From Manifesto to Method: Artistic Research, Community Voice, and the Reimagining of Energy Transitions

Bahanur Nasya[1], Yilmaz Vurucu[2]

1,2 wonderland, 1210 Vienna, Austria,XsentrikArts, 1210 Vienna, Austria.
E-maill:yilmazmv@hotmail.com[1],yilmazvurucu@x-arts.eu[2]

Abstract.

This paper presents the PED Manifesto as a methodological and artistic intervention into energy transition discourse, emphasizing participatory, co-creative, and arts-based research practices to formulate social consent between stakeholders and citizens. Rooted in standpoint epistemology and informed by extensive fieldwork with Renewable Energy Communities (RECs) across Europe, the Manifesto emerges as both a process and a living document designed to aid in *democratizing energy governance*. Through collaborative workshops, artistic outputs (including films, games, and exhibitions), and iterative community engagement, the project repositions energy not merely as a technical issue but as a socially embedded and culturally meaningful practice. The research integrates creative methodologies to amplify citizen voices, challenge hierarchical structures in planning, and build tools for dialogue, inclusion, and local empowerment. Central to the Manifesto are five core demands and ten actionable recommendations aimed at fostering transparency, holistic integration, and place-based solutions in Positive Energy Districts (PEDs). This work demonstrates how artistic research, and co-creation can expand the epistemological scope of sustainability transitions. While the approach aims to present a participatory model for equitable and culturally responsive energy futures, these claims should be viewed as being exploratory in nature, requiring further validation. The proposed framework offers promising pathways toward inclusive energy governance, though its broader applicability and long-term impacts remain areas for future research.

Keywords: Energy Communities, Artistic Research, Community Engagement, Energy Justice, Participatory Governance, Co-creation

Introduction

Climate catastrophe continues to ominously and silently, yet forcefully and sometimes viciously emerge as the definitive material reality to shape the future of the human species. According to Crutzen and Stoermer the “era of humans” (Crutzen, P., & Stoermer, E., 2000) or what they defined as the Anthropocene is a new planetary epoch, in which humans have influenced the environment and shaped the earth in profound, and often harmful and damaging ways. Industrial production has played a key role in this impact, working with ideologies (and systems) such as neo-liberal capitalism to justify the plunder, and create a cognitive dissonance or disconnect between our consumption habits and the environment that allows for our existence. This results in us evading the larger impact of our actions.

The implication that all of humanity bears responsibility for the ostensible destruction of our habitat, not to mention our modes of production, relations and sociality, is one that has been disputed by some academics and writers who highlight the disparity in the creation and impact between classes and even societies. Indeed, Malm and Hornborg (2014) place

responsibility for the destructive power of industrialization and modern extraction on a "clique of white British men." They offer a critique of the wide brush strokes of analysis that place all humanity as being responsible and highlight a discrepancy in agency and impact among social and economic classes. One could thus argue that the monopolization of power and resources in the hands of a smaller yet influential group results in valuing surplus value and profit over all else and thus, destroying our environment.

The neo-liberal system (and Capitalism in general) not only impacts our environment, but our sociality as well. Judith Butler (2015) highlights this by arguing that self-sufficiency is a moral imperative of neo-liberalism. This individualism and lack of community or sociality is one of the key identifiers of capitalism, as economic exploitation and maintenance of class relations is made possible through a domination of ruling class ideology and what Gramsci (1971) labels as the manufacturing of consent. It seems as if we're at a point in history in which power and resources are monopolized and the relations of production allowing such hoarding is normalized through State Apparatuses. Community and sociality are reduced to individualism (with a sense of despondency and loss of hope in citizens) and we're on a crash course towards extinction… all alone.

Energy transition is more than energy sources

This reality, or at least our personal perceptions of what we believe constitutes our current reality, is what motivates us to research movements that are different. We've been active in telling the stories of communities that seek new ways of promoting inclusivity, social well-being, diversity and sustainable practices. Our observations have mostly been that building meaningful connections between citizens and their environment, promoting transparency and local collaboration creates results that far exceed top-down methods that are enforced on society. (Nasya, Vurucu, & Barthel, 2025) There is a lack of transparency and inclusion in our economic and social models. What's more, the topic of energy seems to be a critical issue when it comes to the environment: so we began researching how we could connect these themes, and what the landscape had to offer in terms of cases.

In the turmoil of the climate change we're experiencing and the pressing need to transition our system towards renewable, sustainable principles and practices, energy emerges as a central topic with deep meaning and importance. Within the energy transition projects we studied and researched; we found the newly emerging concept of energy communities as being one that shows promise and aligns with principles of bottom-up processes. These communities are unions made of concerned citizens seeking ways of reducing the environmental impact of our consumption habits, providing alternatives to the monopolization of energy, establishing local communities that sometimes go beyond the mere goal of creating sustainable energy, and engaging in communal activities that create strong bonds among citizens.

In a way, RECs (Renewable Energy Communities) are one response to the anthropogenic reality surrounding us, as well as the need for community and localized sustainable living. Energy has been the driver behind conflicts and environmental damage (for instance through the CO2 emissions), yet the prioritization of the climate issue and the urgency of the climate crisis does not influence the actions and preferences of the global energy industry, given that renewables still only account for %9.7 of the global consumption. (International Energy Agency, 2019)

Through the projects we were engaged in, the energy communities we researched and the members of which, we spent time discussing, exchanging, and dreaming with, we came to the conclusion that the necessary energy transition was too big of an issue to be left to the profit-oriented minds and cultures of industry and Capitalism. Yet, how were we to create a framework that included artistic research and practice concepts such as participation, co-creation and standpoint theory on this topic? We realized that we needed collaborators we

could work with particularly technicians and researchers, and work with them towards a participatory, non-academic approach.

Through the PED-ACT project and with our partners, we began analysing the data in the PED Database. The PED database is a platform that compiles information from different PED practices and contexts, mostly located in Europe. (Nasya & Vurucu, 2025). While compiling an analysis of 50 European cases, we also drew parallels with the cases of the PED-ACT project located in Sweden, Austria, and Türkiye.

This paper builds on distinct empirical contributions made in the PED-ACT partnership, specifically the developed PED Matrix, which builds the foundation of the PED Manifesto. The PED Matrix and Manifesto is introduced shortly in this paper to showcase how the empirical research was adopted into artistic practice. For further details on the empirical work, further documents are cited. It's important to highlight that all available documents of the 50 registered PED projects in the PED database were analysed to define the pillars of the PED Matrix in order to determine common topics, tasks, and challenges. This analysis allowed the identification of the common elements of the energy projects on which the critique of energy transition can pinned, and on which the Manifesto can build upon.

Method

The PED Matrix (Nasya & Vurucu, 2025) and the scoring system is what stemmed out of this data and its analyses. A European research network (Cost Action funded, PED-EU-NET) studied and researched all existing and designed PEDs which integrated into the PED database over a period of 4 years from 2020 to 2024. By 2024 the network consisted of 50 cases across Europe. The PED Matrix stems out of an analysis of these cases. The available documents of all cases were identified from the modelling results of NMF and LDA algorithms to distinct topics, which are representing the core aspects of the matrix. These topics were shared for feedback and revision, with case owners, stakeholders, and researchers of the PED-EU-NET network. The collaborative process involving the PED-ACT partnership and stakeholders refined the PED Matrix, resulting in eight main aspects: social, process, technical, governance, environmental, legal, financial, and managerial. An energy transition scoring system was formulated for each aspect, with five topics detailing criteria for qualitative assessment. An energy transition scoring system, with a numerical point system from 0 to 3, assesses eight PED Matrix aspects. A score of 3 indicates comprehensive inclusion of criteria. Our initial conclusions and findings were as follows:

First, we came to realize that there was/is a gap between the goals of industry, the cycles of the government and the needs of citizens. Political positions emerge based on election cycles and the need to be re-elected (by politicians), industrial decisions are based on profit and commercial concepts, (Nasya & Vurucu, 2025) and the only constant in this equation, which oddly enough plays the least decisive role in the energy transition and energy sourcing are regular citizens. We began advocating for a move beyond profit driven models, one that puts communities and citizen groups as the primary actors in this necessary transformation (Nasya, Stevens, & Vurucu, 2025).

Second, it was obvious that each citizen group and therefore their RECs had strengths, as well as weaknesses. For instance, the Urtinsa energy community in Alcorcon, Spain struck a good balance between prosumers and consumers, bringing various actors in an industrial zone together. Supported by the municipality, Urtinsa has managed to unite companies and create a democratic process where each member has one vote and the decision-making balance is equalled out (Nasya, Stevens, & Vurucu, 2025). On the other hand, the business-driven members of this REC have difficulties in engaging with regular citizens and attracting them as members. In contrast, the BürgerInnenKRAFTwerk community in Austria, consisting of environmentally conscious citizens aiming to produce energy and create an umbrella

organization that could also be active in Schönbühel-Aggsbach as a community with walks, history and environment protection activities and get-togethers, seemed to lack access to the regulatory frameworks and technological infrastructure (ie: ease of access to the electrical grid system). Both cases are energy communities yet differ vastly. The success of these communities can be hindered by several barriers. (Nasya, Vurucu, 2023).

Citizen communities could have extensive resources and know-how in one area, but not realize they lacked resources in another. Quite naturally, we sought to connect the gap and provide an overview, based on our experience and the research conducted by us and our project partners. We wanted to create an overview of what is necessary for a REC to form and maintain its existence in the long term and remain true to its original calling. We began our work towards creating an overarching document by analysing the research and categorizing the findings.

Third, it goes without saying that legislation plays a tremendous role in promoting the creation of smaller communities. While the citizen-centred Austrian example is embedded within the capacities of the electricity grid, which forces the members of the REC to define the boundaries within the hierarchy of the energy grid, for instance along the reach of the transformer network. The business-driven Spanish example on the other hand, has a limitation of a 2km distance in which the REC can operate, independent from the grid system. These simple legislation differences have a huge impact on how the REC can function, how far the outreach is and who in the end can be a member or not.

Fourth was that while renewable energy creation is highly technological in nature, merely focussing on the technology aspect would result in the impact of these impressive communities being reduced.

Finally, we had to acknowledge that the transition into green energy could only be made fully possible (and sustainable) if the process was egalitarian, transparent, and allowed citizen projects to play a crucial role, given that they benefit the most (locally, environmentally, and economically) from transition into renewable energy. Our role here was to advocate for sustainability, collective action, transparency (distinguishing the ideas and interest of monopolies) and localizing the production and consumption of energy (and hopefully, in the long run, other products as well). We came to understand that localization meant breaking the chains of dependencies and empowering citizens. Our first step towards independence was through analysing the data and creating a scoring system that could help RECs identify their strengths and weaknesses.

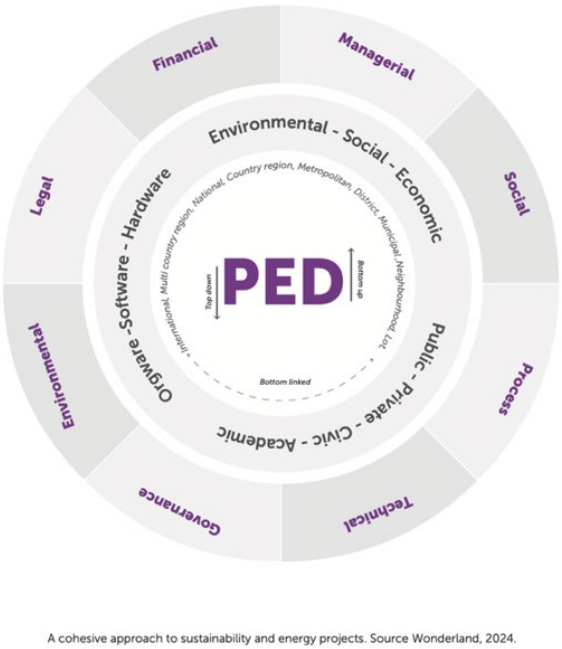
Research result: The PED Matrix

Many studies have focussed on technical, economic, and social factors related to Positive Energy Districts (PED's). Yet, the social aspects are quite limited. The matrix sought to analyse the social aspects on the one hand and provide a quantifiable framework on the other. The complicated process saw the use of machine learning technology and keyword extraction - aspects which are not crucial to the topic of this paper. Suffice to say, the extensive work ended up identifying eight critical subject categories that can help identify and quantify PEDs and ECs. These were the social, process, technical, governance, environmental, legal, financial, and managerial components.



Figure 1: an example of the comprehensive Matrix scoring system for cases

The Matrix is designed to adapt to the dynamic nature of PEDs, incorporating new insights, technologies, and practices as they emerge. The PED Matrix will be further tested and expanded to enhance its precision and usefulness, supporting the development and implementation of energy transition projects in alignment with the latest advancements and stakeholder needs. The Matrix has managed to gather all relevant data and create a scoring system that can help communities identify their strengths and weaknesses.



A cohesive approach to sustainability and energy projects. Source Wonderland, 2024.

Figure 2: a depiction of the PED Matrix categories

PED Aspects scoring & Cases	Schönbühel-A.	Urtinsa
Social	12	3
Process	6	1
Technical	5	6
Governance	9	8
Environmental	9	3
Legal	7	14
Financial	9	8
Managerial	7	7

Figure 3: a comparison of the scores of two different energy communities

A good comparative example of the scoring system are the results for the Bürgerinnenkraftwerk and Urtinsa energy communities, highlighting their strengths and areas needing support. A comparison of citizen and business-driven energy communities highlights the influence of partnership models on legal and managerial aspects. Citizen-driven RECs score highest in social-related topics. Group members have diverse knowledge and capabilities, especially regarding energy, making it an opportunity for learning and strengthening social practice. Community diversity influences energy project values and areas needing assistance. Community energy projects, driven by entrepreneurs' face challenges in demonstrating societal contributions beyond sustainable energy production. Stakeholders often overlook the broader benefits of these projects, but the analysed case is strengthened by the collaboration with the municipality significantly, which is reflected in the score of the legal aspect. In both cases, the scoring results were perceived as important, structured, and detailed feedback on the status of the energy project. Having a quantification for the strength and the needs of the energy project, as well as the comparison with other cases helped to understand the work ahead for the development of the case. In some other cases then the described two cases in this paper, stakeholders perceived the scoring as critical and the scientism allowed a meaningful deeper exploration of the needs of the case and discuss, possibilities to cater to the needs.

Forming social consent: The PED Manifesto and the participatory approach

While the Matrix is an impressive scoring system, we felt there still was a gap in communicating this in a meaningful and holistic manner. Not only did we need to understand and code the needs of these communities, but also present actionable items that could help our cause towards renewable energies. The means of communicating the needs of communities in a language and format that is accessible to practitioners, experts and groups of citizens alike was at the core of our approach. This is in essence what Leavy (2015) highlights as a participatory approach, which views non-academic stakeholders as equal collaborators, and

takes a stance against academic hierarchy (as well as governance and power related hierarchies).

In order to ensure this (as part of our methodology), we utilized workshops and co-creation sessions, in which we used games, brainstorming sessions, reviews and discussions on best practices. Our process included viewing films or reading materials in an effort to ignite exchanges and detail the perceptions and challenges of citizen groups.

The manifesto is a continuation of the PED Matrix in this sense, yet it combines our participatory approach into a pathway that looks at the energy transition in three main pillars: economic, ecological, and social sustainability. We recognize that the first two are well researched and accounted for in the field, yet social sustainability generally lacks in the approach to the transition. Utilizing our exchanges during workshops and co-creation sessions, we wanted the manifesto to recognize the significance of the "other" (in this case, citizens and citizen groups.). We also sought to take a stance against rigid systems offered as solutions, and provide a fluid, more harmonious and flexible approach to the topic of energy.

The aim is to fully respect the unique local characteristics of energy projects and the needs of the communities for which they are designed. The PED manifesto puts consultation and empowerment at the forefront of the transition process. It advocates for collaboration between actors with different backgrounds, skills, interests, aims, in working towards a common goal. It also places any bilateral or collective collaborations into a balanced perspective and can be used as the starting point when develop PED collaborations, projects, or pacts.

arts-based research to co-create

Art-based practices always have some sense of participation attached to them (Leavy, 2015) based on the perceptions and understanding of the perceiver. In this case, the work we created represents the data, and derives out of the data. Likewise, the process of participation comes out of the exchanges, and represents the exchanges. The result of these data and exchanges are multiple: films, the manifesto, articles, research and more. These products are refined through exchanges with communities and their inputs and are then produced to be screened / exhibited / utilized in exhibitions and workshops as part of the process.

At the heart of the manifesto are **five core demands** that call for:

1. **Energy equity and justice:** placing human needs and vulnerabilities above market efficiency.
2. **Inclusive governance**: where the people affected by decisions are also the ones shaping them.
3. **Holistic integration**: connecting social, environmental, and technical dimensions across scales.
4. **Place-based solutions**: rejecting one-size-fits-all strategies in favour of contextual, embedded approaches.
5. **Co-creation and transparency**: ensuring that decisions are not only made for people, but with them.

To accompany these demands, the Manifesto proposes **ten actionable recommendations.** They include tools for participation, recognition of emotional and symbolic attachments to place, support for alternative economies, and the creation of cultural spaces that can nourish collective imagination. Importantly, they offer practical entry points for **both individuals and institutions,** shifting the scale of transition from abstract policy to everyday life.

As expressed, the Manifesto is designed to be alive. It is not definitive. Just like the communities it champions, it evolves through discussion, translation, adaptation. It is a framework intended to inspire, invoke thought and exchange between citizens, municipalities, researchers, and policymakers.

We do not distinguish the forms, nor the process in obtaining these forms; the end result is a form of gentle and inclusive activism that allows others to imagine, participate in perceiving, and perhaps even be inspired to take action in their own ways and within their own possibilities.

Standpoint theory and co-creation as a method

Standpoint epistemology, initially developed via feminist theory, plays an important and significant role in our approach to co-creation. We acknowledge that the hierarchical order of society (in this case, of the legal system, of the governance models and of the economy reality of energy and big-energy companies in contrast to citizens who don't really have a say on the pricing or production methods of their energy supply) creates various standpoints. (Harding, 1993)

The power dynamics shape the perception of those impacted by them differently, and our observations suggest this holds true in energy transitioning. That's why the development and refinement of the PED Manifesto wasn't only informed by technical and policy considerations but also by the methodological integration of artistic research and standpoint theory to explore how lived realities of communities might inform energy futures. This approach was employed to better understand and communicate the lived realities of communities involved in energy transitions and to ensure that their knowledge, needs, and desires informed the outcomes of the project in a substantive way.

In our exploratory engagement with the energy community in Schönbühel-Aggsbach (documented through a film and workshops), a recurring theme emerged: their human-centric structure. We spent time with this energy community, exchanging with them and getting to know them up closer. When compared with other energy communities researched through the PED-ACT project, it became evident that a common denominator across different energy communities was their inherently human-centric structure. Each case we studied and engaged with exhibited distinct characteristics based on its geographic, legal, and infrastructural context, but all shared the condition of being citizen-led or citizen-dependent initiatives. The long-term sustainability of these projects was therefore dependent on active human input and continuous community engagement. **This pattern, observed in a limited sample, suggests** that long-term viability hinges on active participation—**though broader validation is needed to generalize these findings.**

In this project of PEDs, "the other" is represented by local citizens and community members who are frequently excluded from technical planning processes but whose involvement is critical for project success. Listening to these voices enabled the project team to identify broader needs and ambitions beyond energy generation, such as community cohesion, intergenerational collaboration, and social resilience. Through our collaboration with Bürger*innenKRAFTwerk (which included staying in Schönbühel and being generously hosted by the community members) we realized an expanded vision that most likely accompanies all such cases: When citizens come together, they often move beyond the confines of mere energy production. This EC had extended their role into community building and regional cooperation, and was active in environmental preservation, local history and community gatherings. They had carved out roles for the community that included the preservation of a local identity, in a sense – they had social ambitions and were creating a diverse and inclusive environment in which community well-being, environmental protection and cultural heritage were as important as energy efficiency. By integrating diverse energy sources (such as water and solar) and collaborating with regional stakeholders, the community sought to balance energy production with environmental and cultural preservation. However, its impact remains limited, underscoring the need for supportive policies and resources. On the other hand, they are illustrating a potential (though not universal) trajectory for citizen-led

initiatives. While such cases inspire alternative models, their scalability remains constrained by policy gaps and infrastructural path dependencies.

When screening the documentary on this EC, we will incorporate local discussions and exchanges to ensure these issues are touched upon and that the participative process includes other stakeholders such as municipalities, investors and planners. The participative process thus, will not be limited with "the other," yet it will place their needs and perspectives at the centre of the movement towards energy efficiency.

The PED Manifesto functioned as a central reference document throughout this process, guiding both theoretical and practical engagement. It was articulated in multiple forms into accessible narratives: a written publication, an exhibition of visual research, participatory workshops, and two films (a documentary and a short animation) which together served to translate complex socio-technical processes into accessible, tangible, and meaningful narratives. This multimodal dissemination approach reflects principles of arts-based research, which emphasizes the integration of creative methodologies into scholarly inquiry to foster dialogue, increase accessibility, and engage diverse publics (Leavy, 2009). This arts-based approach served as a provocation—repositioning energy as a socially embedded process rather than a pre-engineered system. However, our emphasis on inclusivity and transparency encounters systemic barriers (e.g., grid monopolies, inflexible regulations), underscoring the need for further structural advocacy.

Just as the PED Manifesto advocates for inclusion and transparency, particularly regarding power relations and ownership structures, our approach repositions energy not as a pre-engineered system to be deployed, but as a locally defined and socially embedded product, akin to other forms of local production. However, operationalizing this perspective is challenging due to structural and systemic constraints. Centralized grid monopolies, lack of legal frameworks for localized generation and exchange, and existing infrastructural dependencies necessitate ongoing advocacy. Through the production and dissemination of our materials, films, posters, exhibitions, and games, we aim to support this advocacy, making energy governance more transparent and participatory.

To adapt to local contexts, we have created a database of communication tools ranging from visual materials to interactive games. These tools can be tailored to the cultural, spatial, and environmental contexts of each community. For example, in Cesena, Northern Italy, local identity is shaped by the Savio River, which also presents a recurring flood risk. The exhibition planned in Cesena will connect the energy transition to the environmental crises and increased flooding risks (Nasya, Sarsam, & Vurucu, 2025). In contrast, the city of Antalya, where tourism dominates both the economy and spatial planning logics, requires a different mode of engagement centered around visibility, affordability, seasonal energy use, and awareness building among both residents and visitors. These place-based experiments highlight contextuality but are not prescriptive. We experience that each community's socio-cultural fabric demands tailored engagement. We propose that such responsiveness is vital for sustainable transitions, though its efficacy requires longitudinal study.

Awareness of such intricacies (and the capacity to adapt methods, formats, and content accordingly) is central to our process. By engaging with the specific needs and cultural logics of each location, we aim to foster a more inclusive, grounded, and context-responsive energy transition. This approach reinforces the notion that no transition can be sustainable if it ignores the socio-cultural dimensions of the communities it affects.

Conclusion

The process of creating the PED Manifesto was never meant to be final. It was, and remains, a step in an ongoing inquiry, one rooted in both urgency and care. Through documentary films, animated narratives, exhibitions, and workshops, we opened spaces for

dialogue and collective imagination. These formats allowed us to translate the abstract and technical into the tangible, and to give voice to those too often excluded from the transition discourse. The diversity of the material and content, the levels of simplicity allow us, to share beyond projects and national borders, inspire community groups that were yet not introduced to the topics of energy transition or were unaware that they too, could become one of the actors in the transition. But this is only the beginning. If we are serious about inclusive, community-driven energy futures, then more is needed. More time spent with diverse communities. More attention to the nuances of place, language, culture, and vulnerability. More research into what participation truly means as a process of shared creation. And more experimentation with the forms we use to communicate, co-create, and organize.

The energy transition will not succeed through numbers alone. It will succeed when the stories, needs, and capacities of people are not an afterthought but the starting point. Our work is committed to that belief, and to continuing this journey alongside those who are ready to question, imagine, and co-create what comes next. We have begun to build a database of puzzle-like-tools that are adaptable and open to being shaped by the contexts in which they are used. They come in packages of stories, lots of stories, which can connect and inspire. Our goal is to continue expanding this body of work and to make it accessible as **open commons,** a public resource that municipalities, communities, researchers, and educators can use, reinterpret, and build upon. Especially for the practitioners and researchers using arts-based research techniques this content but also the co-creation moments can be valuable. Especially, for the arts and social science scene, such combination of methods can deliver new insights and potentially new ways of empowerment.

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You can find the Documentary film on BürgerINNENKraftwerk here: https://vimeo.com/1024655505

You can directly access the PED Manifesto in full here: https://wonderland.cx/the-ped-manifesto/