

Radio piece for a broad audience interested in political and social aspects of renewable energy

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Paper: *Social implications of siting wind energy in a disadvantaged region – The case of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Mexico by María Elena Huesca-Pérez, Claudia Sheinbaum-Pardo, Johann Köppel (2016)*

A tweet: No to ‘no prior information practice’: wind energy projects in Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Mexico need more participation of local peoples.

Transcript:

“We need to defend the land of our ancestors”. Such outcries are not occasional in Oaxaca, Mexico, where social conflicts surround wind energy projects. Maria Perez and Johann Koeppel from Berlin Institute of technology and Claudia Scheinbaum from Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico looked exactly into this problem. Their recent research will help us understand the social implications of siting wind energy in a disadvantaged region.

It might not be a new topic for our listeners that wind energy underwent a major development in the last decades. The costs of the installation of the wind energy sites are decreasing. National governments support wind energy for several important reasons. Wind energy can reduce Green House Gas emissions. It can increase energy security. In contrast to solar power it’s easier to integrate produced electricity into the grid. And it’s a low-cost technology among other renewables. Siting wind turbines brings community benefits such as new economic chains and access to cleaner energy. It also draws locals closer to the global community of fighters against climate change.

Isn’t that impressive?

Most of us here probably agree that renewable energy is important. And that we need to increase wind energy capacity all over the globe. But..take a step back and think: what do locals feel about massive wind turbines next to their homes? Not to mention that wind turbines produce noise and flicker shadows. What happens to the environment, when these wind giants march in? What is the situation with environmental justice? How can we better distribute the benefits?

Locals increasingly complain about wind turbines, while projects continue. It’s a Not-In-My-Backyard problem. But for some people, for example local communities in Isthmus of Tehuantepec, one of the poorest regions, in Mexico, wind farms are in their backyards. So let’s dive into the problems there. First of all, Mexico has a vast wind potential due to its

geographic conditions. At the moment less than half of its potential is used, meaning that the amount of wind projects will rise. The Government incentivizes investments into them. International RE investors are coming to the region. The Clean Development Mechanism, one of the UN instruments to reduce CO₂ emissions, also finances them. But as projects scale up, so do social problems.

So how is wind energy regulated now in Mexico?

Most of Mexican wind energy projects are large private investments. In Mexico only the transmission and distribution of electricity are provided by the government. At the same time, one has to assess the social impact of such projects. And introduce indigenous consultations according to international standards, and now Mexican standards as well. While most of the regulations are at the national level, regional and municipal levels, who are dealing with energy farms on-site can only decide on how the land is used.

There are three major sources of social conflicts here: top-down decision making, associated high corruption, and lack of participation of local and regional authorities in the wind energy planning. Going back to the case of Isthmus of Tehuantepec, where the wind farms are already dense, people are poor and still use fuel wood for cooking, social conflicts surround wind turbines. Alongside promised economic opportunities, there are negative impacts on agriculture and fields used by cattle. What happens is that people can't live from their land as before. And wind farms generate very few jobs after construction. Mexican producers of construction materials don't gain much either as most of the machinery and materials are imported. The most worrisome effects are on the local ways of living: land is damaged, trees are cut, water is polluted, noise is produced, cattle is disturbed... And people feel that wind farms violate their sacred lands. And almost nobody talks to them. This situation is definitely undesirable. What can we do?

Perez suggests that the Mexican government builds a more comprehensive energy policy. It should give a say to local municipalities and communities to protect them and the environment. This policy is not there yet.