

Reconfiguring Energy for Social Equity

Worldwide, renewable energy production is growing at a rapid pace. Yet, who will benefit from this transition in different global contexts? Starting in the Fall of 2020, the ReSET project will investigate how investments in renewable energy might help to achieve social equity outcomes. In doing so, researchers in ReSET aim to collaborate with different agents of change that play a key role in setting agendas, defining policy principles and financing the global energy transition.

The ReSET Project

The project, Reconfiguring Energy for Social Equity (ReSET), is a research collaboration funded by the Volkswagen Foundation with academic partners from the Netherlands, India, Germany and South Africa. ReSET aims to illuminate how the transition from fossil to renewable energy can be leveraged to address the Sustainable Development Goals, specifically SDG7 (transition to renewables) and, while doing so, deliver on SDG5 & SDG10 (reducing inequalities) and SDG16 (inclusive and just institutions).

This 4-year project, consisting of leading institutions from the partnering countries (see overview below), investigates how investments in the energy transition can improve social equity in the global north and south and illuminate key principles that can help achieve this.

An Unjust Energy Transition?

The backdrop for this project is not necessarily a positive one. Climate change and rising social inequality are both grave concerns for the coming decades. The transition from fossil to renewable energy will be a key determinant of wellbeing in the 21st century. We argue that the decentralised and distributed infrastructures for renewable energy may, in principle, ameliorate inequities resulting from centralised carbon economies.

However, recent evidence suggests these potentials are not fully exploited. Indeed, research suggests that renewable energy may once again be built and organised in a centralised way, concentrating resources and power in the hands of a few and missing opportunities for meaningfully empowering local communities. Therefore, we argue that an unjust energy transition is distinctly possible.

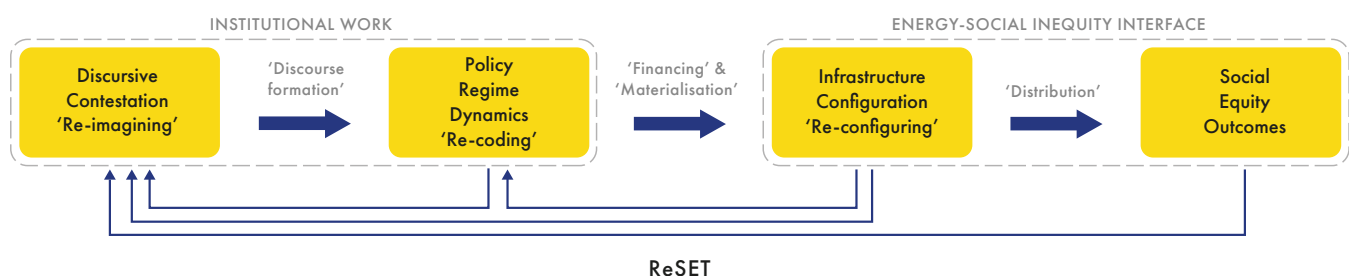


Figure 1: the theoretical framework of the ReSET project

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The Software of Policy Regimes

ReSET compares four case studies from Germany, India, the Netherlands and South Africa. In each country context we are interested in understanding how, in exemplary initiatives, the software in the form of ‘policy regimes’ (policy processes that shape specific policy outcomes), determines the flow of investments into the hardware of energy infrastructures. Together with a diversity of stakeholders, we aim to develop a framework for analysing how the energy can be re-imagined, re-coded and re-configured to enhance social equity outcomes (see figure 1).

The project will look at urban and rural areas where renewable energy development is connected to a social equity agenda. In these contexts, researchers will collaborate with actors operating at different scales – development banks, municipalities, entrepreneurs, social movements, and others - to explore what these actors (can) do to influence relevant policy frameworks and social equity outcomes.

Investors as Agents of Change

The ReSET project seeks to engage stakeholders from the outset and communicate findings as the research project proceeds. It will do so in three ways: firstly, the project will develop an innovative framework and a series of case studies (exemplars) that help to describe possible futures and what different agents of change can do to reorient investments in renewable energy projects. Secondly, RESET will engage a community of investors (e.g. development banks) in a series of workshops to enable mutual learning and to review strategic-decision making and investment evaluation. Thirdly, the project will build a learning environment to educate and link early-career academics and professionals.

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Towards a Just Energy Transition: Projected outcomes

Committed to a ‘transdisciplinary research approach’, the ReSET project aims for three types of outcomes (cf. Mitchell et al. 2015)¹:

- Practical improvements: descriptions of tangible exemplars, new criteria for investment decisions, insights in powerful policy instruments
- Knowledge exchange: integrating social and technical know-how, professional education webinars and an online postgraduate module
- Mutual learning: building learning networks of stakeholders across the global north and global south via workshops and an online platform

These three types of outcomes provide the foundation for an evolving synthesis paper that will describe practical ways in which stakeholders can influence policy regimes, policy outcomes and investment flows that can reinforce the precarious just energy transition processes. This will include an analysis of the potential of a diversity of delivery vehicles, including the private sector (independent power producers), communities (cooperatives), local governments, public entities and various kinds of public-private partnerships. The focus will be institutional and financial innovations that reinforce a just energy transition.

¹ Mitchell, C., Cordell, D. & Fam, D. 2015. Beginning at the end: The outcome spaces framework to guide purposive transdisciplinary research. *Futures*, 65: 86–96.

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