



Temporalities of energy justice: Changing justice conceptions in Dutch energy policy between 1974 and 2022

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ABSTRACT

The concept of energy justice is increasingly adopted by policymakers and scholars. We argue that, although the use of the concept is new, normative interpretations of what is just have been part and parcel of energy policy as dynamic conceptions, changing to reflect the socio-cultural and socio-technical transitions of their time. To show this dynamic nature of justice conceptions, we analysed 13 key policy documents outlining the course of energy policy in the Netherlands in the period 1974 to 2022. Our analysis identified four periods in which different justice conceptions were dominant. We found that justice conceptions broadened over time and changed in the relative importance of certain aspects of justice: from primarily being regarded as a distributive concern to including and emphasising procedural and recognition justice. Our analysis shows that conceptions of justice are spatially and time sensitive, continuously being re-interpreted and re-enacted. Based on this insight, we propose for energy justice scholarship to view justice more as a highly contingent and spatially and time sensitive concept. This understanding asks of policymakers to engage in continuous, representative dialogue with societal actors to share heterogeneous conceptions of justice, using participatory processes open to a societal redefinition of priorities.

1. Introduction

The transition away from a fossil-fuelled energy system towards a more sustainable system impacts a wide variety of stakeholders, often in unequal ways (Sovacool et al., 2023). This raises questions about energy justice, a concept which is increasingly adopted by policymakers and scholars in understanding and addressing ethical concerns in decision-making for energy systems (Carley et al., 2021; Gao and Zhou, 2022). In the Netherlands in particular, justice has recently become one of the central pillars in national energy policy after societal backlash against energy projects due to their negative, unequal societal impacts (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate Policy, 2023; Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid, 2023).

By applying principles of social justice to energy systems through the concept of energy justice, scholars aim to address these far-reaching and unequal societal impacts (Sovacool et al., 2017, 2023). Energy justice has quickly developed as an academic field in the past ten years since its foundational paper by McCauley et al., in 2013 (McCauley et al., 2013;

Sovacool et al., 2023). Ever since, energy justice has been adopted to reflect on a wide variety of topics, including spatial dimensions of energy systems (Bouzarovski and Simcock, 2017), energy poverty (Bartiaux et al., 2018), and citizen engagement (Bell, 2021; Walker and Baxter, 2017), amongst others.

With this rather recent explicit utilisation of the concept of energy justice in policy and academia, the questions and issues underlying energy justice are often represented as somewhat new. However, whereas energy justice discourses have recently grown in abundance, energy justice issues have been part and parcel of energy policy much longer, albeit more implicit. We argue that, although the term ‘energy justice’ is a recent addition to energy policy, the emergence of the term is historically rooted in concerns for its underlying values such as the fairness of policies and the inclusion of actors and their needs. Normative interpretations of what is just have evolved throughout time, embedded in a series of negotiations among actors with differing views on justice in socio-technical systems. Justice conceptions are thereby dynamically changing to reflect the socio-cultural and socio-technical transitions of

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their time (Labelle, 2017). Moreover, it is important to understand the historical contingency of the energy justice concept in policy. The ways in which energy justice is now understood and taken up in energy policy is shaped by the (more implicit) understandings of (energy) justice in energy policy in the past. Such situated and time-specific justice conceptions can have lasting impacts as they inform policy choices and thereby shape the technological and policy structures that are put in place, guiding the course of energy transitions (Sorensen, 2022). Investigating the historical contingencies and the way justice conceptions have evolved over time allows to reflect on the current understandings of energy justice and the limits of those.

The aim of this paper is thus to write a history of the present: how the present concerns for energy justice emerged and unfolded in the energy policy domain over time. This also involves the ‘journey’ of how energy governance relates to justice vis-à-vis the socio-technical energy system. We conducted a historical analysis tracing the development of justice conceptions in Dutch energy policy documents across nearly five decades (1974–2022). We start with an analysis of contemporary scholarly interpretations of energy justice, and study the past to “trace the erratic and discontinuous process whereby the past became the present” (Garland, 2014, p. 372). In this sense, we add to existing literature that provides historical accounts of energy policy (Correljé and Verbong, 2004; Raven and Verbong, 2007; Verbong et al., 2008; Verbong and Geels, 2007) by focusing on the history of justice within such policy. We further contribute to emergent energy justice literature that has hitherto focused predominantly on contemporary energy policy contexts. We do so by adding an often neglected analytical dimension by understanding energy justice as a dynamic concept that co-evolves with societal pressures, physical infrastructures, political ideologies, and policy choices throughout time.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we provide an explanation of energy justice as a dynamic, co-evolving concept, which forms the basis of our conceptual framework and coding scheme. In Section 3, we elaborate on our methodology, which outlines the historical-empirical materials and method of analysis. Section 4 presents our analysis of energy policy documents in the Netherlands, after which we discuss the results in Section 5. Section 6 concludes the study with policy recommendations.

2. Energy justice

Energy justice scholars aim to guide energy policymaking by eliciting more socially just contexts of energy production, transportation and consumption (Jenkins et al., 2016; Sovacool et al., 2017; Wood, 2023). Two theoretical approaches have become commonplace in this field of energy justice. First, McCauley et al. (2013) introduced the currently dominant three tenet approach (Jenkins et al., 2021; Wood, 2023). It uses three categories to analyse injustices: distributive, procedural and recognition justice (Jenkins et al., 2021; Wood, 2023). In short, these are concerned with the distribution of monetary, environmental or other benefits and burdens over members of society; the fairness of processes of decision-making; and the recognition and acknowledgement of diverse actors and their unique identities. Second, Sovacool & Dworkin (2015) formulated a set of eight guiding principles of justice that should inform policymaking for energy systems. These principles of justice are used by some scholars as an alternative to or in combination with the three tenet approach (Jenkins et al., 2021). The eight principles are availability, affordability, due process, good governance (transparency and accountability), sustainability, intragenerational equity, intergenerational equity and responsibility (Sovacool et al., 2016; Sovacool and Dworkin, 2015).

Most energy justice scholars adopt the three tenets and eight principles as the basis of their analyses of injustices and possible policy recommendations (Jenkins et al., 2021). However, there has been some critique on the common use of these approaches as fixed normative yardsticks with which policy recommendations can be formulated for

any and all possible contexts. Most papers do not specify the ethical basis for their assessment of the justness of cases – both when the assessment is made by the author or by the research subjects (Tornel, 2022; Van Uffelen et al., 2024; Wood, 2023). In so doing, energy justice research seems to shape energy policies with a certain supposedly universalistic idea of what is just, without explaining the underpinning reasons for why this idea would be truly just for and applicable to the studied contexts. This complicates the incorporation of these recommendations by policymakers in the often complex decision-making processes they face, with a wide diversity of actors who hold their own valid perspectives on justice in a specific context (Pellegrini-Masini et al., 2020; Van Uffelen et al., 2024; Wood, 2023).

In line with these critiques on the use of the dominant energy justice frameworks, energy justice scholarship has been evolving to open up to alternative approaches to justice. The three tenet framework has been expanded upon with a fourth tenet of restorative justice – concerned with the response to and reparation of harms done to actors – the uptake of which is growing among scholars (Hazrati and Heffron, 2021; Heffron and McCauley, 2017). In addition, calls for intersectional and contextualised approaches to justice are increasing to move beyond the universalistic ideas of justice. These approaches aim to incorporate the perspectives and demands for justice of a more diverse group of human and non-human actors, and to relate assessments of justice and policy recommendations to their social and spatial-temporal contexts (Celestremajer et al., 2021; Sovacool et al., 2017, 2023; Tornel, 2022).

Even though this is a valuable development of the field, the dominant energy justice literature is still reproducing a rather static – albeit multifaceted – understanding of energy justice. We would like to contribute to the field by adopting a dynamic view on energy justice. We argue that energy justice as a concept co-evolves with societal pressures, physical infrastructures, political ideologies, and policy choices. Changes in (dominant) societal perspectives on justice will be reflected in the justice conceptions that are adopted in policy. These changes can be instigated by sudden shocks, for instance due to moments of destabilisation of existing (policy) arrangements due to major economic, environmental, or political challenges and changes (Sorensen, 2022). Additionally, multiple smaller societal movements can collectively steer incremental change (de Looze and Cuppen, 2023; Gerschewski, 2021). In this sense, energy justice conceptions are always in flux and different elements of the concept can be tapped into or interpreted differently at different times. If energy justice is a dynamic concept, then this changes energy justice research from a static, tick-box description of justice elements in single cases, to a focus on how energy justice conceptions are embedded in space and time. Energy justice conceptions thereby inherently reflect this co-evolutionary process and therefore understandings of what energy justice means should always be contextualised and understood as having historical and timebound resonance.

3. Methodology

We conducted a document analysis of key energy policy reports published by the Dutch national government to analyse how the present concerns for justice emerged and developed over time in Dutch national energy policy.

3.1. Empirical focus: Dutch energy policy

We focus our analysis on the Netherlands in the period from 1974 to 2022. What makes the Dutch case particularly interesting is its history of rather technocratic energy governance and its recent turn towards participation and explicit justice considerations. For years, the Netherlands has been a frontrunner regarding the renewable energy transition (Kemp, 2010; Proka et al., 2018). The technically-driven governmental approach to the transition towards renewable energy production and consumption has resulted in societal backlash and calls

for a more just transition (de Looze and Cuppen, 2023; Dueholm Rasch and Köhne, 2017). Consequently, calls for justice have become an increasingly explicit part of public discussions on the energy system.

These voices have been strengthened by increasing public dissatisfaction with, for instance, the seeming governmental disregard for the effects of natural gas extraction in the province of Groningen. Gas extraction was key in building the Dutch energy system since the 1960s. Due to gas extractions since then, Groningen was subjected to earthquakes without proper compensation of the physical and psychological damage (Correljé, 2021), sparking discussions on fairness and justice of the Dutch energy system.

In recent years, similar concerns for justice have become an explicit part of policy on the energy transition. ‘Justice’ and ‘participation’ have been introduced as new central pillars of the Dutch energy policy, as an addition to the original pillars of affordability, reliability, safety and sustainability (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate Policy, 2023). As such, justice has entered policymaking for the first time as an explicit policy goal/concern.

3.2. Data collection

We conducted a historical document analysis of thirteen Dutch policy documents that were published between 1974 and 2022 (Table 1). We chose 1974 as the starting point of our analysis, as this marked the year of the first comprehensive national-level energy policy. The Dutch government thereby adopted a new energy policy pathway focused on integrated policymaking (de Jong et al., 2005). The reports that follow reflect on this pathway throughout the years, displaying policy choices and their justification. In these reports, the Dutch national government critically assessed the state of the Dutch energy system and the policies in place to govern this system, in order to address energy crises and crucial socio-economic and socio-technical challenges. The overview of the documents in Table 1 shows that the publication of these reports was initially highly irregular. These started off as responses to energy crises in the form of White Papers, until governments from the 1990s onward wished for more regular assessments of the energy system in the form of Energy Reports. Since, the 2019 Climate Agreement, climate and energy policy have been combined. The Climate Agreement is a national agreement on climate and energy policy until 2030 among around 150 private and (semi)governmental organisations. Thereafter, the White Papers on Climate present yearly reports on the changes to climate and energy policy to reach the goals set out in the Climate Agreement. We ended our analysis in 2022 due to the timeframe of this study, although it should be noted that these White Papers are still being published and that energy justice conceptions continue to evolve.

3.3. Data analysis

Justice was not adopted as an explicit term in most of the policy documents. To still be able to distil implicit justice conceptions, we

Table 1
Documents analysed.

Year	Document
1974	White Paper on Energy
1979	Second White Paper on Energy. Part 1: General Energy Policy
1995	Third White Paper on Energy
1999	Energy Report
2002	Energy Report “Now for later”
2005	Energy Report
2008	Energy Report
2011	Energy Report
2016	Energy Report “Transition to sustainable”
2019	Climate Agreement
2020	White Paper on Climate
2021	White Paper on Climate
2022	White Paper on Climate

developed a codebook to identify these in the policy documents. We used the four tenets of justice (see Section 2) as a basis for our coding scheme. For each category, we adopted more specific codes, based on energy justice frameworks in the energy justice literature (Celemajer et al., 2021; Hazrati and Heffron, 2021; Heffron and McCauley, 2017; Jenkins et al., 2016, 2021; Lacey-Barnacle et al., 2020; Mansfield et al., 2002; Menghwani et al., 2020; Simcock, 2016; Sovacool et al., 2017, 2023; Sovacool and Dworkin, 2015; van den Berg and Tempels, 2022; Williams and Doyon, 2019). Developing the coding scheme was an iterative process: the first two authors combined, renamed, and sharpened codes and code descriptions based on an initial round of coding. All authors took part in a second round of refining the codes to create clear, unambiguous, operationalisable codes. The final coding scheme can be found in Table 2.

Using ATLAS.ti version 22, we automatically coded the documents using the “Text Search” tool, with paragraphs as the unit of analysis. The automatic coding was based on search words that we formulated for each code in our coding scheme based on the code descriptions. To validate the search terms, we first read and manually coded the 1974 White Paper, 2016 Energy Report and the summaries and introductions of the other documents, before starting the automatic coding. This validation process led us to make some search words more specific and to include older (20th-century) Dutch spellings of certain search words so that the automatic coding would pick up on these.

The automatic coding provided us with an overview of results per code. Hereafter, we read through each of the coded paragraphs and summarised the main takeaways per subcategory of justice for each report. Additionally, we built an extensive timeline of the most

Table 2
Categories of energy justice used in this study for the automatic coding of documents.

Tenet	Code	Description
Distributive justice	Distribution of access	Distribution of the supply of energy sources to fulfil the needs of (part of) society. Includes concerns for energy reliability, sufficiency, security of supply, energy system resilience, and accessibility of energy sources.
	Distribution of ecological impacts	Distribution of the depletion of natural resources and pressures on the environment and the species living therein, such as emissions of greenhouse gasses, pollution and land-use change.
	Economic distribution	Pricing of energy sources, and the distribution of economic losses and gains of energy production, consumption and transport, involving possible job losses and opportunities and economic (dis)advantages.
Procedural justice	Intergenerational distribution	Distribution of burdens and benefits over present and future generations.
	Accountability	Designation of responsibility in decision-making and participation process: the division of roles of actors.
	Inclusion	Extent to which those affected by a decision or policy can shape it.
Recognition justice	Transparency	Provision of and access to information.
	Recognition	Acknowledgement and valuation of actors and their needs, perspectives and knowledge as ensuing from their unique identities.
Restorative justice	Compensation	Reimbursement of victims of existing or future harms through, for example, monetary means, (public) goods or privileges.
	Prevention	Avoidance of possible future harms.
	Punishment	Criminal persecution of those responsible for the occurrence of harms.
	Reparation	Removal of a harm and/or its root causes in society.

prominent events and policy changes over time. This timeline was built based on the content of the reports, but we snowballed from the reports to other documents further explaining these events and policy choices, such as policy documents, reports on participatory processes, news articles, and academic papers reflecting on the history of Dutch energy policy (such as (Correljé and Verbong, 2004; Raven and Verbong, 2007; Verbong et al., 2008; Verbong and Geels, 2007)).

Having collected this overview of policy changes and justice conceptions as reflected in the energy reports between 1974 and 2022, we identified how justice conceptions changed between 1974 and 2022. We divided the chronology in periods. Each new period marks a change in justice conceptions in the policy documents. This resulted in four main periods in which different justice conceptions were most prominent in the energy reports.

4. Shifts in energy justice conceptions (1974–2022)

In this section, we elaborate how justice conceptions in Dutch energy policy evolved over time. We identified four periods in which different justice conceptions were dominant (Fig. 1): justice as 1) managing availability crises for economic growth; 2) liberalisation for the economic benefit of all; 3) green growth with room for participation; and 4) inclusive climate policy. We reflect on how these dominant justice conceptions co-evolved with (inter)national trends and developments.

4.1. Justice as managing availability crises for economic growth (1974–1995)

In 1974, the Dutch government made the first national-level policy on the entirety of the Dutch energy system, the different parts of which had hitherto mainly been guided by provincial and municipal governments (Verbong, 2000). From then on, “a central element of policy was a more active involvement of the national government in the energy system” (1979, p.25). This was decided because “the shock of the oil crisis” in 1973 had urged policymakers “to intensively reflect on the phenomenon of ‘energy’ in the international and national economy” (1974, p.3). Six years later, another oil crisis followed, putting the world into a “further worsened energy situation” (1979, p.25). National energy policy in this first period was mainly a response to such crises of energy availability.

The government combined a concern for the distribution of access to energy with a concern for economic distribution. The Limits to Growth report, published by the Club of Rome in 1972, predicted that continued (exponential) economic growth would deplete the world’s fossil energy resources and lead to global economic collapse. Policymakers were

concerned about this “finiteness of natural energy resources” (1974, p.5) and thought the “finality of the age of oil” (1979, p.26) was an especially pressing issue. The “continued growth of our [world’s] economies” (1979, p.26) depended on oil. To reach the “goals of the socio-economic policies”, “a continued economic growth [was] desirable over the next decade” (1979, p.65). The government therefore aimed with its energy policy to “maintain the employment opportunities and improve their quality” (1974, p.49) and also to “restore the revenues of industries to an acceptable level” (1979, p.65).

Energy policy became a balancing act, aiming to ensure accessibility of energy resources in the present and in the future. In this sense, this strong focus on the distribution of access was underpinned by some elements of intergenerational justice. The main question became “whether, and if so, how the growth of our energy needs could be reduced, and how we can meet the energy needs of the future” (1974, p.4). Policy was made for the “guaranteed provision of energy to meet demand, resulting from a consumption that is as efficient as possible” (1974, p.62, 169). Policymakers “focused on energy saving and diversification” (1979, p.34), the latter to also “reduce the vulnerability” (1979, p.5) of the energy system. A benefit of this policy was that “energy saving contributed greatly to environmental policy” (1979, p.14), as “curbing direct environmental pollution” (1974, p.4) was another pillar of Dutch energy policy during this period. In addition, the Dutch natural gas reserves were seen as crucial to grant future generations access to sufficient energy resources, and were therefore treated “as carefully as possible” (1979, p.33), meaning that prices for gas were kept artificially high to limit demand.

Energy policy in the first period was thus mainly characterised by concerns for distributive justice, in particular the distribution of access to energy and economic distribution. Notions of intergenerational distributive justice and fair distributions of ecological impacts were additional bases for energy policy.

4.1.1. Justice as temporary concerns for inclusion (1981–1983)

Interestingly, the first period was briefly interrupted by a sub-period characterised by procedural justice concerns, which ran from 1981 to 1983. During the whole first period, nuclear energy was seen as an important contribution to the energy system “from the aspect of diversification of the electricity supply” (1979, p.139) and “[t]o save fossil energy resources” (1974, p.128). During the sub-period, in response to rising societal tensions concerning nuclear energy, the national government showed more concern for procedural justice through the inclusion of citizens in informing decision-making on nuclear energy. This became the Broad Societal Discussion (BMD; “Brede Maatschappelijke Discussie”), organised between 1981 and 1983. In this discussion,

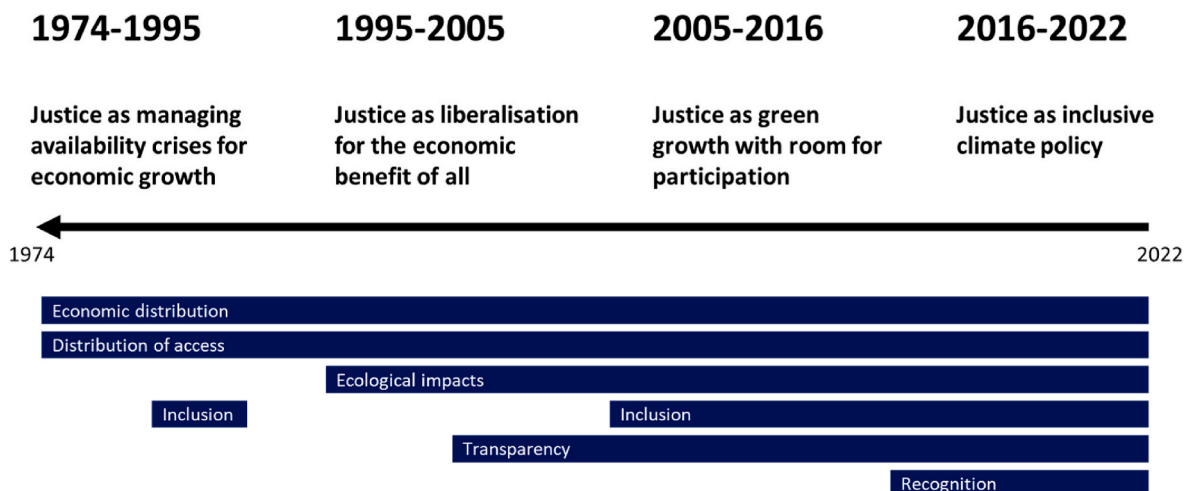


Fig. 1. Summary of dominant justice conceptions (1974–2022).

citizens and other stakeholders were asked to voice their concerns and suggestions regarding national energy policies, especially regarding nuclear energy. The BMD marks a clear turning point in decision-making on energy policy, as this was the first time society was asked to actively think along and provide input to energy policy. The outcome of the BMD was to refrain from building additional nuclear power plants. However, the government still wished to build these and therefore decided to reject the outcome. This indicates that whereas procedural justice and inclusion became more important, in reality not much was done with the input of these involved actors. In 1986, the Chernobyl nuclear disaster played a pivotal role in abandoning the preference for investing in nuclear energy from the policy agenda (Verborg, 2000). Decision-making processes went back to top-down business as usual, and this erratic sub-period of procedural justice conceptions in Dutch energy policy discontinued, to be proceeded with only years later.

4.2. Justice as liberalisation for the economic benefit of all (1995–2005)

With the Third White Paper on Energy in 1995, the Dutch national government ushered into a new period of national energy policy, and new justice conceptions became apparent. The White Paper resulted from “a quest for a way to allow the government to stimulate a sustainable energy system and create policy frames for increased liberalisation” (1995, p.15). Over the course of the period, this goal of liberalisation would become dominant, whereas sustainability and the environment became “an important precondition” (1999, p.5). In contrast to the first period, policy was no longer being made as a reaction to “drastic changes” (1995, p.13) and “the availability of energy [was] not an issue” anymore (1995, p.51). Instead, the decision was made to actively steer the energy system towards liberalisation. This decision followed the global and especially European Unions “tendency towards internationalisation [of energy systems] with a specific focus on increased liberalisation” (1995, p.13).

Economic distribution was the main justice principle in this period, as economic growth became central to policy. The Dutch government thought that they, together with “businesses, consumers and their representative organisations” (1999, p.23), could use energy markets to achieve socio-economic goals. These energy consumers “clearly express [ed] the wish to soon be able to enjoy the benefits of the market” (1999, p.23). Freedom of choice in a free energy market was believed to be “crucial” (1999, p.4), as it would create “the stimulus for suppliers and consumers to improve economic efficiency and energy services” (2002, p.23). Thereby, it would lead to adequate (low) prices, reliable supply and protection against monopolies. In this way, “all involved actors would profit to the maximum extent” (2002, p.38).

Liberalisation also became the tool in reaching the secondary goal of creating a more sustainable energy system. This concern for the distribution of ecological impacts was prompted by “the impending climate problem” (1995, p.5), put firmly on the Dutch policy agenda by the 1992 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and later the 1997 Kyoto Protocol. Policies to curb direct environmental pollution remained on the policy agenda, as in the first period, but avoiding the “threatening consequences of climate change” (1995, p.7) now became of greater concern. Market forces would drive this switch to environment-friendly energy. To achieve sustainability, “an increase in energy efficiency” and “energy saving and sustainable energy sources” would remain the “top priority” (1995, p.31, 1999, p.5). This could be achieved through liberalisation, as “the implementation of market forces in the energy sector [would] increase economic efficiency” (2002, p.23). Because the aims of a free market and sustainability could clash, policy additionally focused on stimulating private research and development into sustainable technologies, on implementing ‘green certificates’ for sustainable energy, and on stimulating an Emissions Trading System.

As part of the liberalisation of the energy market, the responsibility for decision-making in the energy system was granted to the “market wherever possible, government wherever necessary” (1995, p.77).

Governmental attention to accountability and transparency increased, as “transparency [was] necessary to ensure the proper functioning of markets” (2002, p.42) and to allow for “adequate supervision” (2002, p.23) of these markets by the government. Energy producing companies should provide transparent information on energy prices and the environmental impact of their production. The government itself was to be transparent in the conditions for companies to gain access to existing energy networks and in the regulations on procedures for new energy projects. In addition, the government set preconditions to ensure safety of energy production, create free competition, limit environmental impacts, and take care of public and geopolitical interests. As in a theatre, the market parties would thereby become “the actors [that] act out the play” of the energy system, while the government was the “director shaping the conditions and deciding on the division of roles” (1999, p.5).

As in the first period, concerns for distributive justice were thus again central to energy policy. However, in this period the main conception of justice related to economic distribution, with a second place for the distribution of ecological impacts. Procedural justice concerns were increasing in importance, mainly related to accountability and transparency.

4.3. Justice as green growth with room for participation (2005–2016)

“Now that liberalisation has been completed, the Cabinet mainly focuses on the issues of security of energy supply and the climate problem” (2005, p.3). With this claim in 2005, energy policy evolved into a new phase in which “the vision of the Cabinet is not green *or* growth, but green *and* growth” (2011, p.2). Distributive justice conceptions in the energy reports expanded to include distribution of ecological impact as a main adopted conception. Added to this was a renewed concern for availability of energy. All in all, the aim was that “by 2050, Europe and the Netherlands should have an energy supply that is much cleaner than today, as reliable as today’s and also affordable” (2008, p.9).

This period was characterised by more attention to ecological impacts and availability gaps of the current energy system: “In the longer term, a realistic transition to a sustainable energy system is needed in light of the climate and the decreasing availability of fossil fuels” (2011, p.2) and therefore “the energy system must become more sustainable and less dependent on scarce fossil fuels” (2011, p.2). In practice, this meant a focus on “energy saving, renewable energy, carbon capture and storage (CCS) and nuclear power” (2008, p.11) as well as “a real need for all safe and reliable energy options, both grey and green” (2011, p.2).

Nonetheless, despite this attention to ecological impacts of the energy system, the transition to more sustainable energy sources had to be “good for the Dutch economy” (2011, p.2) and “the position of the Dutch consumer should not deteriorate” (2011, p.4, p.27). Furthermore, it was argued that “too strong a focus on a clean energy supply can jeopardise reliability, and a clean energy supply that doesn’t work won’t do you any good” (2008, p.13). To ensure this combination of availability, sustainability, and growth, “the Cabinet [set] strict preconditions in terms of CO₂ reduction, safety and environmental management and, within those conditions, [gave] companies and entrepreneurs room to invest and realise projects. In addition to a reliable and affordable energy supply, this [would provide] jobs and economic growth” (2011, p.21). All in all, complex societal issues were seen as providing “opportunities to strengthen the competitiveness of the business sector” (2008, p.17). The international competitiveness of the Netherlands was further strengthened by “putting the Netherlands on the international map as the gas roundabout of northwest Europe” (2008, p.45): it was argued that “the gas roundabout is good for security of supply because an open and well-functioning gas market is attractive to major gas producers around the world. The gas roundabout is also good for the economy because value is added to the gas chain in many areas. This could include services such as transport, storage and quality conversion, but also trade, financing and innovation” (2008, p.45).

The green growth plan was not just regarded as a top-down decision, but rather intended to be implemented in consultation with society: “The government chooses to establish a Green Deal with society [...] It is precisely by pursuing shared goals that a robust and stable future perspective for a sustainable economy is created” (2011, p.5). Here, ideas of procedural justice once again came to the forefront of policy, mostly through an increase and “optimalisation of the approach to public participation” (2011, p.61) in decision-making as “a transparent approach, involvement of the community at an early stage and clear communication have proven essential in this regard” (2011, p.60). In practice, this often meant that “besides formal consultation procedures, the usefulness and necessity of new investments are proactively brought to the attention of concerned citizens, companies and authorities. The various options with their advantages and disadvantages are also explained by means of information evenings, brochures and websites, and more frequent and intensive consultation between all parties involved takes place prior to decision-making” (2008, p.105). In the justification for this increasing attention to citizen and stakeholder participation, recognition justice conceptions were addressed: “Major energy infrastructure projects will involve careful consideration of the various public interests at stake” (2008, p.105).

In summary, the third period saw distribution of ecological impacts and economic distribution becoming the two central justice issues. Concern for the distribution of access to energy returned, but remained of lesser importance. Procedural justice began to play a greater role, with the resurgence of the concern for inclusion of societal stakeholders.

4.4. Justice as inclusive climate policy (2016–2022)

The period of green growth with room for participation came to a close in 2016 when a fundamental shift in the role of Dutch energy policy was presented. Rather than having energy policy as a specific field, it became an integral part of climate policy. This increasing attention to climate policy was partially forced through binding international agreements – most prominently the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement, in which “goals such as limiting warming to well below two degrees and achieving a balance between greenhouse gas emissions and sequestration in the second half of this century” (2016, p.5) were agreed upon. In addition, a climate court case initiated by the Urgenda foundation legally obligated the national government to “take additional measures to reduce CO₂ in the short term while contributing to the long-term transition” (2020, p.12). This turn to integrating energy into climate policy meant an even larger focus on “energy savings and the use of energy carriers from low-carbon or renewable sources” (2016, p.74), attention to “other environmental impacts, such as biodiversity loss and landscape degradation” (2016, p.23), and an effort to “achieve climate neutrality by 2050” (2021, p.40).

The attention to integrated climate policy did not come out of the blue. Rather, the Urgenda court case and Climate Agreement represent broader societal unrest and (climate) activist movements. Instead of energy and climate decision-making being the isolated task of policymakers, the Dutch government acknowledged the “broad societal engagement with the climate issue” (2020, p.15). In addition, the transition to renewable energy has great spatial implications and resulted in backlash and lack of support and acceptance from local citizens. Such conflict sparked discussions on procedural and recognition justice.

The Dutch government increasingly saw the energy transition as “in the first place a societal transition [...], in which citizens and companies also have to rely on each other and on the government” (2019, p.4). Therefore, “the biggest challenge for politics and society in the coming years is to build acceptance and public support” (2020, p.10). The government agreed to focus on “a transition that is fair, achievable and affordable for all and considers it important to have a good understanding of the development of the citizen perspective on the transition in the coming years” (2020, p.21). To achieve this, much of the

implementation of a renewable energy system was decentralised: “to tackle these changes, we want to place the control as much as possible at local and regional level. That way, local differences in socio-economic starting positions, wishes and possibilities can be taken into account as much as possible” (2016, p.67). Much of this decentralised policy-making was aimed to include “early and careful dialogue with citizens, businesses and civil society organisations on the spatial integration of energy production, storage and transmission” (2016, p.8). By actively involving stakeholders in policymaking, the idea was that “the plans can do justice to their concerns, preferences and ideas” (2021, p.4) and to “strengthen ownership and thus support for the energy transition” (2016, p.138).

In short, the distribution of ecological impacts was of main concern in the fourth period. Economic distribution lessened in importance, whereas procedural and recognition justice – especially the inclusion of societal stakeholders – now became main justice conceptions as well.

4.5. Summary of the results

We distinguished between four distinct yet interrelated periods in which the Dutch government articulated energy policy, based on diverse conceptions of justice. In the first period, the basis of energy policy was mainly formed by concerns for the distribution of access to energy followed by conceptions of economic distribution. In the second period, as the government liberalised the Dutch energy market, a just economic distribution became the central justice conception. The third period was characterised by green growth. In this period, pre-existing concerns for the distribution of ecological impacts were combined with economic distribution to form the basis of policy. The importance of inclusion, transparency and recognition justice started to grow in this third period. These conceptions gained further prominence in the fourth period, largely characterised by the decentralisation of decision-making. In addition, in this period, the distribution of ecological impacts was at the centre of policymaking. All in all, initial implicit notions of justice, consisting of a small set of conceptions, developed into an explicit policy topic encompassing a wider variety of conceptions in the fourth period (Fig. 1).

5. Discussion

Our results have contributed to the two aims of this paper. First of all, in describing the emergence and development of justice conceptions in the Dutch energy policy domain over time. Second, in shedding light on the historical contingencies of Dutch energy policy and the role of justice therein.

Below, we discuss and reflect on key empirical, methodological and theoretical issues associated with our historical analysis. Starting with key empirical reflections, we found that the social values that pertain to ‘justice’ mostly broadened over time: from primarily being a distributive concern to including values of procedural (as illustrated by the emphasis on public support and different stakeholder categories) and recognition justice (as illustrated by the emphasis on diversity of socio-economic needs) (Fig. 2). In addition, we found that the concept of justice is dynamic in the sense that the relative importance and meaning of specific justice conceptions shifts over time. Even though there has been a stable presence of justice conceptions such as distribution of access and economic distribution for almost five decades, their importance compared to other justice conceptions shifted. For instance, whereas distribution of ecological impacts was presented as subordinate to conceptions of economic distribution in the first and second period, this turned around, especially in the fourth period (see Section 4.4). Our analysis shows that the interpretation of what justice in the energy system is, and therefore the values that inform decision-making, are spatially and time sensitive. Rather than being seen as a fixed construct, justice is continuously re-interpreted and re-enacted (Labelle, 2017) by actors who put forward such new justice conceptions, both in societal debates and in the policies

approach might be necessary to uncover divergent imaginaries of what a just energy transition should be (Hoffman et al., 2021).

6. Conclusion and policy implications

In this paper, we aimed to write a history of the present: how the present concerns for energy justice emerged and unfolded in the energy policy domain in the Netherlands over time. We conducted a historical document analysis to trace the development of justice conceptions in Dutch energy policy documents from 1974 to 2022. We analysed the co-evolution of these justice conceptions with societal pressures, physical infrastructures, political ideologies, and policy choices throughout time. We distinguished four main periods: Justice as 1) managing availability crises for economic growth (1974–1995); 2) liberalisation for the economic benefit of all (1995–2005); 3) green growth with room for participation (2005–2016); and 4) inclusive climate policy (2016–2022). Overall, the results have shown that initial, rather implicit notions of justice consisted of a small set of conceptions, mostly distributional in nature. However, over time and impacted by wider socio-political discourses and events, justice developed into an explicit policy topic encompassing a wide variety of conceptions, including also procedural and recognition elements (Fig. 2).

The results show that the understanding of justice is contextual, being timebound and shaped by its historical interpretations and by various disruptive external events and incremental pressures. This means that specific events and policy pathways in the past have impacted how we perceive justice nowadays and in the future. This understanding of justice has far-reaching implications for future research on energy justice, and most of all on embedding justice within energy transition decision-making pathways.

6.1. Policy recommendations

Although our analysis was focused on changing justice conceptions in the Netherlands, some events and pressures for change had an international nature, such as the oil crises and the acceleration of liberalisation. This means that some of the trends of change we have observed could also be recognised in other countries that experienced these same drivers of change. If the understanding of justice is always in flux, we need to find ways to effectively capture this fluidity in policy, both in the Netherlands and beyond. Such an approach suggests a couple of policy recommendations.

First of all, we see a need for continuous institutionalised dialogue amongst policymakers and societal actors. To aid the ongoing governmental effort to learn of justice issues and steer policies to overcome these, participation pragmatically focusing on acceptability and public consensus to tackle one specific policy problem is insufficient. Participation in general, across policy issues and levels of government, should be enhanced to ensure an improved representation of value diversity in decision-making. These arenas of participation should be open to heterogeneous conceptions of justice. Rather than assuming that every actor is on the same page when utilising an unspecified umbrella concept like ‘justice’ – as is currently being done –, it is important to leave room for diverse interpretations of the concept and make the concept concrete and tangible within specific situations. What justice means on a national level might not be the same as when the concept is applied to a local decision-making process, and what may seem just on a local level may prove unjust on higher levels (national, regional, international). In a similar way, a decision that is just for current generations might not be just for future generations. Having an eye for the different geographical and temporal scales on which justice plays out is crucial, and this requires deliberate, organised and structural interaction, exchange and dialogue between policymakers and actors involved in these different scales. To do so, policymakers need to clarify how they have interpreted justice, allowing societal actors to reflect on this interpretation and propose their own understandings in response. Therefore, we

need institutionalised policy mechanisms that employ public participation as continuous processes where actors can turn to in order to share their ever-changing societal needs and enable a continuous redefinition of priorities.

This leads to a second recommendation, which is to invest in the representativeness of such an ongoing dialogue. Where in many cases policymakers do organise conversations with stakeholders, the degree to which a broad diversity of actors is involved is not always representative of the community that is impacted by certain decisions at these different temporal and geographical scales. It might then be questioned to what extent procedural and recognition justice are truly being considered. Policymakers should look beyond the usual involved stakeholders and incentivise the active participation of actors that might present different perceptions of a just energy transition.

Finally, and relatedly, there is still a difference between engaging with stakeholders in participatory *processes* and having such participation and input be reflected in final decision-making *outcomes*. Having a participatory process and a diversity of justice conceptions represented in such a dialogue is not necessarily going to lead to a consensus or unified understanding of what a just energy policy is. Neither society nor science can eventually make the final call of what is a just decision. In the end, this is a political choice, where trade-offs are to be made between different policy goals and social values. Policymakers should not shy away from making those, sometimes tough, decisions in order to accelerate the transition to an energy system that is sustainable and just.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Annemiek de Looze: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Sander ten Caat:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Antonella Maiello:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Conceptualization. **Shivant Jhagrore:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Conceptualization. **Eefje Cuppen:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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