Energy democracy in a continuum: Remaking public engagement on energy transitions in Thailand

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A B S T R A C T

Sustainable energy transitions are fundamental in making climate actions effective and in attaining sustainable development. To achieve the transition inclusively, fairly, and justly, democratizing these processes seems imperative; yet, not all human societies are thriving in democratic spaces. Focusing in the non-democratic state of Thailand, this paper explores the materiality of energy democracy in such locations. Using mixed qualitative methods and a grounded approach, the paper offers a case study of community-oriented renewable energy transitions as practices occurring outside the realms of state-sanctioned and government-fostered apparatuses for public engagement. The case shows how these practices continually shape and co-produce energy sociotechnical orders. The paper further shows how a space for communal deliberation can become a site for the making and remaking of public engagement, and how, over time—of hits-and-misses, of consensus-and-dissensus, of stability-and-uncertainty—it could become durable, yet remained open-ended and provisional.

“Not only is the force of public discussion one of the correlates of democracy…but its cultivation can also make democracy itself function better...The achievement of social justice depends not only on institutional forms (including democratic rules and regulations), but also on effective practice.”

Amartya Sen ([1]:158), Development as Freedom.

1. Introduction

International norms suggest that sustainable energy transitions are fundamental in making climate action effective and in attaining sustainable development. The Paris Agreement on climate change, on one hand, calls for a multilevel action on decarbonisation of energy systems. By multilevel, it means that energy transition has to occur across scales—from the local to the subnational to national to international. Agenda 2030 or the Sustainable Development Goals, on the other hand, calls for energy transitions as a component of the goal of universal energy access. In many developing countries, energy transitions towards sustainable, environmentally benign systems are key not only in meeting these normative agenda; it is also vital for well-being and quality of life. Yet, little is known about how communities (i.e. those at the bottom level of governance) in developing countries are progressing in their transitions. Even less is known about transition processes occurring in non-democratic societies. This paper seeks to address this gap. It explores, examines, and reflects on how community practices of energy transitions occur democratically even in a non-democracy.

Broadly, energy democracy refers to an emergent social movement that re-imagines energy consumers as “prosumers” or innovators, designers, and analysts who are involved in decisions at every stage of this sector, from production through use [2]. In many democratic societies in the developed world, energy democracy has been thoroughly documented in scholarly papers in terms of actions and interventions by community energy groups, co-operatives, and associations (e.g. in the UK [3]). This paper joins this corpus, but enriches it further by focusing its gaze on one understudied location in the developing world. A critical interrogation of this marginal topic opens up a new opportunity for scholars and practitioners alike to scrutinize how community energy transitions are practiced in situ in developing countries, what their challenges are, and what their futures could be. In so doing, we are able to compare how these experiences demonstrate similarities and/or differences vis-à-vis energy democracy-as-construed in the global North.

Following this introduction, the paper is presented in four sections. Section 2 describes the contexts by which the paper is framed: that energy democracy is a dynamic practice in a continuum of public engagement. Public engagement, which comprises exercises and processes enabling citizen engagement on public issues, is experiencing a deliberative turn in the ways and means by which we could understand, navigate, and appreciate its value in the co-production of energy transitions, including in non-democratic locations. Section 3 details the methods used in highlighting the ‘grounded’ approach to present an empirical case of a community-in-deliberation for a sustainable energy
future. Section 4 discusses how this community navigates energy transitions as co-produced sociotechnical projects in what can be called the ‘making’ of public engagement for community energy transitions. Section 5 describes how active citizens in a non-democratic state exhibited the ideals of public engagement for energy transitions in what can be called the ‘remaking’ of public engagement. Section 6 concludes the paper.

2. A continuum in the democratic co-production of sustainable energy transitions

Energy democracy is a concept open for interpretation, but its agenda could include processes of social mobilisation for economic, social, and political projects of energy transitions [2]. The spaces in which these processes are made show shifts in who controls power, not only electric power but also political, social, and economic power ([4]; cf. [5]). As a social agenda, energy democracy encompasses several advocacies, from eschewing fossil-based institutions and corporate profits to addressing historical economic and political inequalities. Being a social movement, therefore, energy democracy blossoms from below—i.e. within and among neighbors, communities, and groups—and expands through strategic alliances, coalitions, and networks to build political, economic, and social power [6–8]. Energy democracy, in sum, pertains to active civic participation in the production and use of energy.

Civic participation on issues of public interest is not new; it is a well-studied aspect of social life and considered part and parcel in the making of social orders [9]. Yet, the concept and practice of public engagement undergoes changing interpretations. Its meanings and contextualization are subject to a dynamic interpretation and re-interpretation, of making and re-making. Chilvers and Kearnes [10] suggest that what matters when enrolling citizens in public engagement is the nod towards reflexivity of the many inevitable openings, closures, framing conditions, and ambivalences that exist when imagining social orders. A focus on reflexivity acknowledges how tension-filled the exercises of public engagement are [11]. Existing in a continuum that is processed and practiced over time, public engagement is indeed characterized by hits-and-misses, of consensus-and-dissensus. By looking at public engagement from this temporal perspective, one could appreciate the durability or non-durability of exercises and practices that make public engagement. Such moments of ebbs and flows, hits and misses, stabilities and uncertainties mean that civic participation is, at best, open-ended and provisional [11,10]; and so should be our understanding of energy democracy.

Energy democracy could mean public engagement exercised in multiple ways. Just like other arenas of civic participation, energy democracy is referred to by other names and brands. In many communities in developed countries, it manifests in citizen-organized, community-managed energy systems. The oft-cited German Energiewende has been suggested to be largely a product of energy democracy [12]. In many ways, these local-level social action practices have helped reveal what can be called the ‘deliberative turn’ in contemporary politics [13,14]. This turn is evidenced by citizens, more than ever, becoming ‘engaged’ with public issues that affect them. In Energiewende, these issues encompass society’s better appreciation of risk, new ownership structures, and socio-economic opportunities. In other locations, such as in the UK, citizen engagement in community energy is also due to factors such as social cohesion and job opportunities, among others [3]. While energy democracy has been richly documented in the context of the democratic global North, little evidence can be found about the emergence of these modes of public reasoning for energy transitions in non-democracies.

Energy transitions are key in addressing one of the most profound sustainability challenges facing society today, climate change. The deployment of renewable energy technologies—advanced as a key response to the climate challenge—as replacement to fossil fuel-based energy systems has to occur quickly and as a multilevel venture. This new international project on decarbonisation, enshrined in the Paris Agreement [15], has already received countenance from across governments, democratic or not. Enrolling those at the bottom rung of the multiple levels of governance, i.e. local governments and communities, are key to the decarbonisation process. Article 11, Section 2 of the Paris Agreement [15] recognizes this focus on the ‘local.’

A focus on the local has technological basis: the distributed nature of renewable energy sources—wind and sunlight in particular—allows almost everyone to tap these forms of energy themselves. The word ‘energy prosumer,’ a word play between ‘consumer’ and ‘producer,’ aptly captured this evolved meaning of ownership. It has also become a hinge by which the social movement on climate action attaches their tactics to challenge the power exclusively held by energy firms and utilities [4,8,7]. With energy transitions constantly re-imagined, localized forms of energy democracy also underlined new opportunities for citizen participation, at the same time that ‘public engagement’ has also become opened to new meanings. One of the many sites where these dynamics have been observed is in non-democratic Thailand.

3. Methods and data

Thailand was studied in this paper for the following reasons. Its emergence as upper-middle income economy in 2011 from a low-income country in less than a generation [16] makes it an interesting case to study how developing countries navigate the tensions and trade-offs arising between industrialization and decarbonization [17]. The country’s energy landscape is also almost homogeneous: with the state owning the largest stake in energy generation and distribution—an interesting context compared to the mostly privatized and deregulated nature of electricity systems in other Southeast Asian economies. The state owns publicly-listed energy corporations such as the Electric Generating Authority of Thailand, its subsidiary the Electric Generating Company, and PTT (with businesses in natural gas and other fossil fuels) (see some discussion in [18]). With a steadily rising emissions—from 152 MtCO₂e in 1990 to 369 in 2013 [19], Thailand also offers a lens by which we can better see the contrasting contexts of development and decarbonization. Inequality is another point of interest. Thailand, despite its impressive industrialization, still has significant rural poverty [20], where more than 80% of the country’s 7.1 million poor people live in rural areas [21]. The state of politics in Thailand is another key context. Amongst the countries in Southeast Asia, it is the only country not colonized by western powers. Its turbulent contemporary political history also makes it an important study site. Following a series of take-overs and protests, Thailand is, as this paper goes to press, under a military government.

In many ways, therefore, Thailand represents a locus of study by which one can glimpse the relationships between democracy and the environment—of which the empirical evidence remains a considerable gap in the literature [22]. A 12 October 2017 search of the International Bibliography of the Social Sciences found only eight articles with the words ‘Thailand,’ ‘democracy,’ and ‘environment’ in the title, keyword or abstract published in the last twenty-five years; 1992–2017. The Social Sciences Full Text and ScienceDirect databases returned one and zero articles; respectively. This paper addresses this gap by asking a critical question: how democratic processes and exercises of public engagement for sustainable energy transitions could be (or are being) produced under a non-democracy? This paper does not necessarily provide an extensive response to this question; what it does instead is show empirical evidence that public engagement on energy transitions is possible in a non-democracy; and that these exercises were even capable of producing new meanings of public engagement.

The fieldwork for this study was conducted from November 2016 to January 2017 during which the author spent time in Bangkok, Chiang Mai, and Phetchaburi. A ‘grounded’ approach, which means that the research involved a critical exploration of the problem at hand without...
any predetermined hypotheses or variables, dependent or independent, about why and how they unfolded the way they did” ([23][23]: 3835), is employed. This open-ended approach provided the author some wiggle room, hence allowing flexibility and relexivity to thrive as the research progressed [24].

The author used multiple qualitative methods involving interviews, focus groups, walkthroughs, and observations. Interpreters were employed whenever necessary. From this panoply of methods, the author engaged in a narrative analysis to document public engagement practices as they exist and as experienced by the participants being observed in situ. This narrative approach has been used widely in the fields of public policy, sociology, and political science (e.g. [25,26]).

The case study reported in this paper sprung from the Phetchaburi leg of the fieldwork. Phetchaburi is a province located southwest of the capital, Bangkok. The study site comprises a community scattered in ten moo ban (village), in the tamboon (town) of Pa Deng, in the amphoe (district) of Kaeng Krachan. This community, about 275 km southwest of Bangkok, is within Kaeng Krachan, the country’s largest and oldest national park in the Thai-Myanmar border. Many households raise cattle for a nearby royal dairy project. A number of them raise pigs and chickens and plant crops such as pineapples, maize, vegetables, plums, and jackfruits. (Note that there exists no official statistics about this population and their livelihoods.)

In this location, the author spent a week interviewing, conducting group discussions, and observing people and their interactions with their energy technologies and with one another, and walking through neighborhoods and agricultural and grazing fields. These interactions occurred as early as five in the morning and concluded as late as eleven in the evening. An IRB determination from Boston University stated that this project is not human subjects research, hence IRB review is not required (Protocol No 4103X, notification provided on 29 April 2016).

Altogether, the author visited five sites, speaking with interviewees in one-on-one, pairs, or group settings. Interviewees were randomly selected according to their availability and were asked to name other potential interviewees. The interviewees were asked to provide their consent, briefed about the study and the outline of the conversation, and told that they were free to say whatever they wanted to say. The discussion followed guide topics including: (1) a comparison of the quality of their life pre- and post-deployment of renewable energy technologies; (2) the benefits and challenges of associating in the community activity; and (3) the issues they have with the association

Altogether, 31 interviews—five in pairs, two in groups, and the rest, individually—were made. There were two group discussions: one with a group exclusively comprise of women and the other a mixed gender group, each lasting an hour. On average, these conversations lasted 40 minutes, with some extending up to 1.5 hours.

4. The case: an energy transition and the ‘making’ of a public engagement

In Pa Deng, about a hundred households self-organized a network based on King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX)’s sethakit por piang (sufficiency economy) idea of development, also called ‘MoSo’ (after ‘moderation society’). (There exists no formal census of this network but rough estimates from its leadership suggested they are about a hundred and fifty individuals (field notes 11/2016).) MoSo has been globally hailed as transformative by organisations such as the United Nations Development Programme [27]. Nonetheless, MoSo is not free of controversy. Hewison [28], for instance, tied it to slippery discursive framings in that it could be whatever someone wants it to be. Elinoff [29] notes that this view of development is not exclusive to the King since groups reimagining Thai development around cultural forms of communality, substantive participation, and religious notions of moderation have been advancing it for more than two decades already. MoSo, nonetheless, is translated in practice in the Pa Deng network through five key development areas: resiliency, community cohesiveness, stronger households, livelihoods, and capacity building. At the core of this collective are activities contributing to sustainable energy transition. These involve adoption of technologies such as biogas digesters, which are containers holding a mixture of flammable gases produced from organic matter that are used for cooking, improved cookstoves, and solar home systems for lighting and irrigation (field notes 11/2016).

In 2006, Khun Kosol (name used with permission) founded the network when he relocated to Pa Deng where he started a vegetable and poultry farm. As the network’s de facto leader, Khun Kosol was seen giving interviews on television and was often mentioned in some of the author’s interviews in Bangkok and Chiang Mai. The network appears to be ‘flat’ in terms of institutional arrangements with no ‘formal’ hierarchy. Khun Kosol served as a figurehead of the network, and was assisted by a treasurer, a secretary, and five ‘leaders’ assigned to each of the network’s five key development areas. This team served a term of one year, after which, they are replaced by another set of volunteers (field notes 11/2016).

The collective was created in reverence to Rama IX, the late King of Thailand, a shared understanding among network members and reiterated during the interviews (field notes 11/2016). This imagined relationship with a monarch, who, at the time of the fieldwork, had recently died, is unique amongst Southeast Asian countries in that the King was given a revered, almost demigod, status across Thai society [30]. Such adulation is important to note as this conveys cultural meaning by which public engagement in Thailand is practiced ([29]; cf. [31]).

The network’s focus on sustainable energy transitions sprung from a communally identified need. Although Thailand had already reached 100% grid electrification, communities such as Pa Deng’s could not be connected to the national grid. State regulations prohibit grid extension to national parks. Lighting fuel therefore had to come from expensive kerosene, while cooking fuel had been expensive liquefied petroleum gas (LPG), charcoal, and some illegally harvested forest wood. Finding solutions to shift away from these unsustainable, expensive, and not readily available fuel involved processes of constant experimentation and learning, including copying from what others had been doing (field notes 11/2016).

Upon knowing that their Burmese neighbors on the border had been using concrete biogas digesters for cooking, the Pa Deng network decided to build a pilot demonstration project to see if this technology would also work in their context. In contrast to these traditional concrete biogas systems, however, they experimented with locally available, cheaper plastic material. Their new system, which cost about THB 50,000 (about USD 1400), could produce energy using local fuel stock from cow manure, is easy to operate, maintain and manage, and, in the longer term, is cheaper than buying kerosene, charcoal or LPG tanks (field notes 11/2016). A majority of network members had adopted this cooking technology, with some households even using it to power small engines for electric lighting (field notes 11/2016).

Financing for these technologies were either borne by members themselves, and in cases when a member could not afford them, the network provides some financing scheme from a ‘common fund’ that members contribute on a monthly basis (field notes 11/2016). Monthly repayments were made on the principal, plus a low interest. The network has also received some grants, in cash and in kind, to support these technologies. These include some amount from the Global Environment Facility, technical support from a local university, and recycled batteries from a private firm operating in the province of Phetchaburi (field notes 11/2016).

The benefits of distributed, stand-alone, and community renewable energy systems are well documented in the literature (e.g. [3]), and the author’s conversations with some network members have enriched this body of literature. Since their sustainable energy systems could already supply their energy demand most of the time, the use of expensive kerosene, charcoal, or LPG tanks for cooking and diesel for fuelling
generation sets have been greatly reduced. As a result, monetary savings are the first of these benefits that households felt. This money could now be used for more important expenses such as for health and education. Some interviewees reported that they also used these savings for productive purposes such as additional equipment or agricultural inputs for their farms and small businesses. Since they no longer need to harvest firewood, the second of these perceived benefits is about protecting the local environment, which has immediate impacts on the local biodiversity, the protection of a local carbon sink, and avoided emissions. The third of these is freed up time. Time previously spent for firewood gathering was now used for productive efforts such as farming. The fourth is the availability of lighting in the evening, which enabled children to better do their homework in a more illuminated environment (field notes 11/16).

The sustainable energy transitions observed in Pa Deng—from the use of unhealthy and non-environment friendly biomass, kerosene and LPG tanks to the adoption of sustainable biogas digester fueled with locally available feedstock, and the shift from using diesel-generated electricity system for lighting and irrigation to the adoption of solar-powered systems—are not technologically exclusive. In contrast to other rural collectives, which are usually state-organized, the Pa Deng network was created and sustained independent of outside intervention from elite government and non-government interests. Sustained for over a decade now, the network practices a practical and grounded public engagement exercise made durable over time by extensive social experimentation and reflection involving processes of deliberation in decision-making.

5. ‘Remaking’ public engagement

As a sociotechnical practice, the public engagement observed in Pa Deng in both formal (i.e. their monthly assemblies) and informal (e.g. interactions on roadways and evening gatherings over local wine) ways reveals how their spaces were transformed into sites for remaking public engagement: a deliberative turn in ways and means by which the practice of public engagement had evolved.

Deliberation can be minimally defined as ‘mutual communication that involves weighing and reflecting on preferences, values and interests regarding matters of common concern’ ([32][32]: 76). While there are multiple ways to know whether a deliberation is ‘good’ or ‘bad’ (see [33]), Dryzek [34] has developed three ideals of deliberation: authenticity, inclusivity, and consequentiality. In short, deliberation should provide avenues for authentic exchanges of reasons ensuring participants of equal and fair opportunity to entertain and welcome competing arguments. This activity should also be, as much as possible, inclusive, meaning that participants have ample opportunity to reflect upon possible options presented, at the same time that all those affected by a decision are enrolled in the process. The outcomes of deliberation also need to be consequential, i.e. they are either connected to a binding decision or included in recommendations that can be taken into account in future decision-making process [35,33]. While inclusive, authentic, and consequential deliberation is evidently practiced in and by the network, the Pa Deng exercises also shed light on public engagement’s evolved meanings, i.e. that public engagement is co-existent, collective, cultural, contingent, co-produced, critical, consequential, and connected.

5.1. Co-existent

The Pa Deng case illustrates that public engagement is always part and parcel of our everyday lives, or, in this case, the lives of the members comprising the Pa Deng collective. This means that public engagement is not an end in itself; rather it is built onto social, technological, and political processes and means that order this community [9]. A farmer stated: "Our biogas digester would have had happened anyway, even if we did not organize a network. We saw this system already working elsewhere. But the network made the process of adopting it simpler and quicker. I suppose, without my friends and neighbors helping me build my own biogas digester...I mean, the money I borrowed from our community fund to buy materials and their helping hands, I don’t think I can have a biogas digester of my own. But I’m always ready to extend a helping hand to my neighbor. They are the only people I can count on given our location in the forest. We really have to help each other out. And, the digester and our solar panels are one of the many ways we show others that we can work together (field notes 11/2016)."
5.3. Cultural

The Pa Deng case exemplifies publics as internal, not external, to the processes and exercises of public engagement. In this case, both formal and informal deliberation became processes of cultural embedding and active mediation by which Pa Deng publics were ushered to their engagement exercises [31]. There is evidence of a premium placed on the cultural aspect of the process of public engagement here. Farmers were enjoined to participate in the transitions largely since it is ‘attached’ to the practice of the King’s ideals. As a country whose monarch is highly regarded and revered, public engagement was easily achieved following the mere invocation of the name of the monarch himself and his attachment to this exercise [30].

Engagement also appeared to be natural and never predesigned around some stringent methodologies. Informal negotiations, for instance, which regularly occurred as neighbors gather in the evening to enjoy local wine, on the side of the road, or on the way to the market became informal sites of public engagement. In these discussions, farmers would describe their technological innovations. One dialogue between two farmers that the author had observed, for example, covered smoothly flowing exchanges of personal anecdotes about how one’s biogas digester had successfully incorporated some locally available grass cuttings, in addition to cow manure, to produce more cooking gas. These interactions and techniques of participation—though they tend to be more cultural than they are methodical—did not exclusively mean that these examples of public engagement were spontaneous events; they were more of the reverse, and, in some ways, even nudged (field notes 11/2016).

Although the collective commitment and efforts to contribute to MoSo were key nudges to sustainable energy transitions in the community, they were achieved also through established communal connections. This was quite apparent in the more formal interactions amongst network members during their monthly meetings. In these deliberation events, members actively share their experiences including their newly found knowledge about their energy systems with each other. These deeply culturally embedded iterative processes of experimentation, allowed the informal appraisals of local innovations in Pa Deng that also became necessary for making the engagement processes durable (field notes 11/2016).

5.4. Contingent

As a practice existing beyond the ambit of the state, the Pa Deng case vividly demonstrated a shift away from the normative assumption of engagement as a formal deliberation occurring exclusively in formally sanctioned and fostered public spaces [41,33]. Induced from the inside, the Pa Deng innovations for sociotechnical energy transitions were not exclusive products of donor or state-funded development projects.

It is key to highlight that the Pa Deng case can be said to be representative in terms of it being a network built around the concept of self-sufficiency and relatively understood as something attached to Rama IX’s MoSo development ideals. At the same time it is also a special case, considerably sui generis, in that it is the sole network in Thailand, to the author’s knowledge, to have achieved relatively considerable successes in providing local sustainable energy access.

Pa Deng’s internally induced and organic deliberation on energy transitions is also more ‘traditional.’ By traditional, I mean that interviewees would always make a mention of how communality is embedded in being Thai and exemplified in statements such as: “It’s just the way we do things here. We are all Thais. We need to help each other (field notes 11/2016).” Apparently, this ‘Thaiiness’ is not exclusive to this community. The literature points out similarities in spaces where public engagement had also thrived, for example, in Malawi where community members discuss issues with their chiefs ([42]; cf. [43]).

The only noticeable difference would be that the Pa Deng context is not operating under a chieftainship arrangement. Citing examples from India, Sen [44] also notes similar long tradition of civic engagement. Most notable, moreover, are the various communal structures for common resource managements that Ostrom [45] had documented about community-based public engagement that even pre-date industrialization.

5.5. Co-produced

The Pa Deng case also showed that a shift in the conventional understanding that the tools, instruments, and mechanisms of public engagement could be standardized or universalized. This means that public engagement has to be regarded as a co-produced interweaving of the social, the normative, and the material contingent upon issues, cultures, and contexts [9,31]. This underlines public engagement as something to be processed differently across sites.

The Pa Deng network underscored the coproduction of energy innovation by means of not only highlighting their technical transformations but also by valuing the social development (the sense of communality through camaraderie and cohesion) and environmental sustainability (the shift towards sustainable fuel). This high regard towards a multifaceted understanding of what quality of life ought to mean is a product of the community’s collective understanding that sociotechnical energy systems are but ways and means to achieve self-sufficiency (field notes 11/2016).

The evident specificity of the practice of public engagement in Pa Deng, in a way, rejects the one-size-fits-all or ‘institutional monocropping’ [46] as a development dogma. As a specific practice, therefore, what the Pa Deng community had produced for themselves would not necessarily mean that it would also work elsewhere, even in almost-similar contexts in rural Thailand. The co-production aspect of public engagement hinges on the understanding that each sociotechnical innovation is unique.

5.6. Critical

The Pa Deng case also provides a picture of public engagement that understands exclusions to be part of the practice itself. This runs counter to the conventional understanding that stern methodological focus on producing, ushering, and gathering representative mini-publics is necessary to ensure ‘inclusion’ of relevant actors [47]. While inclusivity is important [34], it is simply all but impossible to include ‘all’ relevant actors within a single socio-material collective of participation [10]. In Pa Deng, not all inhabitants are members of the network. When asked why this was the case, the responses the author elicited ranged from “some are rich enough to continue living with expensive LPGs” to “not everyone is attracted with the idea of collecting ‘dirty’ cow manure” (field notes 11/2016). This means that collective experiments, such as what had occurred in Pa Deng, are always partial and subject to overflows.

Even more relevant, the Pa Deng case demonstrates that the virtues of reflexivity and humility are more important in public engagement. By reflexivity and humility, the interviewees referred to their communal practice of critically assessing their own normative biases and commitments as they practice their collective work. One farmer stated:

“I learned that you don’t necessarily need cow manure to operate a biogas digester. I learned that I could substitute it with other feedstock such as grass cuttings and some kitchen leftovers. So I thought my friend who is not a member of our network will be attracted to join us; but it wasn’t enough to convince them. They have other concerns, which I respect. Anyway, our network is voluntary. If you like, then you can join. If you don’t, it’s still okay. I like that we are not forced to be here. And I like that we are free to talk things out, to disagree without being disagreeable (field notes 11/2016).”

The public use of reason—a process or an exercise of rational
discuss the reasons and defense of positions with reasons—indeed, is commonplace in this case. The author had observed tensions a number of times but it was more evident during the community monthly gathering. During deliberation, members freely spoke their minds, arguing with one another on friendly tones, always using stories and narratives of their own experiences (field notes 11/2016). Examples of issues that members found themselves deliberating deeply at the monthly meeting were about establishing rules on delinquents and the criteria for prioritizing technology and loan recipients. While there were heated discussions on these issues, deliberating members had carried it with cordial attitudes. These critical, yet polite and respectful, spaces for carrying out discussions of issues carry greater legitimacy compared to the arithmetic fiat of the rule of majority ([36] [36]: 5–6; [33] [33]: 37–38).

By giving and taking arguments, the Pa Deng network members learned that they could always adapt or change whatever their preferences were, and, thus, they could still be nudge toward positions that would be mutually accommodative [48]. Of the ideals of democracy observed during this exercise, reflexivity turned out to be its most important quality. Reflexive participation means attending to and being open about the framing preconditions of participatory processes, and the ways by which publics are enacted and performed [49]. Reflexivity was intrinsically induced in the Pa Deng deliberation through engaged processes of reasoning while also promoting experimentation and learning-by-doing (field notes 11/2016).

5.7. Consequential

The Pa Deng case also demonstrates a steering away from the linearity of public engagement, i.e. the understanding that exercises and processes should always deliver actionable outcomes and that closure and consensus should be its end-state. A specific binding process is inarguably key in legitimizing deliberative processes [33]; otherwise, ‘they run the risk of being ephemeral and even masking power relations’ ([36] [36]: 11). However, there is the so-called ‘chain of sovereignty,’ which refers to the series of steps through which preferences are translated into action [36]. These chains are exquisitely long such that the hijacking of deliberative outcomes is not totally impossible [36].

The practical solution for conserving, safeguarding, and insulating these outcomes, as they travel along these chains, is to use stronger institutional design. The world-renowned Brazilian municipalities’ participatory budgeting exercise is one example where institutional arrangements have been strongly built to ‘protect’ discussion outcomes as they travel along the chain until they are properly incorporated in public decisions [50]. While this may be significant, the outcomes of engagement in Pa Deng do not necessarily travels longer chains. The consequences of their deliberation were actions that their group needed to take, or, at the very least, something that they can collectively learn from [35,33]. Examples of these include: new capacity built onto the skills set of farmers (e.g. capacity to repair damaged biogas digesters), and actionable decisions on network discipline (e.g. penalties for lackluster participation such as frequent absences in network meetings) (field notes 11/16).

5.8. Connected

The Pa Deng case also underlined a shift towards public engagement as one occurring in diverse, entangled, and interrelated interactions to describe, negotiate, or decide a confluence or a variety of issues, not just a single one [51,11]. The connectedness of issues that the publics in Pa Deng took in their public sphere meant that issues are not stand-alone. Traffic and osmosis, thus, are the norm, not the exception. The Pa Deng sociotechnical energy innovation, for instance, had to be appreciated as but a part of a constellation of the community’s many interconnected interests. These would include interests to establish stronger communal bonds, which is important in this geography where neighbors are located miles apart, to attain new skills, to improve their living conditions, and to participate with the larger Thai culture of reverence towards their monarch (field notes 11/2016). The connectedness of interests—although they are heterogeneous at best—requires creative, yet structured, approaches. This would entail the Pa Deng network to seek external engagements. A farmer noted:

“I know we are very ambitious with our plans and goals for the future. But we also learned from prior experience that we could not operate as an island, that we really need to go out there, to learn from others, to seek help, to approach people and organisations for funding, to help us understand new stuff. This is important to us. We are lucky that we are now very visible nationally. We have visitors like you for example who come to see and learn what we are doing. Many times we did not expect people to take the long ride from Bangkok. But we are very happy that our efforts here get noticed. You know, sometimes, we have groups coming to introduce us into something new, our solar batteries, for example. We need more of these new connections to help us out in every possible way. Many times we visit other facilities outside Pa Deng. We learn from a nearby community college. We also learn from other farmers (field notes 11/2016).”

This interchange and interdependency is considered a “deliberative system” by which Pa Deng innovation is but a part in the many nodes, forums, and processes of a complex whole [52]. Paying close attention to actors and institutions in other parts and nodes of the sociotechnical energy transitions system in Thailand and beyond is important—especially when thinking about prospects for large-scale energy transitions. These interactions allow for greater overflows and leakages benefiting not only the Pa Deng community, but also other similarly organized people collectives, which had already started to learn from the Pa Deng innovation through field visits and training camps that the network had hosted in the past. While it is important that the Pa Deng network taps into this system, it remains vital to note that the conditions under which the spaces for deliberation in Pa Deng are also continuously nurtured and connected from the inside [11].

Maintaining internal strength is important. The ‘voluntary’ communal association observed in Pa Deng, including their deliberation, could be easily displaced with the influence of the Thai military, state, economy, and society. It is key to note that regardless of the network being situated in a non-democracy, the autonomy and independence from state resources or authority are both essential in undergirding the democratic nature of Pa Deng’s public participation. Mansbridge ([33] [33]; 36) recognizes this quality as the ‘absence of power (where power is defined as coercive power, namely the threat of sanction or the use of force).’ Time could only tell, however, whether connectedness would either result in the Pa Deng network maintaining this autonomy or losing it.

6. Conclusion

The Pa Deng case illustrates that the ideals of public engagement are extant and have a long history in Thailand, as in other parts of the developing world [43-45]. What this tells us is that public engagement can thrive regardless of political system, or, in this case, that energy democracy could be sustained even in a non-democracy. This is the paper’s empirical contribution.

The Pa Deng case provides an empirical determination of the extent to which discussions in the public sphere are actually deliberative—one measurement of democracy—and the extent to which they can make a difference. The case study helps shift the terms of public engagement by which the poor and the marginalized in societies can be given the voice and tools to draw attention to their concerns, even in non-democracies. The dynamics of legitimacy- and meaning-making appeared on the ground even in the absence of state control or government fostering. As
it occurred, the ideals of democracy had slowly, yet effectively, morphed in Pa Deng even when the Thai state’s legitimate monopoly on energy policy remains in the hands of state administrators. When publics have access to processes and exercises in which they can reflect on what they need, weigh the various options, and try and experiment from multiple alternatives, as the Pa Deng case shows, they learn. The public engagement spaces ‘made’ and continually ‘remade’ by the people of Pa Deng have provided them venues for imagination, inspiration and creativity, negotiation and compromise, which, altogether led to internal transformations that successfully bound them together onto a shared, communal vision of what ought to constitute better and quality of life for themselves. In turn, these spaces became channels for making public engagement that served the needs of the less powerful.

The practical and grounded ‘democracy’ observed in situ in Pa Deng reveals that the concept of democracy is a complex and dynamic amalgam of many processes that exhibit the ideals of public engagement. The very notion that the practice exists in a non-democracy shows also that effective public engagement needs fostering, meaning it requires commitment from publics themselves. This paper shows that this commitment to public engagement occurs in a continuum, which also means that gears could be shifted. In Pa Deng, these shifts had registered, thus far, in terms of public engagement as co-existent, collective, cultural, contingent, co-produced, critical, consequential and connected. To be clear, such shifts do not mean that public engagement such as the one observed in Pa Deng is a substitute for electoral democracy. What it shows instead is that such exercises could deepen democracy. Mackie ([53]:71) aptly sums this up: ‘Democracy involves both voting and discussion, and discussion is obviously at least as important to democracy, descriptively and normatively, as voting.’

In closing, the Pa Deng case could never be generalized; at best it could be sui generis. In revisiting the question of whether the Pa Deng experience demonstrated some similarities and/or differences with energy democracy-as-experienced in the global North, we can say that, in general terms, there are not much differences. The aspects and attributes of energy democracy determined and described here are almost the same but these, as they occurred in situ in this specific locality, do not necessarily mean to be exact replicas of other ‘energy democracy-as-they-occur’ elsewhere. This, nonetheless, do not necessarily render the outcomes of this case study of lesser value. Rather, it signals the need for collecting more stories and narratives of ‘energy democracy-as-it-occurs’ in other spaces to either validate, extend, and/or amplify what have been observed in Pa Deng. Future research also calls for comparative analysis of these cases as they exist across temporal and spatial scales.

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