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### Energy Sovereignty

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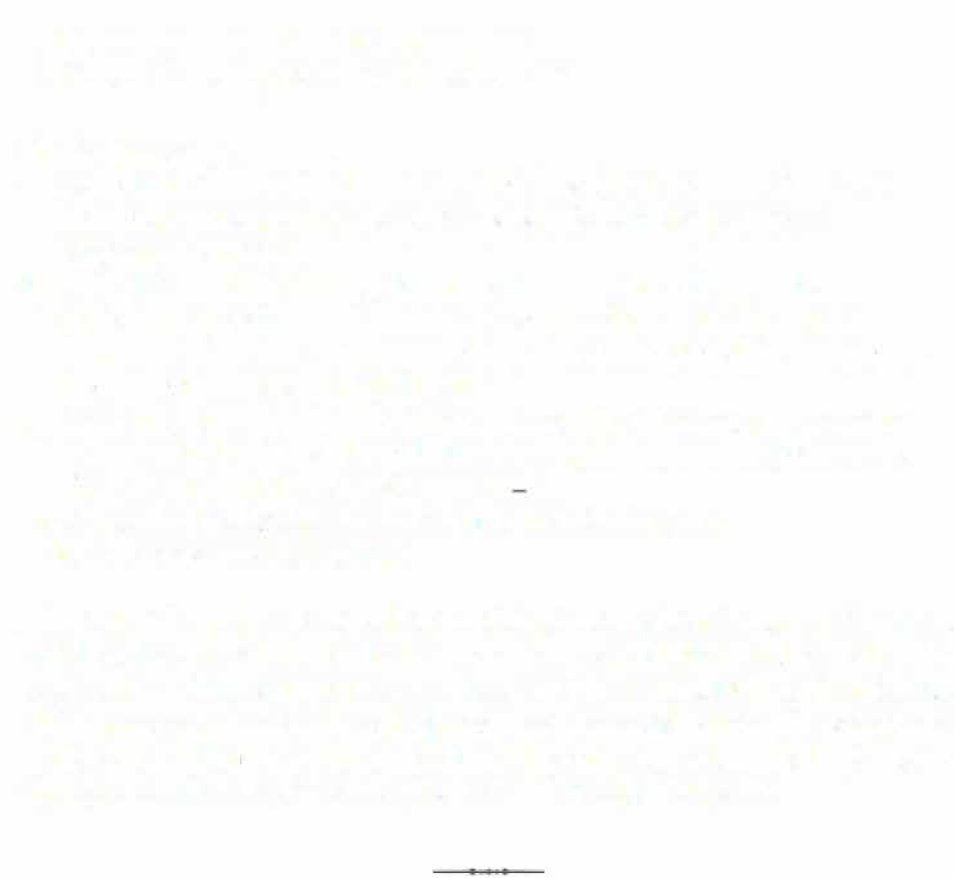
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## ENERGY SOVEREIGNTY

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Energy sovereignty (ES) refers to political projects and visions towards a just generation, distribution, and control of energy sources by ecologically and culturally grounded mobilized communities, both urban and rural, in ways that do not affect others negatively, and with respect for ecological cycles. Energy sovereignty acts as a slogan for organizations and movements to reclaim the right to take decisions about energy, understood as a natural commons, and basis of life for all. It also refers to the plurality of systemic

alternatives under way that challenge the dominant energy paradigm controlled by centralized powers.

The concept of ES has been used since the 1990s in Latin America to challenge the privatization of basic services by transnational corporations and the 'corporatization' of the state enterprises. Similar to the claim for food sovereignty by farmers' movements, ES has become popular among organizations and movements globally, especially after 2000, as a response to multiple forms of extractivism, energy poverty, corporate oligopoly, patriarchy, privatization and trade agreements, wars and crimes to secure provision of fossil fuels.

More recently, it has also become a response to climate change and to the fossil fuels industry. For instance, energy sovereignty has been included in the new constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia. In Europe, the issue has been addressed in several campaigns questioning the energy oligopoly and seeking to create new public enterprises. Barcelona is a case in point. In the Germany where the transition to renewables is strong, *Energiewende*, meaning energy democracy is mostly used. There are moves to re-municipalize urban energy utilities and grids in Boulder, USA, Hamburg, Berlin, London.

Energy Sovereignty defends the right to decide what source of energy to exploit, how much to produce, how, by whom, where, and for whom. In line with ecofeminist perspectives, it calls for decolonizing the hegemonic structure of the energy model. Decolonizing energy requires questioning deeply rooted beliefs such as the universalizing understanding of Energy with a capital 'E' as the abstract and uniform commercial generation of energy, and as a function of capital accumulation. It also involves differentiating Energy from the incommensurable and contextually diverse uses of 'energy', with a small 'e' (Hildyard *et al.* 2012), which is able to adapt across time and space to different ecologies and human geographies.

The alliance between actors – environmental justice organizations, peoples affected by energy projects, trade unions and urban dwellers – across sectors shows not only the complexity but also the great potential of ES as a political project. In Colombia, the movement of dam-affected people, *Movimiento Ríos Vivos*, urges that any proposed dam must include both energy and water sovereignty, owing to the close connection between communities and their water cultures, as well as the direct relation between the historical domination over peoples and that over water resources.<sup>1</sup>

In Brazil, the national Movement of Dam Affected People (MAB) allied with trade unions in the *Plataforma Operária e Camponesa para Energia* or Workers and Farmers Platform for Energy,<sup>2</sup> met to discuss the historical debt that megaprojects and energy corporations owe to those affected, and



to draw-up a proposal for an energy and mining policy for the country (*Proyecto Energetico Popular*).

In the US and internationally, the federations Trade Unions for Energy Democracy (TUED) and Public Service International (PSI) also understand energy as a crucial common issue across most social sectors. Energy is important for restructuring economic and productive relations, and to properly address public health and workers' safety.

Energy sovereignty challenges the opposition of 'urban' and 'rural' when it comes to socio-environmental impacts: the ones affected by an unjust energy model are not only those displaced by megaprojects, but all those on which the socialization of costs is imposed and from whom extra profits are mined. The urban energy poor should be considered impoverished or robbed, and democratic processes distorted by the 'revolving door' between politicians and energy entrepreneurs. In Spain, United Kingdom or Bulgaria, for instance, urban dwellers have organized to denounce skyrocketing electricity tariffs and the violation of laws designed to protect vulnerable families – for example, in Barcelona, by the Alliance against Energy Poverty.

Energy sovereignty also tackles the issue of technology and knowledge within energy transitions. It calls for decentralization, relocalization, and differentiation of energy generation, technology, and knowledge. It poses an epistemic challenge to reconsider our 'territory' not as a mere repository of natural resources, but as a socio-cultural whole, where one makes sense of existence and where one bases and roots conscious, responsible and joyful political *proyectos de vida* or life projects (Escobar 2008). Or, as other Latin American communities say, *planes de permanencia en los territorios* (plans for staying in the territory) or *proyectos de buen vivir* (plans of living well).

Proposals for ES inevitably meet with limitations and conflicts. As it shakes the basis of production relations, it challenges powerful sectors of our societies: energy companies, constructors, finance and political elites, the military establishment, and so on. What will be, for example, the implications for the structures of modern states and governments? Will ES require a restructuring of the administrative context in order to manage a new energy model? How can it avoid closed and exclusionary groups, and instead promote collaboration of open communities, perhaps based on a subsidiary principle? Will initiatives for ES ultimately help redefine limits to consumption and establish patterns of energy-usage that are truly sustainable for a given territory?

Despite the depth of these challenges, a closer look reveals that different models are already implemented and functioning, for example, the rural electrification cooperatives in Costa Rica (among which, COOPELESCA),

the cooperatives SOM ENERGIA and GoiEner in Spain, and RETENERGIE in Italy, along with urban re-municipalization initiatives. They need to be valued and defended as powerful potential multipliers.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See more details on the work in Colombia of the Movimiento Rios Vivos at <https://defensaterritorios.wordpress.com/2016/08/25/politica-energetica-colombiana-y-propuestas-del-movimiento-rios-vivos-para-su-transformacion/>.

<sup>2</sup> See Movimento dos Atingidos por Barragens (MAB), <http://www.mabnacional.org.br/category/tema/plataforma-oper-ria-e-camponesa-para-energia>.

### Further Resources

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