

Decarbonisation and its discontents: A critical justice perspective on four low-carbon transitions

What are the types of injustices associated with low-carbon transitions? Relatedly, in what ways do low-carbon transitions worsen social risks or vulnerabilities? Lastly, what policies might be deployed to make these transitions more just? The presentation answers these questions by first elaborating an “energy justice” framework consisting of four distinct dimensions—distributive justice (costs and benefits), procedural justice (due process), cosmopolitan justice (global externalities), and recognition justice (vulnerable groups). It then examines four European low-carbon transitions—nuclear power in France, smart meters in Great Britain, electric vehicles in Norway, and solar energy in Germany—through this critical justice lens. In doing so, it draws from original data collected from 64 semi-structured interviews with expert participants as well as five public focus groups and the monitoring of twelve internet forums. It documents 120 distinct energy injustices across these four transitions. It then explores two exceedingly vulnerable groups to European low-carbon transitions, those recycling electronic waste flows in Ghana, and those mining for cobalt in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The presentation aims to show how when low-carbon transitions unfold, deeper injustices related to equity, distribution, and fairness invariably arise.