

Manchester Urban Institute

People and energy

Putting people at the centre of energy policy

The people and energy theme foregrounds research agendas at the energy-people-cities interface. It extends the decade-old legacy of the Centre for Urban Resilience and Energy (CURE). The theme starts from the premise that effective and sustainable energy policies are predicated upon a deep understanding of people's everyday lives, social relations and future aspirations. As such, the theme gives centre stage to human needs, social inequalities and progressive politics in the context of energy research.

Sustainability matters

The theme provides integrated and innovative social science-based insights into current and future urban energy transformations. We build on multiple strands of research that employ the 'urban' as a starting point for scholarship and policy with respect to questions of sustainable and low-carbon energy use. This research contends that current societal challenges surrounding energy – involving issues of climate change, decarbonisation, sustainability, security, and equity – are deeply implicated in the functioning of cities. At the same time, future urban development is predicated on networks of energy supply and demand.

Foregrounding energy justice and citizenship

The theme highlights the social and political roots of energy-related injustices, as well as the manner in which they are underpinned by lack of recognition and appropriate recourse to legal and political procedures. The distribution of costs and benefits associated with energy-related interventions, processes and transformations also features centrally in our work. Our work seeks to provide novel perspectives and forms of integration between spatial inequalities and energy transformations within multiple urban and regional settings.

Detailed evidence from across the world

Findings from the theme are based on detailed evidence from multiple sites and modes of governance. This ranges from small-scale communities and neighbourhoods to transnational organisations. Even if our work is strongly embedded in the local, national and global policy contexts, the theme seeks to highlight alternative understandings and interpretations of energy policy – giving voice to places and people who are seldom heard in mainstream decision-making circles.

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The people and energy research theme is pioneering in terms of its focus and composition. We have developed a distinctive focus on energy-related spatial inequalities, justice and citizenship while offering new insights into the social, economic and cultural underpinnings of energy production and consumption alike. With more than 30 research projects whose value exceeds £20 million and a deep embeddedness in decision-making processes – as evidenced, for instance, by our leadership of the EU Energy Poverty Observatory – we are one of the world's leading research groups in this area.

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Professor Stefan Bouzarovski

Academic lead on the People and Energy research theme, Manchester Urban Institute





Photo: Stefan Bouzarovski

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Engagement with multiple actors

We have an extensive network of ongoing and past collaborations with a wide variety of stakeholders, representing different forms of government, businesses, advocacy groups, practitioners and think tanks. Our ability to tackle energy challenges in a multi-disciplinary manner has been aided by the diverse composition of our group, which includes researchers from more than 10 different disciplines. This team has acted as one of the main hubs for energy and social science research at The University of Manchester more broadly.

Research projects

Research projects are at the core of our people and energy theme. They have been funded by a variety of agencies – from the European Union and various national governmental bodies, to local authorities, charities and businesses. Recent and ongoing projects include EVALUATE (Energy Vulnerability and Urban Transitions in Europe), ENGAGER (European Energy Poverty: Agenda Co-Creation and Knowledge Innovation), EPOV (EU Energy Poverty Observatory), and STEP IN (Using Living Labs to roll out Sustainable Strategies for Energy Poor Individuals). All of these projects have helped change how people-energy relations are approached and addressed in science and policy. They foreground systemic factors such as energy needs, recognition, practices and housing structures, as well as the regulation and governance of the energy sector. The projects engage an exceptionally wide range of institutional stakeholders through collaborative approaches and co-creation – workshops, seminars, conferences, online and social media activity – and bring energy issues to the attention of influential decision makers.

This work extends into the international geopolitical domain as well: the AGORA project (The age of infrastructure: China as a global urban agent) seeks to explore how Chinese infrastructural investment reconfigures relations between cities, regions and nation states. The project highlights the existence of a particularly urban form of transregional development, where growth is achieved through connectivities between economic hubs. Our starting point is that China's global infrastructural presence can reveal wider contradictions and contingencies in the changing planetary relationship between cities, states and market-led development. The project involves case study work and network building among relevant stakeholders in academia, government, business and the third sector.

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EVALUATE has been advancing the boundaries of knowledge by developing an innovative and comprehensive framework to study energy poverty – a global problem linked to a broad diversity of societal concerns including environmental sustainability and social equity. EVALUATE has established the theoretical envelope and generated an unparalleled amount of scientific knowledge on the subject.

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Professor Diana Ürge-Vorsatz

Vice Chair, Working Group III, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)



Photo: Stefan Bouzarovski