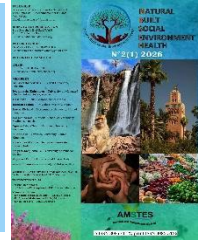


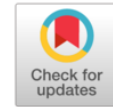


# Natural Built Social Environment Health

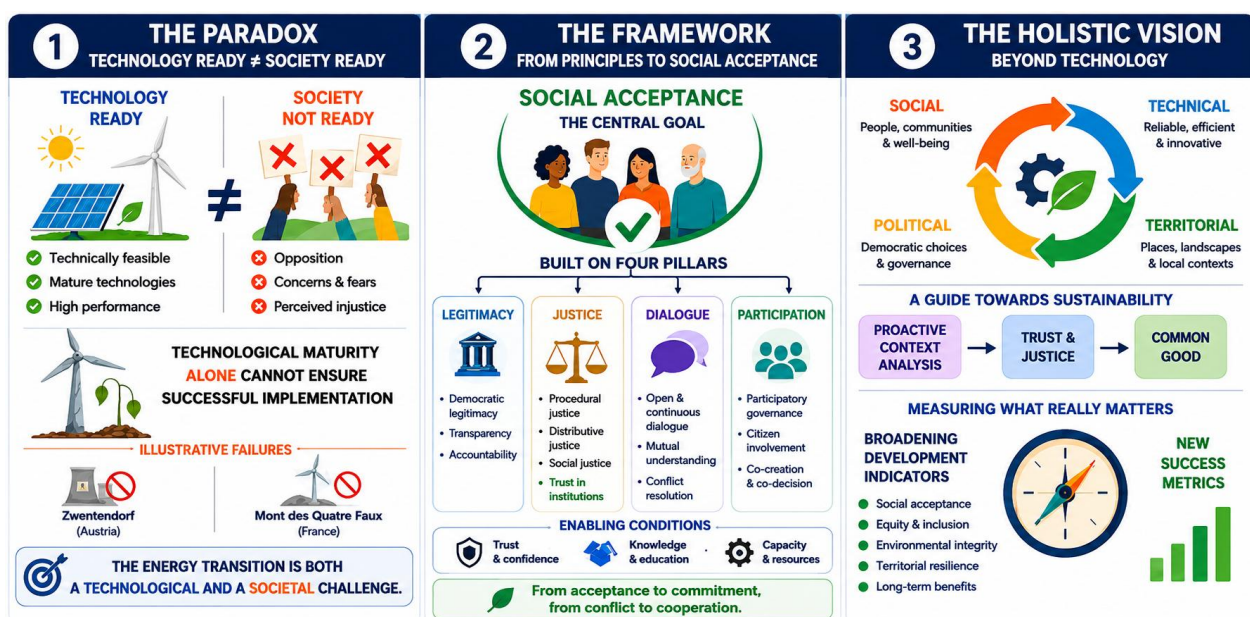
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## BOOK REVIEW



**The Social Acceptance of Renewable Energy Projects**, edited by Sébastien Bourdin. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2026. 364 pp. Hardback. ISBN 978-1-03534-874-9. eISBN 978-1-03534-875-6. DOI: 10.4337/9781035348756



One may spend many years designing a renewable energy production technology, advancing through the Technology Readiness Level (TRL) scale to a very advanced stage, and demonstrating that it is technically ready to be deployed, only for it never to move beyond the experimental stage (i.e., the Zwentendorf nuclear power plant in Austria or the Mont des Quatre Faux wind farm project in France) [1,2]. And this is not because it is ineffective, but because the most important thing has not yet been done: preparing the ground, giving equal importance to social maturity, and building acceptance (pp. xii–xv; 2–28). It is precisely this question that the volume edited by Sébastien Bourdin addresses.

This subject is particularly sensitive, because from a distance renewable energies appear to carry a very positive message, promising to provide all the power we need from the wind, the sun, water, or biomass!

We all wish to accelerate decarbonization, combat climate change, and achieve the energy transition. At the same time, we would prefer the wind turbine to be installed far from where we live, for the landscape to which we are attached not to be altered or saturated, and for no territorial injustice to be created (pp. 196–329). It is rather like saying, "*You can't have your cake and eat it too.*" We therefore face a complex paradox, which can only be resolved through understanding the perceptions of opponents, an appropriate scientific approach, an integrated vision, an ecosystem of committed stakeholders, and a constant search for balance between interests that may sometimes diverge.

*The Social Acceptance of Renewable Energy Projects* demonstrates the extent to which the energy transition is as much a societal challenge as it is a technological one. Through this volume, Sébastien Bourdin first teaches us to understand the democratic legitimacy of an energy project (pp. 104–140), then to identify the factors that favour or hinder it (pp. 29–49), teaches us to analyse the conflicts generated by such investments (pp. 196–329), shows us how to mobilize the tools that strengthen public support (pp. 104–195), and finally to conceive the energy transition as a transformation that is at once technical, territorial, social, and political (pp. xii–xv; 196–329). None of this can be improvised.

This book does not merely explain why certain projects fail; it guides the reader towards understanding that the ultimate objective is not to obtain obedience. Instead, the energy transition is a process with inputs and outputs that must be prepared according to the context through a proactive approach. It provides the necessary guidance to help build and preserve the social acceptance of energy transition projects. A sustainable society rests not only on coercion, but also on trust, dialogue, perceived justice (pp. 29–49; 104–140), and the feeling of participating in a decision directed towards the common good. And it is this that truly determines the long-term success of public health policies.

The first chapter presents the complete interpretative framework and the terminological framework needed to understand what follows. We are introduced to the principal concepts that recur throughout the book: social acceptance, governance, trust in institutions, stakeholder participation, social justice, procedural justice (the way in which decisions are made), distributive justice (the sharing of benefits and constraints), risk perception, attachment to place, the saturation of familiar landscapes, power relations, positive incentives, citizen participation (pp. 104–195), as well as the different types of technologies according to their degree of integration into society. In short, the author provides us with all the keys needed to speak the same language!

On the other hand, I would also have liked to see the authors incorporate the concepts of *intergenerational justice*, *democratic sustainability*, and even revisit the notion of *clean energy*. For certain forms of energy described as "clean" ought to be excluded from this category. An energy source is not "clean" simply because it emits little CO<sub>2</sub>. The impact on the climate should not be the only element taken into consideration; the impact on human health, the environment, biodiversity, and the very long-term consequences should also be included. Some questions likewise remain unanswered: when we finance these investments through borrowing, do we have the right to place part of the costs and risks on future generations? What duties do we owe to people who have not yet been born?

Once these prerequisites are recognised, the book's logic is clear. It first explains that social acceptance depends largely on perceptions, values, representations, and on psychological, cultural, and territorial factors. These elements shape the way in which citizens perceive an energy project.

What is discussed next is probably one of the book's major contributions. Support cannot be imposed; it has to be built. Sébastien Bourdin therefore explains how it can be progressively constructed through participatory governance, genuine citizen involvement, procedures perceived as fair, an equitable distribution of benefits and constraints, as well as continuous dialogue between all stakeholders.

Controversies and conflicts can be managed, and the authors provide numerous examples towards the end of the book, focusing on wind energy, hydrogen, geothermal energy, and value sharing. They analyse the mechanisms that lead to public opposition, phenomena such as NIMBY (pp. 298–312), and they present methods for assessing, anticipating, and strengthening social acceptance before conflicts compromise the deployment of projects (pp. 313–329).

It would be inaccurate to say that social acceptance always has the power to block a project. Several projects have been authorized and implemented despite limited citizen participation or strong social opposition. In a number of cases, the decision is taken mainly by the public authorities (i.e., the Flamanville nuclear power plant in France, as well as the Bure nuclear waste storage project), or social acceptance itself constitutes an objective. Nevertheless, it can be regarded as a risk factor for project governance (pp. 104–329), but also as one of the most important conditions for their legitimacy, stability, and long-term sustainability (pp. 104–140). Plainly stated, society must willingly accept solutions proposed in line with the Sustainable Development Goals.

These concepts developed by Sébastien Bourdin are transversal and applicable to many ecological transition policies, such as the ban on plastic bags [3]. In this case, the authorities may act very

quickly without questioning social acceptance. But, it remains legitimate to distinguish between two situations that the book sometimes tends to group together:

1. **Strategic infrastructures**, such as electricity networks, telecommunications, certain transport infrastructures or nuclear power. States may consider that these fall within the national interest and decide to implement them even in the face of opposition.
2. **Projects with a strong territorial impact**, where several options are possible (the siting of a wind farm, the location of a solar power plant, the choice of the route for an electricity transmission line, etc.). In these cases, citizen participation may serve to improve the project, select a better location, or distribute the benefits more fairly.

I place myself once again in the position of an observer within society. It is sometimes perceived that participatory procedures are selective, slow, bureaucratic, or even mobilized strategically according to the interests at stake, sometimes to demonstrate a commitment to democratic principles, and at other times to slow down the implementation of a project. I therefore leave myself with one question: when social debate is implemented, does it always represent the sincere expression of a democratic principle, or can it sometimes become an instrument mobilized according to the circumstances to block or unblock, slow down or accelerate, impose or legitimize certain decisions? Is it always a democratic end in itself, or can it sometimes become a strategic instrument of governance?

Finally, I find this book so stimulating because it convinces us of the need to broaden our vision of development indicators. The development of a society should not be measured solely by the conventional indicators with which we are familiar (i.e., GDP, HDI...). Certain additional indicators should be incorporated: social acceptance appears, *par excellence*, to be the necessary barometer for measuring commitment to democracy, and it is in this way that we will be able to define our position:

Are we those actors of governance who criticize behaviour while advancing in opposition to public benefit, to democracy, and to sustainability? Or are we those actors who seek to understand its true roots, take societal issues into consideration, and believe that the ground must first be properly prepared, and that social dialogue, ethics, and good faith are indispensable?

This book is particularly valuable for all stakeholders and decision-makers, but also for the ordinary citizen, whether living in a city or in the countryside, in the Rif or on the plains, in the desert or at the heart of the metropolises. It raises awareness that everyone has rights, but also duties in the face of the challenges of the energy transition.

Far more than a book devoted to renewable energy, this volume is exceptionally stimulating because it encourages us to reflect upon several issues facing our society. This book helps us to understand the mechanisms that lead to the success or failure of many projects, mechanisms to which too little attention is often paid and which should frequently be considered upstream of the implementation process. It also reminds us that social acceptance gives full meaning to the saying, "It is better to do it properly the first time." In reality, conflicts surrounding renewable energy are often as much conflicts of governance as they are conflicts of social justice.

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nadia.boutaleb@fstm.ac.ma

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