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Is energy solidarity a remedy for energy access difficulties of French households or a symptom of a troubled management of these difficulties ?

Adèle Sébert

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The energy concerns of the last few months, marked by the concomitant rise in global energy demand (following the post-Covid economic recovery), a geopolitical crisis in Europe and a slowdown in electricity production in France following the shutdown for maintenance of some of the country's nuclear reactors, has put the energy access difficulties of French households back in the media and political spotlight. Furthermore, the environmental issues (commitments to reduce GHG emissions, availability of energy resources, energy dependence. . .) question the capacity of the State to act in the field of energy policy and the relevance of this level of action.

Yet the feeling that the State is the most appropriate interlocutor to limit the effects of rising energy prices (electricity, gas, fuel) has been reinforced by recent measures (“bouclier tarifaire”, “indemnité inflation”). The public and collective management of the energy access difficulties of households relies on a variety of actions in the fields of the energy supply and the public service, the fight against poverty, housing renovation. These actions are tied up with an abundant terminology to designate situations (fuel poverty, energy exclusion, energy over-consumption, submissive energy sobriety), public or private devices (French “chèque-énergie”, accompanied auto-rehabilitation, participative renovation site) and actors to deploy them (“ensemblier solidaire”, “conseiller précarité-solidarité”).

New forms of monetary and energy transfers have recently developed : “dons d'énergie” or “dons de chaleur”, which have yet to be characterized, and to some extent energy saving certificates, which operate on the same principle as CO2 certificates. These transfers involve various public, para-public and private actors : they are based on energy saving obligations (on the side of energy sellers) and become financing tools for associations that take charge of energy access difficulties of low-income households or some local public action actors. These transfers add to the already existing policies and tools, some of which could also share the title of “energy solidarity”.

To what extent can these forms of energy solidarity be linked to the principles of energy justice (Jenkins et al., 2016; Sovacool and Dworkin, 2015) ? Considering with Éloi Laurent (2012), that fuel poverty is the symptom of several inequalities, what social and environmental inequalities do this diversity of energy solidarity target ? What does it tell us of the dynamic between the State, market actors, social and solidarity economy actors and civil society actors ? Is it a question of creating a form of collective action in order to compensate for an energy policy for which market logic produces excluded households that the State does not (or does not manage or does not wish to) take charge of ? Or is it a way for private actors to compensate for activities that produce these same excluded households ? Does energy solidarity disrupt the division of responsibility for access to energy between the State and

market actors, or is it simply a confirmation of this division ? Is it a new way to promote a fair but individualized energy transition relying on bilateral and compensatory economic relations ?

We propose to question the economic meaning of the notion of solidarity, understood as a link of “social interdependence” based on a “contractual principle of action” (Blais, 2019), which would be applied to energy access, in order to establish a typology of forms of energy solidarity. We will work on a material collected during a PhD research from 2017 to 2022 and based on 41 semi-structured interviews with actors from fields of the energy supply and the public service, the fight against poverty, housing renovation. This typology would be a first try to answer the questions previously asked.

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