

SIRI

Swedish Platform for System Innovation Research in Interaction

POLICY BRIEF

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An aerial photograph of a modern, multi-story apartment building with a light-colored facade and numerous balconies. The building's roof is covered with a large array of blue solar panels. The surrounding area includes green lawns, trees, and other residential structures in the background.

INNOPATH: Re-thinking Energy Commons in Transformative Innovation Policy – Towards a More Democratic Energy Transition

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Photo: Solarimo GmbH/Pexels

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Transformative Innovation Policy (TIP) has become a dominant approach for steering innovation toward sustainability goals across Europe.

In theory, TIP recognizes the importance of inclusive, bottom-up innovation and socio-technical system change. In practice, however, current policy designs remain strongly techno-centric, growth-oriented, and producer-focused, limiting their ability to support more democratic and just transition pathways. Drawing on qualitative research on energy commons in Sweden, this policy brief shows that while energy commons hold significant potential as post-growth, community-led alternatives, their transformative capacity is constrained by regulatory ambiguity, institutional bias toward technological innovation, and resistance from incumbent actors. As a result, energy commons risk becoming accessible only to resource-strong communities, undermining their democratic promise. Policy recommendations counteracting this problem and to set the playing field for more democratic, just, and effective energy transitions are provided. The results can be summarised as follows:

1. Energy commons are framed primarily as technical projects

Policy support and public discourse tend to emphasize renewable technologies; grid integration; economic efficiency. Social motivations, such as community empowerment, democratic control, and collective identity, are acknowledged rhetorically but rarely prioritized in policy design or funding criteria. This reinforces a narrow understanding of innovation and sidelines social innovation processes.

2. Regulatory ambiguity limits participation and equity

Energy commons in Sweden face unclear legal definitions; complex administrative requirements; fragmented translation of EU directives into national and local regulations. As a result, participation is often limited to resource-strong actors (e.g. homeowners, professionals, well-connected

communities), challenging claims that energy commons automatically democratize energy systems.

3. Incumbent actors frame energy commons as system-destabilizing

Large utilities and grid operators frequently highlight grid coordination challenges; forecasting and balancing risks; system reliability concerns. This framing reinforces conflicts between centralized infrastructures and distributed governance, positioning energy commons as risks rather than contributors to system resilience, despite evidence that decentralized systems can enhance robustness and local adaptability.

4. Energy commons operate as sites of contestation

Rather than functioning as straightforward alternatives, energy commons become hybrid spaces where post-growth and democratic aspirations interact with growth-oriented market logics and state-led infrastructural constraints. Without targeted policy support, commons risk being co-opted, constrained, or diluted, rather than scaled in ways that preserve their social purpose.

These findings suggest that current TIP designs:

- Reproduce producer-centric and technology-focused innovation logics
- Underestimate the importance of collective governance and social learning
- Risk reinforcing inequality and exclusion in sustainability transitions

Energy systems are not only technical infrastructures, but social systems shaped by ownership models, governance arrangements, and everyday practices. Energy commons specifically challenge centralized, profit-driven energy models by foregrounding collective ownership;

democratic decision-making; equitable access; and social and ecological value over profit. Energy transitions are not only about changing technologies – they are about changing who owns, governs, and benefits from energy systems. Within EU policy, energy communities and energy commons are increasingly framed as vehicles for energy democracy, citizen engagement, and local resilience. If the purpose of TIP is to genuinely enable systemic change, it should explicitly recognize and support commons-based forms of innovation, alongside technological development. This requires policy instruments that prioritize social innovation, reduce regulatory barriers, and build long-term institutional pathways for collective ownership and governance.

THE ROAD FORWARD FOR POLICY

To tap the transformative potential of energy commons, policymakers should:

1. **Explicitly recognize commons-based innovation**
Treat energy commons as system innovations, not niche technical projects.
2. **Reduce regulatory and administrative burdens**
Clarify legal definitions and responsibilities for energy commons.
3. **Create stable institutional pathways for collective ownership**
Develop long-term support structures beyond pilot funding.
Enable commons-friendly financing, taxation, and ownership models.
4. **Enable multi-scalar coordination without undermining local autonomy**
Support coordination between local initiatives, municipalities, regions, and national agencies. Recognize that scaling does not always mean “scaling up” — horizontal diffusion and replication matter.
5. **Redirect public funding toward participation and capacity-building**
Invest in energy literacy, facilitation, and community organizing.
Support intermediaries that help communities navigate technical and regulatory complexity.
Fund reflexive learning processes, not only technological outputs.

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<https://www.kau.se/en/ctf>

KEY POINTS FOR POLICY

- Current Transformative Innovation Policy (TIP) remains too focused on technology and economic growth, overlooking the social and democratic dimensions of energy transitions.
- Energy commons offer important alternatives through collective ownership and local control, but their potential is limited by unclear rules and complex regulations.
- Without targeted support, energy commons tend to benefit well-resourced communities, risking new forms of inequality rather than broad energy democracy.
- Incumbent energy actors often portray energy commons as risks to system stability, despite their potential to strengthen resilience and local adaptability.
- To achieve fair and effective energy transitions, policy must actively support social innovation, collective governance, and long-term pathways for community-led energy models.

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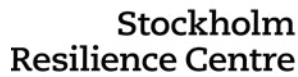


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SIRI is a transdisciplinary and cross-sectoral platform, connecting researchers, practitioners, and policymakers interested in the design and implementation of transformative innovation policies. SIRI facilitates networking, community building, and joint initiatives to co-create and exchange knowledge and best practices for systems transformation.



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