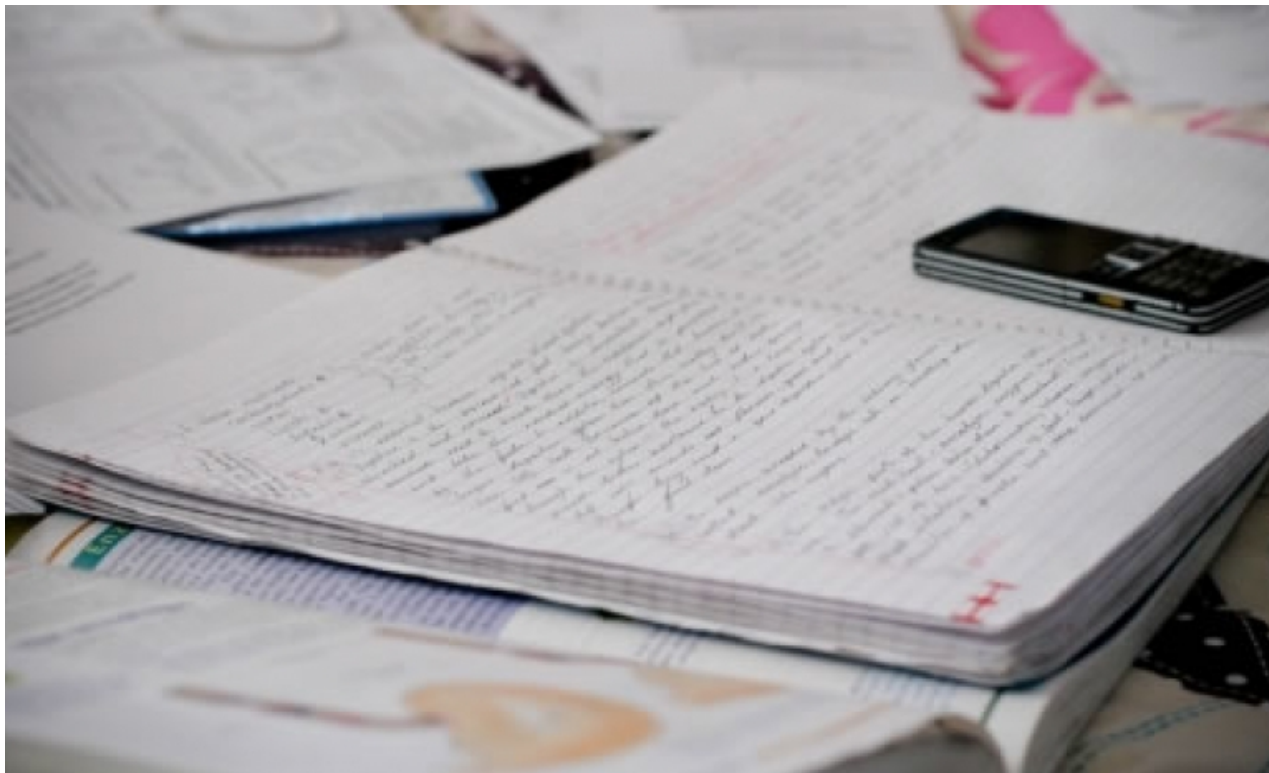


From poverty to energy injustice



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To end energy injustice we need to guarantee rights, because vulnerability comes hand-in-hand with difficulties to access housing, and access to other basic services and utilities such as electricity, gas, running water, telephone services or the internet.

Judith Seubas Goixart

Submitted by F Pere Tarrés on Fri, 11/09/2018 - 12:04

Description:

Biologist and working partner of the Tarpuna cooperative.

Vertical photo:



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Horizontal photo:

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When you're cold at home and consider whether you can afford to turn on the heating or not; when you worry because you don't know if you'll be able to pay the next electricity bills; when you find it difficult to make ends meet at the end of the month because you spend a big chunk of your salary on paying these bills....these are all symptoms that you are suffering from injustice, vulnerability or energy poverty. If, on top of this, and despite living in Europe, you happen to live in the State that has seen the largest increase in energy prices in recent years, with the most speculative energy market, and where you depend on an administration that faces difficulties to generate efficient social aid mechanisms –less than 50% of households with energy poverty meet the requirements to access such aid– the situation becomes even more complicated and injustice increases.

You may say that this doesn't happen to many. Well, studies show that from 15% to 29% of the population has problems to keep their homes at a comfortable temperature or to pay their bills regularly, or that these bills represent an exaggerated expense compared to their income. These figures are not to be ignored if we compare them to other social vulnerability indicators.

You may say that energy poverty is an old and unfair problem. You don't need to be an expert to reach the conclusion that poverty, in all likelihood, includes energy poverty, but not inversely. Even so, there is a direct link. We can well imagine that, when you live in a precarious financial situation (difficulties finding a job, low wages, impossibility to find decent housing, etc.), there are also difficulties to ensure access to and a good use of basic supplies and that, therefore, you are at risk of suffering from energy vulnerability. Meaning it never rains but it pours: when you are cold or too hot you inevitably fall ill, your health declines and you suffer the consequences. Recent studies indicate that living in a house under conditions associated to energy vulnerability has direct effects on one's physical and mental health and, therefore, on a person's wellbeing and opportunities for improvement.

You may say this is all related to speculation on the housing market, or that houses are not properly insulated. Indeed, the energy efficiency of the housing stock must be improved but, more importantly, it is vital to ensure access to energy-efficient social housing for the most vulnerable families.

You may say that people find it hard to understand their bills, and yes, bills are immensely complex to understand. Recently, it would seem you need a PhD to understand the prices, taxes, levies, and all that comes with it on your bills. Knowledge is necessary but, more importantly, what we need is information and transparency in energy-related aspects that determine the price of energy; because these factors have a direct impact on the energy vulnerability of people.

At the end of the day, it is all about rights. To end energy injustice we need to guarantee rights, because vulnerability comes hand-in-hand with difficulties to access housing, and access to other basic services and utilities such as electricity, gas, running water, telephone services or the internet. That is why it is vital to consolidate the right to basic utilities and, especially, access to information and knowledge –which are also rights– to use them adequately and efficiently. The future of our environment is at risk. Only citizens that are empowered can use knowledge to have better criteria when demanding change and for a revision of all the concepts included in an electricity bill: the taxes or the prices that determine the generation, distribution and marketing of energy. We must protect energy-related rights of our population and this is intrinsically linked to a deep transformation of the energy system, including environmental sustainability as well as social and energy justice criteria.

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