Public engagement in energy infrastructure

WHAT?

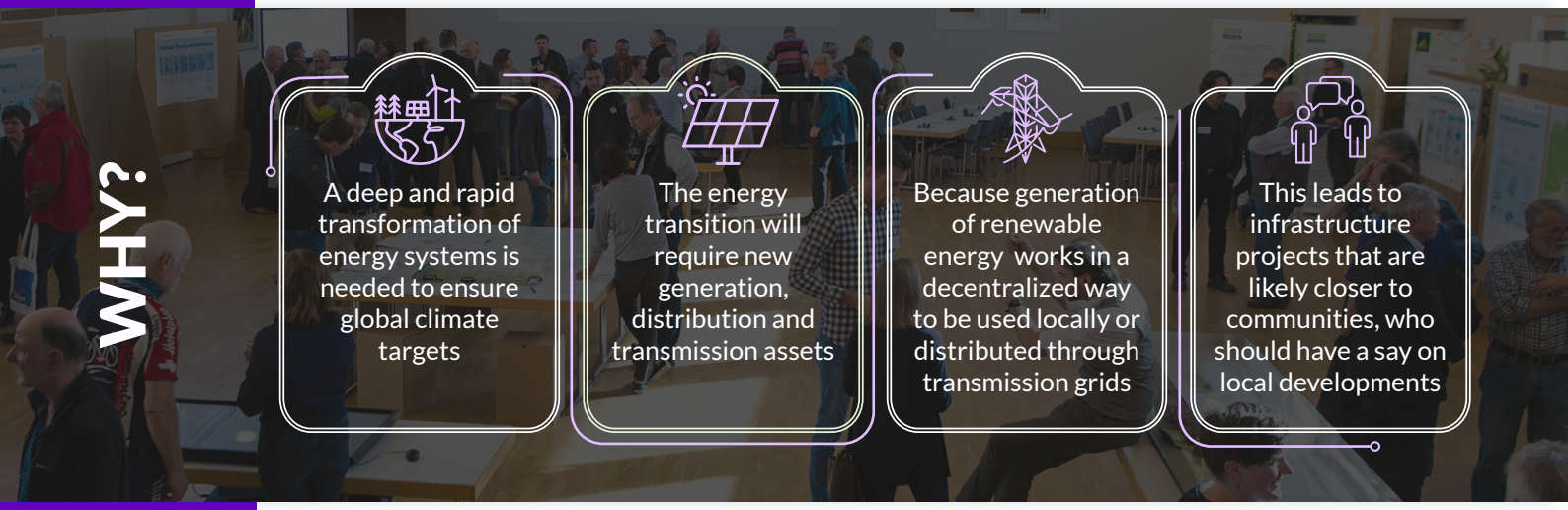
While public support for the energy transition is generally high in most European countries, energy infrastructure developments are often met with **public opposition on the ground**.

Reasons for opposition on energy projects can include:

- Mismatches with place-related identities and attachments
- Fears of their negative impacts on wildlife, agriculture, fisheries, or visual landscape
- Political ideologies and debates

Public engagement
is defined in our research as the involvement of the public in **various stages of energy infrastructure projects**, incl. stages of need definition, planning, permitting, and implementation, as well as of sharing of medium- and long-term socio-economic benefits.

WHY?



A deep and rapid transformation of energy systems is needed to ensure global climate targets

The energy transition will require new generation, distribution and transmission assets

Because generation of renewable energy works in a decentralized way to be used locally or distributed through transmission grids

This leads to infrastructure projects that are likely closer to communities, who should have a say on local developments

HOW?

Public engagement can be implemented with different approaches. We distingish them according to **three typologies of participation**:

Information
One-way communication to raise awareness, incl. digital formats. The public does not provide input

Consultation
Two-way dialogue to gather local views and knowledge. The public can shape the process but not the objectives and outcomes

Empowerment
Two-way community-led engagement. The public co-desings and help shape the process, its objectives and outcomes

All forms of participation can be useful, as various types of engagement can achieve the engagement goals in certain contexts, and publics may have diverse preferences for their participation.

Available research shows that most of the public prefers **high level of consultation, or active participation** where they have the possibility to **influence the decision-making** during the planning and approval stages.

IMPLEMENTING PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT IN ENERGY INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS

What drives the public to engage with energy projects?

Beyond financial incentives, here are some examples of socio-psychological and institutional drivers:

People are affected and concerned
As energy infrastructure projects affect communities, locals want to have a say in their development

Environmental questions
Wider concerns towards climate change and integration with ecological aims into renewable infrastructure

Trust and possibility to influence
Citizens feel motivated to engage when they perceive the process as fair and when they have agency over the decisions to be made

Sense of community and co-ownership
A longer-term vision in which the community's interests are considered also motivate the public to engage.

Some of the **identified challenges** to implement public engagement in energy infrastructure projects include:

Public trust towards developers & authorities: Processes need to be transparent and fair to create an atmosphere of trust and transparency.

Timing of engagement: Public should be engaged before the start of the project and throughout its life-cycle.

Representation of concerns: Listening to citizens enables them to express what issues are important to them and why.

Understanding the value of public participation: Public engagement must be desired by policy makers and practitioners.

Impact on decision making: A challenge highlighted is power relations where the public is not given space to influence decisions.

Skills for meaningful public engagement Skilled workers are crucial to enable the needed formats and tools to facilitate dialogue.

Public engagement with energy infrastructure can be driven or hindered by different factors. The following policy recommendations can help create an environment for **meaningful engagement**:

Need for communication

Policymakers must better communicate about the engagement opportunities, as well as the benefits for the public. National climate policy should also create awareness about the **need for energy infrastructure**.

Capacity-building

Greater awareness and capacity building is needed for businesses, including planners and developers, on the importance of public engagement for a **rapid and just energy transition**, including best practices for public engagement.

Collaboration

Policy makers should incentivise different actors to **share experiences & knowledge** within and across energy technologies, ensuring participation and engagement processes on the ground are inclusive.

UsersTCP | Public Engagement for Energy Infrastructure
IEECP Institute for European Energy and Climate Policy
Renewables Grid Initiative

This Factsheet is based on the research of the IEA's UsersTCP Task 'Public Engagement in Energy Infrastructure'. For more information, click here.