

10th Taskforce on Public Participation, 10-11 October 2022

Agenda item 5 – Public participation in decision-making on urban development/cities

Francesca Carlsson, European Environmental Bureau

Dear madame Chair, dear honourable delegates,

As all States need to boost their energy sovereignty and reduce their dependency on unsafe, climate harming sources, it has now become even more urgent to swiftly scale-up renewable energy capacity.

The energy crisis is already being felt acutely by people across the EU. And while this winter is going to see the energy poverty rate going through the roof, the problem has been plaguing Europe for many years due to politics dragging its feet when it comes to renovating and cutting off gas from homes. To put this into context, before the Russian aggression in Ukraine, one in four people in the European Union were at risk of energy poverty, with three quarters of Europe's buildings being energy inefficient. So heating and powering our homes and businesses this cold season is a prospect that many are understandably dreading, and there are real prospects of a deterioration of socio-economic conditions in the communities that were already struggling and in new communities.

The REPowerEU announced this summer by the European Commission – which includes a proposal to amend the Renewable Energy Directive to speed up permitting processes – as well as the revision of the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive, are initiatives that the EU has embarked on to address the problem of energy efficiency and sufficiency. These can impact our everyday lives in a very real way, from reducing climate impacts and lower energy bills at the end of the month to renovations in our homes and other buildings.

Early-stage, inclusive, meaningful consultation and engagement of people and civil society must be ensured. It is paramount that peoples' rights to access information, public participation and access to justice are maintained in these challenging times; a move that can only reinforce the European Green Deal.

As expressed in a joint statement by a group of NGOs, published on 12 September, we support the EU's aim to speed-up renewables permitting procedures, and urge that this should be done with a holistic approach to spatial planning for renewable energy installations, as well as fostering the participation of affected people and local communities in both planning and ownership of renewable energy projects.

However, as the climate and biodiversity crises are strongly intertwined, we are concerned about the Renewable Energy Directive proposal under the REPowerEU undermining fundamental parts of EU environmental law that protect nature and climate, such as the Birds and Habitats Directives, the Water Framework Directive, the Maritime Strategic Framework Directive or the Environmental Impact Assessment Directive. Exempting projects in 'go-to' areas from environmental impact assessments, and thereby avoiding public participation, is likely to trigger public resistance and slow down, rather than speed up the development of renewables.

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We therefore call on legislators and policy makers to not compromise on existing environmental safeguards and protection to speed up the deployment of renewables and the renovation of homes. And we call on them to not just avoid undermining, but to further strengthen the involvement of people and local communities in the energy transition.

Thank you very much for your attention.

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