

**Power struggle:
the evolving relationship between social
enterprise initiatives and state
interventions in the supply of renewable
energy in the UK.**

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of the social economy vis a vis the role of the state in the UK energy sector. In the post-war period, energy (and especially electricity) provision was heavily regulated by the state which guaranteed long-term security of supply through a centrally planned predict-and-provide model. In the early 1990s, this was abandoned in favour of a neoliberal model which saw whole-sale privatisation of the sector. This resulted in lower electricity and gas prices for consumers in the short term, and the abandonment of investment and R&D in the energy sector. A few years later the political taste for intervention in the energy sector increased again because of environmental and (more recently) security-of-supply concerns. But despite a range of state incentives, the private sector has been unable to deliver many of the renewable energy solutions which are more commonplace in other European countries. The UK government has belatedly recognised the limitations of reliance on such large-scale private sector initiatives in the power sector and it has started to embrace the idea of supporting more community based initiatives. This paper maps the subsequent mixed response to social enterprise initiatives in energy provision in the UK and Denmark, identifies the main drivers and barriers these initiatives are currently experiencing and the ambiguous role of the state therein. The paper will explore case studies drawn from international comparisons particularly rooted in the North American Co-operative experience of energy supply. The paper finally reflects on possible future growth scenarios for the social economy of power provision in the UK and discusses the prerequisites of these scenarios in terms of behavioural change of consumers and government actors at the local, national and European level.

Key words: social economy, renewable energy, state