



European Economic and Social Committee

European Energy Dialogue

In March 2013 the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) adopted the Opinion "Needs and methods of public involvement in the energy policy field" at the request of Energy Commissioner Oettinger. In this opinion the concept of a European Energy Dialogue (EED) was developed.

Why establish a European Energy Dialogue?

The indispensable legislative, regulatory, technological, societal and behavioural developments to prepare the energy transition will require public understanding and ownership to deliver their full potential. The EED is therefore meant to go beyond existing and insufficient consultation processes and be an inclusive, transparent, trustworthy and coordinated multi-level conversation within and across all Member States. Public involvement is a precondition for the achievement of the EU energy objectives. If energy issues continue to be perceived – and sometimes presented – only as the sum of individual factors, the lack of a more sophisticated, overarching picture will impede the understanding of inter-relations and trade-offs between them.

What will the EED be about?

The EED will promote understanding, stimulate practical action and have a measurable influence on energy policy-making by stimulating convergence at EU level, in particular as a way to optimise energy provision, costs and climate objectives. Citizens, civil society organisations, national and local authorities and all types of energy organisations will participate. The EED will combine national and European perspectives with a view to bringing operational added-value to policy making and implementation: actions must be carried out at national/regional level but take account of the broader (European) picture. The EED will encourage discussion of how far sometimes conflicting goals – secure, sustainable, safe, competitive and affordable energy – can be reconciled. Integration and awareness by Member States of the potential consequences on other EU countries will help everybody.

The purpose of the EED is to discuss all relevant energy issues in the context of economic and social development, involving the appropriate stakeholders. Possible topics include:

- Energy production and consumption patterns against a background of energy transition
- Trade-offs and citizens' preferences and participation
- Infrastructure and grids
- Energy efficiency
- Energy education
- Carbon capture and storage

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- Markets organisation
- Energy costs and affordability
- Funding options
- Demand-side response and energy management innovations
- Energy chain governance
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One key element will be to raise the level of awareness, information and understanding of energy issues among the public encouraging interest by being relevant to areas of greatest impact, i.e. mainly through prices.

What is the EESC's role in the EED?

The EESC has consistently advocated the importance of civil society's involvement in building an integrated and effective energy policy. The EED will also play a part in improving participatory democracy and underpin civic and stakeholder involvement in energy futures in each Member State. Building trust through honesty and balance in the presentation of issues, on what is the status of existing knowledge and the genuine opportunities and challenges of each technology, will be essential. The EESC's membership and constituency, reflecting European society, is well placed to reach out to citizens and stakeholders in the Member States and at EU level, and establish this trustworthy and comprehensive programme. However the EESC's limited financial and human resources mean that its contribution to the putting in place of the EED will mostly occur through promoting, stimulating and coordinating a series of operational actions that will be principally carried out and financed by other institutional and non-institutional partners.

How could the EED be developed?

The EED is a comprehensive framework that will structure and articulate a series of concrete actions which will develop over a number of years. It is proposed, in its inception phase, to focus on six specific areas of action:

- ***Supporting dialogue in the context of national approaches:*** Many countries have varying types of public dialogues on energy already happening (at local, regional or national level). These initiatives can all contribute to the EED – can influence it and be influenced by it. The EED could provide a framework for dialogue on energy issues to be held at national/regional/local level. The EED will encourage these initiatives to take account of the broader, European picture, and so can be benchmarked and feed into the debate on energy policy choices at EU level. It is essential to establish links between the national, intermediary level and the pan-EU discussion. The involvement of citizens at the best appropriate level is crucial, as is the definition of minimum engagement criteria to guarantee reliable standards for all initiatives in the EU in terms of whom to involve, engagement methods, topics, two-way communication.
- ***Enhancing and extending the ex-ante EU consultation processes:*** several consultation methods can coexist to meet different purposes. The current public consultations carried out by the

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European Commission before proposing new legislation are appropriate for some purposes but less to others: they do not always allow gathering civil society's diverse viewpoints. Building on what they do well, the EED and the EESC, using the input of a potential research programme, could support enhancing and upgrading them, possibly through decentralised and more direct and responsive public engagement and consultation initiatives. By contributing to the EU process they could improve the quality of consultation and its impact in decision-making.

- ***Dialogue with stakeholder groups and major players in the energy chain:*** The EESC's work already involves dialogue with numerous energy-related stakeholders groups. Active discussions with such organisations will play a part in the EESC's role in the coordinating hub for a comprehensive energy dialogue. The EED also needs to take account of the positions of energy supply and distribution companies. The intention is to seek out shared areas of interest (e.g. policy certainty, need for investment) and explore what these influential organisations have in common with other stakeholders. In order for all stakeholders to be able to participate in a meaningful dialogue, flanking measures in terms of capacity building and skills development may be needed for some.
 - ***Channelling the contribution of the existing energy forums:*** The European Commission has established a number of energy forums where policy and practical EU initiatives are discussed and feed in to EU policy and legislative development and review. One objective is to explore stronger connections with issues of direct public concern thus enhancing their capacity to make a useful contribution to dialogue and consultation.
 - ***Encouraging widespread public awareness:*** the challenge of the coming years will be to provide the consumers with the capacity to make a range of vital decisions about their energy choices. Effective markets depend on consumer knowledge just as citizens need similar understanding to support medium and long-term political decisions. Specific initiatives must be devised for the general public so as to increase awareness about energy issues and a sense that a story about energy is being developed – for themselves, their household, neighbourhood, community, region, country and for Europe as a whole. Over time a clear and consistent European energy narrative will emerge – the product of millions of individual and group contributions. Such a narrative will not have resolved all the conflicts. It is likely to show that hard choices and rising costs lie ahead. But it will have established a greater degree of public understanding and a framework responsive to change and global events. Above all it will have engaged people, as consumers, workers and citizens, in practical action to build the energy transition.
 - ***Research and piloting wider public engagement:*** The EED will contribute to improving the quality of policy and decision-making by exemplifying a process of resolving conflict, building trust and legitimacy and improving knowledge and understanding. It is hoped that public involvement techniques and a general framework for a pan-European energy dialogue will be the subject of an EC-funded research programme starting in 2014.
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