.1. Colloquial Use of ‘Justice’ as ‘Equality’

One of the reasons why it is hard for practitioners to grasp the notion of energy justice pertains to the way this notion from moral philosophy has merged with the colloquial meaning of the concept, in which, in the vast majority of cases, people expressing the need to have justice mean that there are inequalities that are to be taken away. In the context of the energy transition, this can be recognized, for instance, in the discussion on energy poverty as one of the key features of energy justice (Shortall & Mengolini, 2025). The costs of energy bills may exclude people from having access to energy services, which is considered to be unjust. In such manifestations of ‘energy injustice’, it is suggested as something *external* to energy projects and policies: justice frameworks are often interpreted as yardsticks that allow the assessment of the consequences of these projects and policies (Bombaerts et al., 2023; Laes et al., 2023; Wood et al., 2024).

In addition, energy justice tends to be taken as instrumental to the *prevention of societal opposition* to energy projects and policies. This means that inequalities are not seen as unjust in themselves, but they are feared as they might trigger societal protests that threaten the further development of the energy transition. Telling, in this context, is the way the label of ‘just transition’ has been taken up by the European Commission. This label has a longer history, being coined by emancipatory movements in the 1970s, but following the Paris Agreements of 2015, it has come to be adopted in the context of environmental policy (García-García et al., 2020; Morena et al., 2018). In 2020, the European Commission proposed the Just Transition Mechanism (JTM) to make sure that ‘no one is left behind in the transition towards a climate-neutral economy’ (Sabato & Vanhille, 2024).³ The implementation of the JTM appears to be subjected to a rather restricted account of justice, mostly looking at the job security of laborers working in coal-intensive regions (Chiara et al., 2025; Moesker & Pesch, 2022). The reasoning here seems to make the energy transition socially acceptable by preventing opposition – the absence of conflict being taken as an indicator of acceptance (Cuppen & Pesch, 2021; Gross, 2007).

The outcome of this process is that ‘justice’ is composed of a relatively arbitrary set of inequalities that need to be countered. Underlying theoretical grounds appear to be largely missing. This is not just a problem that raises academic concerns; it is also problematic from a practical perspective. While, as said earlier, a main driver for introducing energy justice is avoiding societal protest, empirical studies show that the inequalities that are included as topics of energy justice are often the result of protesters raising attention to these issues (Pesch et al., 2017; Van Uffelen & Ten Caat, 2025). In other words, it frequently happens that in order to know what are considered unjust inequalities, so that protests can be prevented, protests are assumed to show which inequalities are considered unjust.

2.2. Institutional Embedding of Energy Actors

An explanatory factor for the way energy actors adopt ‘energy justice’ is their embedding in existing institutional contexts. Acknowledging that the Dutch institutional context may be idiosyncratic in certain respects (Halffman, 2003; Hisschemöller, 2005), we will present some of its main characteristics in order to illustrate how a specific context shapes the activities and expectations of actors involved in a specific setting. With regards to the uptake of energy justice, the institutional set-up is decisively motivated by the belief that politics and expertise can be respectively delegated to the realm of subjectivity and objectivity appears to be leading; this belief informs a rigid division of responsibilities in which expertise facilitates the establishment of policies (Taebi et al., 2024). In other words, a strict instrumental means-end reasoning is maintained in which policy goals are set in the political arena, based on information provided by experts; subsequently, policy tools are to be deployed to achieve these goals, without affecting them (Cuppen et al., 2015; Pesch et al., 2020). Analytically, a separation between objective expertise and subjective policy can be helpful (Rutgers & Schreurs, 2006; Simon, 1997), as it helps to coordinate activities. The institutionalization of different roles and responsibilities is an effective form of make-belief that can be continued as long as there is no moral dispute. However, in the case of uncertainty or crises, institutionalized boundaries between subjectivity and objectivity will have to be renegotiated – precisely what is happening in the energy

transition. Below, we identify three typical patterns of behavior which evolve from the binary opposition between the objective and subjective realms (also see Van Uffelen, 2025).

First, there is the tendency to focus on epistemic features of societal controversies, ignoring their moral aspects. This tendency may be typical for the Dutch political culture in which policies are based on the active involvement of a wide range of stakeholders and experts (Lijphart, 1975; Visser & Hemerijck, 1997). In the Dutch policy culture, expert knowledge figures as a basis for shared understanding, which should allow for decisions that are widely accepted (Hisschemöller & Sioziou, 2013; Pesch et al., 2012). Speaking out on moral aspects could be understood as a transgression of this traditional role conception, displacing servitude with activism (Verhoeven, et al., 2022).

In the context of the energy transition, uncertainties about the outcomes of decisions are often merely understood as *epistemic* uncertainties, also when these uncertainties pertain to contrastive moral evaluations (see Van Uffelen, 2024). The (qualitative) moral and societal unknowns are not considered because they are considered within the realm of subjectivity. Instead, they are confounded with uncertainties that can be subjected to existing quantitative assessment methods for uncertainty and risk. For instance, in a project on carbon capture and storage, policymakers only wanted to discuss safety in terms of quantifiable risks, while the concerns of the local population were discarded (Cuppen et al., 2015). Generally, policymakers are not open to the critique that the seemingly precise predictions of these probabilistic methods are rooted in a host of assumptions out in the method, which in turn do have a subjective character; the mere quantitative outcome is simply considered to be an objective foundation for public policy (Taebi, 2021).

A second pattern has somewhat of an ironic nature. While energy actors seem to believe that they can refrain from moral claims by maintaining an objective disposition, it is precisely this objective disposition that hands over specific moral biases. This becomes especially manifest when neo-liberal dogma is applied, as has become the case in the Netherlands since the 1980s (Mellink et al., 2022). That is, cost reduction or utility maximization are perceived as value-neutral goals and even taken for granted when they are at the expense of other values. The instrumental approach also allows the privatization of public services, which has had a big impact on the energy transition, which is mostly governed by a market logic (Laes & Bombaerts, 2022). As we will see, the market logic is not just an economic one; it also, and perhaps even more so, imposes a logic of justice. Indeed, utilitarian principles of ‘all count for one and no more than one’ are the foundations of *some* justice principles. Yet, as it has been abundantly criticized in moral philosophy, there are other, also morally defensible, ways of considering justice principles that question the utilitarian calculus (e.g. Hansson, 2007). By maintaining that there is only one objective stance toward institutions, specific normative ideas, such as neoliberalism, are masked as universal and uncontroversial (Young, 1990). This is morally problematic because the institutionalized ideas of justice are those of the dominant cultural groups in society; the objective stance allows their moral ideas to become hegemonic and oppressive toward alternative justice conceptions. It is, therefore, increasingly important to acknowledge normative uncertainties here.

The third pattern is that energy actors often overlook the demand to account for both inter- and intragenerational justice, which is characteristic of sustainable

development (Hickey & Robeyns, 2020). This demand makes the delineation of the temporal (i.e. intergenerational) and spatial (i.e. intragenerational) implications of the energy transition a major concern: which future generations need to be taken into consideration when making decisions, and what is the geographical span of the transition? These questions demand profound reflection (Pesch, 2024), but what happens in practice is that energy actors tend to derive their perceptions about what is just from established policy goals and agreements. For instance, we can look at the Paris Agreement from 2015, which set the goal to keep the average global temperature rise within 1.5 to 2.0 degrees Celsius, as a seemingly absolute and almost absolute measurable indicator to assess the performance of climate policy. Climate policy is necessary to fulfill the intragenerational justice demands of future generations. However, this number of 2.0 is as precise as it is artificial, and climate catastrophes are bound to happen in varying degrees with different global average temperature rises. Moreover, the global average temperature rise says nothing about local effects, which could be more severe. The Paris Agreement has been translated into operational goals which equally rely on quantified goals, such as the Dutch policy goal to reduce carbon emissions by 55% in 2030 to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050.⁴ Subsequently, these policy goals attain an almost absolute status and seem to coincide with climate policy, making it virtually impossible to negotiate alternative policy options to pursue climate goals – even if these could potentially be more effective (Stirling, 2014).

A similar line of reasoning can be followed in the context of spatial delineations. Here, existing jurisdictions are usually taken as a point of reference. First and foremost, these are nation-states or supranational bodies such as the European Union, which are administrative bodies with the authority to develop and implement policies. In the case of the energy transition, we may also observe how lower governmental bodies, such as municipalities, are involved, as many renewable energy systems, such as wind or solar parks, pertain to the local level. The effects of energy policies and projects, however, are not contained within administrative boundaries such as countries' borders (Pesch, 2015, 2019). A person might suffer distress from a wind turbine located in another town, while people all around the world might be affected by European climate policies, for instance, because of the depletion of critical raw materials. The assumption that justice issues only play out within existing spatial boundaries makes it hard to recognize justice issues elsewhere and, as such, compromises the ability to pursue intergenerational justice. This becomes clear if we realize that energy policies may have multinational justice implications. For instance, the proposal to dispose of nuclear waste as a collaboration between different European nation-states implies multinational considerations of justice (Taebi, 2012) Many other energy policies heavily rely on the relations between two not necessarily neighboring countries; e.g. when European countries import biofuel from Brazil, there could be multilateral considerations of justice become increasingly relevant and the full cycle of nuclear energy production and waste disposal pose issues of multilateral justice that are not necessarily geographically confined (e.g. within the EU) (Jenkins & Taebi, 2019). Such complex considerations of justice often remain underexplored.

3. Converging to Justice

3.1. Justice as an Evaluation and an Organization Concept

Energy actors are informed by given institutional conditions in their understanding of 'energy justice,' which contrasts with approaches to justice as provided by moral philosophy, which have the task of eradicating ethical considerations from contingent factors (Pesch & Van Uffelen, 2024). Even though it is unlikely we will ever settle on a shared account of justice, theories and frameworks have been developed that help us to hypothesize about judgments that are free from bias and positionality.

This means that subjective expressions of injustice cannot suffice as a legitimate ground for establishing what is to be considered just. Such expressions are too arbitrary, and they are susceptible to prejudice and power. In order to converge on an form of justice that transcends subjective positions, we may turn to Amartya Sen, who distinguished two approaches to justice (Pesch, 2021; Sen, 2011).

The first approach is by exploring the conditions of 'perfect justice,' which has been done by deriving a set of theoretically coherent principles that inform us of what justice can be without being contingent on subjective experiences and evaluations. The second method is to 'overcome injustices' by redesigning institutions. In this, institutions can be seen as arrangements that allow for the distribution of certain goods, and as they intrinsically reproduce specific justice principles (North, 1989; Walzer, 1983). This is a broad definition of institutions that includes all types of social contexts, including small groups, organizations, and societal domains. Moreover, the goods that are distributed also display a wide range, including issues like friendship, money, and responsibilities. Within these contexts, certain distributions are generally considered to be legitimate, but there may be developments that will challenge this distribution. Think, for instance, about emancipatory movements or societal changes that reveal hidden inequalities (Pesch, 2024).

From these two approaches to justice, we may derive justice as an *ex-post concept* that allows for *evaluation* and justice as an *ex-ante* principle that allows for the *organization of institutions*. As an evaluative concept, justice is informed by theories developed in moral philosophy and political theory that are juxtaposed with the intuitions that are articulated in societal debates. With that, these theories figure as a guidance toward a more legitimate account of justice. Above, institutions were defined in broad terms, including a wide range of social contexts. The institutions discussed in the context of the energy domain are usually 'devised' to fulfill certain purposes (North, 1989). We may think of domains such as the market that allows for the efficient distribution of scarce goods, organizations that have certain societal or economic functions, and formal procedures that facilitate decision-making processes. These deliberately designed institutions are rule systems that arrange the distribution of goods; with that, they reproduce certain conceptions of justice. This means that justice can be seen as an *organization principle* that points toward the fact that people's moral expectations are reproduced within certain societal contexts, which then de facto become contexts in which goods are distributed in a way that is seen as just (Walzer, 1983). It needs to be noted that the questions about which distributions are considered to be just may change over time, and as such, we need to be able to redesign institutions (Pesch, 2021).

Although justice as an organization principle stresses that institutions are justice arrangements themselves, the extent to which these are actually just involves the use of justice as an evaluative concept (Sen, 2011). Decisions and decision-making processes are constantly evaluated, and with that, both the evaluative and organizational uses of justice inevitably come to be intertwined and mixed. In order to assess whether the emancipatory claims that are brought forward are justified, theory-based frameworks that function as normative standards are necessary. Even though such frameworks can never be fully unbiased, their underlying assumptions can be subjected to discussion and reconsideration.

3.2. Energy Transitions as Social Experiments Bolstering Normative Uncertainties

The impossibility of providing a description of justice that is genuinely objective demands humility. Any statement can be conditional at most. Within the context of the energy transition, this is especially important because the transition will lead to a shift in responsibilities and risks. Consequently, behavior and expectations need to be adapted, and new norms and rules will be developed. As these shifts apply to both companies and public organizations, a wide range of actors, organizations, and institutions will be affected, who need to take on new roles, including those of consumers, producers, or citizens. In other words, the energy transition entails radical changes in sociotechnical systems in which institutional rules and commitments and cultural practices and values co-evolve with technological developments (Correljé et al., 2022). Using the notion introduced by Van de Poel (2011), we can depict the energy transition as an ongoing *social experiment* in the sense that its outcome is unknown and the process is uncontrollable. In this experiment, moral assumptions and principles are constantly probed and renegotiated without precisely knowing what the outcome will be (also see Dewey, 1922; Pesch, 2024).

To understand the moral ramifications of these changes, we will use the notion of *normative uncertainties* (Taebi et al., 2020). The transition raises normative questions that cannot be answered unequivocally. According to Taebi et al, there are four categories of these uncertainties. First, there are *evolutionary* normative uncertainties, which arise out of the feature that we cannot be certain about which norms and values will be pertinent as the sociotechnical system changes in the future (cf. Hofbauer, 2024; Van de Poel & Taebi, 2022). As has been shown above, we often do not know what is considered to be a legitimate distribution of inequalities that are the result of upcoming technical systems. For instance, the exploration of natural gas in the Dutch province of Groningen was considered unproblematic by residents for decades, but after a series of mining-induced earthquakes, the local population came to fiercely resist further exploration and demanded compensation and recognition (Cuppen et al., 2020). Second, there is *theoretical* normative uncertainty, which occurs in the presence of contrastive moral theories that can be used to assess an ethical issue (MacAskill et al., 2020). In the case of justice, many theories can be applied, which might give rise to contrastive outcomes (Barry, 1989). As no theory can give a definite outcome, such uncertainty will be pervasive. Third, there is *conceptual* normative uncertainty, which has to do with the different conceptualizations and prioritizations of moral principles. In the context of the energy transition, we can see how a debate has arisen about the social and ecological effects of mining of

Table 1. Normative uncertainties (based on Taebi et al. (2020)).

Categories	Characterisation
Evolutionary normative uncertainties	Uncertainty about the norms and values that will be pertinent as the sociotechnical system changes
Theoretical normative uncertainties	The presence of contrastive moral theories
Conceptual normative uncertainties	Divergence of conceptualizations and prioritizations of moral principles
Epistemic normative uncertainties	Uncertainty about the workings of the sociotechnical system

critical raw materials and particularly the rare earth metals that are necessary to create batteries, solar panels, and wind turbines. Until recently, these effects were largely ignored, but increasingly, these are presented as injustices that need to be addressed (Forget & Bos, 2022; Machielsen, 2022). Finally, there are *epistemic* normative uncertainties, which relate to the lack of knowledge about the workings of the sociotechnical system. Based on the same body of information, different interpretations can be made about what is the best way to develop a sustainable energy system. An example of such uncertainties is presented by solar radiation management, while the effects of proposed technologies like stratospheric aerosol injection cannot be known, there are fierce debates on the desirability of even working on the theory of these technologies (Wieners et al., 2023). They give rise to different instances of normative uncertainties regarding what entails justice (Taebi et al., 2023).

Table 1 summarizes the four categories of normative uncertainties.

The experimental character of the energy transition brings about a fundamental difficulty in applying conventional theories of justice, which tend to assume the stability of institutions and norms in order to make authoritative moral statements (cf. Nordmann, 2007). Instead, we need to acknowledge that our moral judgments may be subject to change. Structural approaches to cope with such moral volatility appear to be lacking as of yet, but an initial number of starting points can be given. First, approaches for the longitudinal assessment of the ongoing energy transition need to be developed, in which the standards for evaluation are adapted as we gain new insights and understanding (Hofbauer, 2023). Second, it would be advisable to deploy ethical frameworks that provide guidance for justice while being relatively flexible. Most notably, the capability approach comes to mind here (Brackel et al., 2024; Djinlev & Pearce, 2025; Wood & Roelich, 2020). Third, we need to think about how to accommodate institutional adaptiveness in the sense that new injustices may always arise that require the redesign of institutions (cf. Correljé et al., 2022).

4. An Ecology of Energy Justice

In Section Two, we have stated that energy actors tend to take institutions as neutral, with justice mostly being considered an external yardstick used to determine a specified range of inequalities. These assumptions restrict these actors from productively engaging with questions of energy justice. In this section, we will revisit the tenets of energy justice and reframe these against the background of the theoretical explorations of the previous section. What we aim to show is that the different moral connotations of the energy

transition make up an 'ecological system' in which all elements are reciprocally inter-related. This metaphorical system provides a framework that allows energy actors to reflect on the implications of justice for their daily work.

To start with, the tenet of *distributive justice* concerns the question of goods being distributed over a group of people. As an evaluative principle, this tenet questions whether the distribution of a certain good can be considered just or not. Upon the basis of the organization principle, we can add the question of whether the distributive mechanism that is embedded in a certain institution matches the justice demands that are articulated in a specific policy or project. In this, it is relevant to note that institutions do not exist as isolated social contexts; instead, they make up a patchwork of 'spheres of justice' in which a variety of mechanisms are applied to distribute different types of goods (Walzer, 1983). Concerns may be raised by overlaps and contradictions between these mechanisms. For instance, the privatization of public services that has become customary in many European countries since the 1990s has been motivated by the belief that the private sphere of the market is the most efficient way to distribute goods, but in many cases, efficiency will go to the extent of the accessibility of goods. Indeed, the question can be asked as to whether energy is a market commodity which might give rise to energy poverty or whether it is a public good to which every household should have access.

Second, there is the tenet of *recognition justice*. As an evaluative concept, recognition justice questions whether actors are appropriately recognized in policy processes, policies, and policy outcomes, and evaluative standards include Nancy Fraser's notion of participatory parity in social life (Fraser, 2000) or Axel Honneth's notion of an undistorted relation-to-self (Honneth, 1992, 2018). Unfortunately, the notion of recognition is prone to misunderstandings, and it is often reduced to questions of inclusion in participation processes or to the recognition of rights (Van Uffelen, 2022). In line with the work of Iris Marion Young, we can also interpret recognition justice as an organization principle. Her approach shows how specific normative ideas about beauty, race, gender, the value of different professions, and so on, are institutionalized, which subsequently hides their nature, masking them as universal and uncontroversial (Young, 1990). Recognition justice assumes that institutions are composed of relations of (mis)recognition, and consequently draws attention to the (hidden) normative assumptions that underlie institutions. This perspective, therefore, also implies that there may be competing ideas of justice in society that are implicitly excluded in the way institutions are designed. In the context of the energy transition, misrecognition mostly manifests itself in social groups that are marginalized, devalued, or excluded. In many cases, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic class, or educational level function as implicit barriers for groups to be granted (equal) access to a certain institution. This means that these misrecognized groups cannot make any claim to the goods that are being distributed, including goods such as participatory power, compensation, or subsidies.

Third, there is the tenet of *procedural justice*, which revolves around the question of whether decisions taken are in line with the institutional rules that are seen as legitimate. As an evaluative principle, this tenet questions whether the decision-making procedures are applied fairly (cf. Rawls, 2001). Conceiving procedural justice as an organization principle, however, draws attention to the fact that there are implicit assumptions about procedural justice embedded in decision-making procedures. Again, we can look at the example of the participation of residents in local energy projects. In many cases,

such participation only has a symbolic function, as the most relevant decisions about the project have already been made. In other words, participatory processes are based on the promise that these processes have an influence on the decisions that are made. It will be considered *unfair* by the participants if this promise is not upheld.

When justice is reduced to an evaluative yardstick, the normative make-up of institutions may go unquestioned, and as such, competing assumptions that generate experiences of injustice will not be acknowledged as legitimate (Van Uffelen, 2024). As said above, people appear to have to innate capacity to experience injustice, while it may not be evident to them what the precise nature of the injustice is. As such, controversies are easily misunderstood, with public outcries being either dismissed as emotional or accepted as the legitimate expression of the popular will (Pesch et al., 2020; Roeser, 2011). When justice is perceived as an organization principle, however, these grievances can be understood as contestations of dominant institutionalized normative ideas. Consequently, these grievances can be taken as entrance points for reflection; they direct policymakers to the concerns that are considered relevant by societal actors and inform policymakers that their plans, and perhaps their institutions, need to be adjusted. It needs to be added that because of the presence of normative uncertainties, demands and wishes with respect to justice will be subject to change (Pesch et al., 2017), which makes the need for reflection and reconsideration a point of attention.

Figure 1 renders a schematic graphical representation of the different elements that have been touched upon here. The aim of this figure is not to imply a causal hierarchy, but to illustrate how the different tenets of energy justice relate to the institutions which are constantly subjected to societal and theoretical evaluation. The three tenets of justice are all equally at play in this representation, which shows that both intuitions and theories of justice inform our evaluations of the patchwork of institutions. However, intuitions and theories also feed into the design of institutions themselves. In other words, the relations

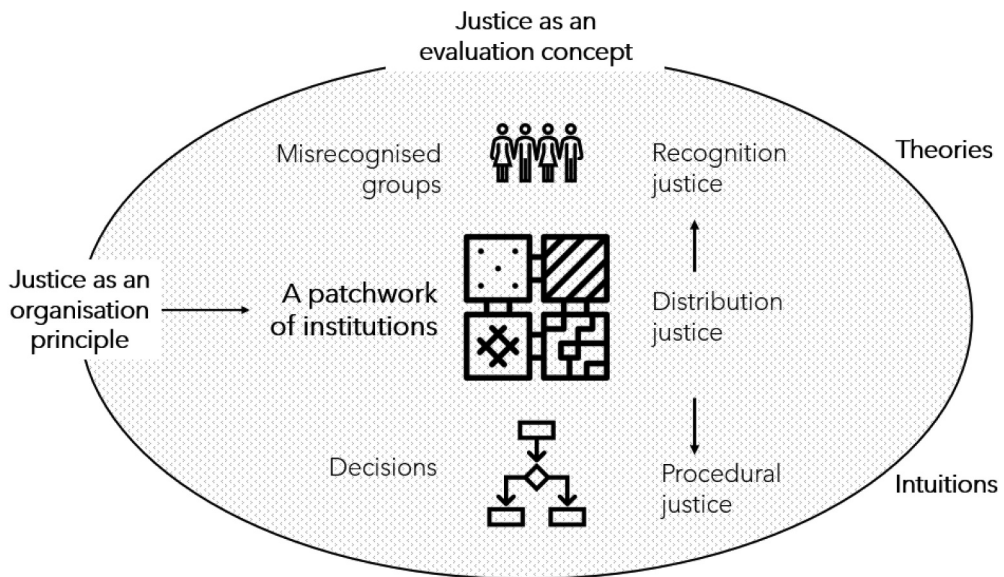


Figure 1. An ecology of energy justice.

and impacts of the different elements are all interrelated, constituting an 'ecology' of energy justice.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Dealing with justice in energy discussions is hard, both theoretically and practically. The reason for this is that we do not and probably cannot know what justice is. Obviously, this should not stop us from pursuing justice, especially when dealing with challenges such as the energy transition. By distinguishing between justice as an evaluation concept and an organization principle, we hope that actors who are professionally involved in the energy transition will be able to grasp the connotations of justice for their work. With that, our paper answers the call in energy justice scholarship for more fundamental critical perspectives on energy systems that go beyond merely critiquing their distributive effects (for example, see: Dunlap & Tornel, 2023; Shove & Walker, 2014; Sovacool et al., 2023).

We need to acknowledge that our analyses lack granularity. This is already manifest in our use of terms such as 'energy actors' and the 'energy transition.' The notion of energy actors involves a wide range of professionals who do not necessarily share their normative and epistemological outlook and, most definitively, will have contrastive interests. In fact, it may be very typical for the Dutch context that we could recognize a group of people homogeneous enough to categorize them as belonging to one group. Also, there is no such thing as a singular energy transition; it is a notion that captures a wide range of activities, including policies, projects, and technology developments, that aim to contribute to an energy system that is sustainable. We have allowed ourselves such imprecision to bring our message across as clearly as possible – but we invite research that spells out these details, which in turn allows for more nuanced conclusions. What our framework also does not do is provide normative guidelines for how to come to a more just energy transition.

What our discussion reveals is that there are justice concerns that emerge *outside* of the conceptions of justice that are formalized in dominant institutions. As Iris Marion Young (1990) notes, the institutions that characterize the modern world fall short of dealing with injustices that are not covered by the institutions that are dominant. This critique coincides with the difficulty of including matters of inter- and intragenerational justice in the development of energy policy, as was written in Section 3. Seeing the energy transition as a social experiment implies that there are developments that occur outside of institutionalized societal contexts. In the literature, there are valuable approaches to justice, which are not covered by our framework, as, until now, these have not yet been taken up in existing patchworks of institutions. We may think here of approaches such as global justice, restorative justice, and inter- or multispecies justice, which would provide an important extension of our initial framework.

The normative uncertainties that characterize the energy transition demand that we rethink the institutional structures and infrastructures that have been developed to facilitate the energy transition. The framework we have presented in this paper allows for a more critical perspective on the way the energy transition is shaped by energy actors. The framework shows that justice cannot be seen as an external yardstick that we can conveniently apply to measure a set of inequalities that is based on subjective experiences – on the contrary, justice pervades their

everyday work. The actions and decisions of energy actors are enabled and constrained by institutions that forward mechanisms and rules for the distribution of goods, and as the energy transition progresses, we need to critically assess how these mechanisms and rules match our intuitions about and theories of what is just.

Notes

1. <https://topsectorenergie.nl/documents/1145/TSE-brochure-ER.pdf>, https://www.wrr.nl/binaries/wrr/documenten/rapporten/2023/02/16/rechtvaardigheid-in-klimaatbeleid/Rechtvaardigheid+in+klimaatbeleid_DT.pdf
2. We have interacted with energy actors in different contexts, such as workshops and project meetings. An event of special interest has been the Energy Justice Festival (see <https://justetrans.nl/festival/>, accessed on 4 June 2025)
3. See: https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal/finance-and-green-deal/just-transition-mechanism_en, accessed on 23–10-2024.
4. See: <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/klimaatverandering/klimaatbeleid>, accessed on 23–10-2024.

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