

Disconnections in Spain

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Version: 4th September 2020

Perspective on disconnections in the policy debate of Spain

Largely an unrecognized issue in Spain until the early 2010s, energy poverty started to attract attention as a distinct social issue and policy subject in the context of the global financial crisis and EU-imposed austerity politics (Tirado Herrero and Jiménez Meneses, 2016). Around that time the Spanish Environmental Science Association produced the first collection of energy expenditure and 'consensual' indicators (Tirado Herrero et al., 2012). By early 2014 the Congress of Deputies, Spain's legislative branch, and regional parliaments in 11 of the 17 Autonomous Communities – the key second-tier governance and administrative level of quasi-federal Spain – had registered legislative action explicitly addressing energy poverty, with a range of local councils also launching initiatives at the city level (Tirado Herrero et al, 2014). At that stage debates mostly revolved around rapidly increasing domestic energy prices (especially at a time of shrinking incomes for many families), indoor thermal comfort, excess winter mortality and other readily available energy poverty metrics.

Disconnections were not a major concern in early debates around energy poverty. They started gaining considerable media attention in autumn 2016 following the death of [Rosa Pitarch, who died as a result of a fire](#) that occurred in her apartment in the city of Reus, south of Barcelona. The 81-year-old woman had been using candles to light her home – one of which set her mattress on fire – for two months after having her electricity supply disconnected, as she was unable to pay the bills. Rosa was a partially disabled person attended by the municipal social services since 2013. According to the Reus local council, Rosa's electricity provider Gas Natural Fenosa (now Naturgy) had [cut her power off without letting the](#)

[municipality know](#), though it was their legal duty to do so. In Catalonia, regional legislation, under the Law 24/2015, requires electricity, gas and water companies to contact social services before stopping the supply of a residential customer in order to verify whether the household is at risk of social exclusion according to social services. Consequently the *Generalitat de Catalunya* – the Catalan government – imposed a [half million Euro fine to Gas Natural Fenosa](#) in June 2017 after finding evidence of the utility's 'serious misconduct'.

Interpreting disconnections enforced by energy suppliers as an extreme form of energy deprivation and foreseeing potential for transformative collective action, the [Aliança contra la Pobresa Energètica](#), or APE, (Alliance against Energy Poverty) was formed in Barcelona in February 2014. They were initially constituted as coalition of social and environmental organizations under the premise of fighting for [access to basic supplies such as energy and water as a fundamental human right](#). APE's energy poverty activism denounces the dominant position of utility companies in complicity with State actors as well as the insufficient protection of citizens in front of energy and water corporations. A key activity of the Alliance is the so-called collective advisory assemblies (*assessoraments col·lectius*). These are bi-weekly meetings attended by a number of *afectadas*¹ (i.e., 'affected' persons with unpaid bills or accumulated debt, or at risk of disconnection and/or eviction) in a space specifically dedicated to sharing concerns and grievances, and to exchanging knowledge and skills about, for instance, how to deal with utility companies and social services. These sessions have therapeutic and empowering purposes so that participants feel they are not alone in their troubles and know that they are entitled to protection and support. Collective advisory assemblies also decide on *acompañamientos* – concerted visits to local offices of utility companies and municipal social services in support of *afectadas* who are in particularly difficult circumstances or are less capable of dealing with certain administrative procedures or requests. As of 2020 the Alliance is campaigning for a real 'second chance' to people indebted to utility service providers. APE has been demanding that big utility companies cancel the accumulated energy debts of vulnerable families since the approval of Law 24/2015. This objective was partially achieved in 2018 when households indebted to the main water supply company of the Metropolitan Area of Barcelona (Agbar) got their debt written off by the utility.

The collective action strategies put in place by APE are similar to those of the more numerous and better-known Platform of People Affected by Mortgages ([Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca or PAH](#)) – a self-organised network of citizen-activists resisting evictions and fighting for the right to housing since 2009 (García-Lamarca

¹ Confronting the masculine as normative grammatical gender for plurals in Spanish, APE purposely speaks of '*afectadas*' (in feminine) to underline the gendered nature of their condition and struggle.

and Kaika, 2016). APE and PAH are sister organizations sharing strategic objectives and tactics, and both originating from Barcelona.

A milestone of APE's and PAH's political action is the Law 24/2015 of urgent measures to tackle housing and energy poverty emergencies. This law is a unique piece of legislation in Spain, one that forbids the eviction and disconnection from basic networked supplies among households unable to pay their utility bills or mortgage and considered to be at risk of housing-related exclusion by social services. Law 24/2015 was brought to the Parliament of Catalonia through a [People's Legislative Initiative](#) launched by APE, PAH and the human rights research and advocacy centre *Observatori DESC*. As proponents and promoters, these entities received the support of [150,000 citizen's signatures](#) and 500 social organizations. The initiative was then formally presented and unanimously adopted by the Parliament of Catalonia in July 2015. This significant accomplishment of energy and housing justice activists was immediately preceded by the election of [Ada Colau, co-founder and former leader of PAH, as Mayor of Barcelona](#) in May 2015. Colau's victory in the Barcelona 2015 local elections was partially the consequence of the global wave of social protests that swept across Spain in May 2011 at the onset of the [Movimiento 15-M](#) or *Indignados* Movement. *Barcelona en Comú* (Barcelona in Common) – the electoral platform that brought Colau to the mayor's seat – was initially constituted as a coalition of Spanish and Catalan left-green political parties that often drew their ranks from local civil society organizations including PAH and APE.

Since May 2015 *Barcelona en Comú's* administration has sought to implement a political agenda inspired by principles of the right to housing and to energy. Despite their precarious majority in the Municipal Council, this administration has continuously engaged with housing and domestic energy issues by giving priority to stopping housing evictions and supply disconnections. As of 2018 the City Council claimed to have successfully assisted [more than 2,000 households facing foreclosure and eviction](#) and stopped [10,000 supply disconnections](#). Municipal action on these fronts is legally grounded on Law 24/2015 and channeled through special mediation and citizen support services created by the City Council – the Energy Advisory Points (*Punts d'Assessorament Energètic*, or PAEs) and Units against Housing Exclusion (*Unitats Contra l'Exclusió Residencial*, or UCER).

While the implementation of Law 24/2015 is restricted to the territory of Catalonia, it is likely influencing national decision making as shown in the latest reforms of Spain's [social tariff for electricity](#), subsequently approved as Royal Decrees 897/2017 and 15/2018. These national laws established for the first time a prohibition to cut off vulnerable households with children up to the age of 16 or with disabled persons. In 2019, the National Energy Poverty Strategy explicitly

recognized access to domestic energy as a 'citizen right' on the basis of articles 47 (right to decent and adequate housing) and 43.1 (right to health protection) of the Spanish Constitution even if it did not take any further legislative steps in this direction.

Research perspective on disconnections in Spain

According to results of the 2016 Spanish Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC), it is estimated over 900,000 people in Spain (100,000 in Catalonia) had their energy supply interrupted at least once during the year 2016 due to 'household financial difficulties'. These account for reported self-disconnections (e.g., 'voluntarily' cancelling the contract with the natural gas provider so that only electricity bills are paid; or going without butane gas bottles to save money) as well as for supplier-enforced cut-offs. These figures are likely to understate the full extent of the issue as they are based on a questionnaire item only asked to respondents that previously stated not being able to keep their home adequately warm, i.e., just about 10% of the Spanish 2016 SILC sample. Despite shortcomings, the estimates are unique in Spain and the whole EU, as it is the first time that a national SILC questionnaire included an item on energy poverty-related supply disconnections in Member States (Tirado Herrero et al., 2018).

When considered along other forms of material deprivation and social exclusion, data on energy poverty draw a grim picture. The Spanish SILC shows that, as of 2016, 1.5 million citizens of the country (3% of the population) were simultaneously in arrears on mortgage and rent payments and on utility bills (Tirado Herrero et al., 2018). These statistics reveal energy poverty as one of the many forms of precariousness faced by the most disenfranchised. The energy-housing link is particularly problematic for the significant number of households that irregularly reoccupy or recover homes from which they have previously been evicted, or live in informal settlements. For them energy poverty is experienced primarily as a lack of regular, legal access to basic household supplies including domestic energy, as utility companies often deny such households a regular provision contract. In some cases, households that have been either disconnected or denied access resort to tampering with meters or making clandestine hookups, specifically for electricity. A dangerous coping strategy, households living under such circumstances are forced into an unstable, insecure form of energy supply that leads to repeated disconnections and to people being charged with fines and surcharges that result in additional indebtedness. These cases are statistically minor but at the same time help visualize conditions of severe energy exclusion experienced by a very vulnerable population sub-group (Tirado Herrero, 2018).

Energy supply disconnections have dire consequences on the energy poor. Still a largely unexplored aspect of energy poverty, they constitute a turning point in a household's energy biography and critically endanger their health and psychosocial well-being. In Barcelona, a small 100-people survey of people at risk of eviction and/or utility disconnection found poor mental health conditions, as measured by the Goldberg-Shapiro scale, in 70% of men and 83% of women in such circumstances. These percentages were four times higher than the average scores of likely anxiety and depression for the whole population of Barcelona – 16% for men and 20% for women (Delgado et al., 2018).

Acknowledgments

Sergio Tirado Herrero's contribution to the EP-pedia is part of a project that has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 752870.

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