

Summer energy poverty

● Energy poverty does not only mean suffering from the cold but also enduring the heat

Largely due to climate change, heat waves are becoming a new characteristic of European summers, but also of summers in other parts of the world. It is estimated that heat waves kill about 12,000 people every year around the world [1]. More than 70,000 additional deaths occurred in Europe during the summer 2003 [2]. In the EU, about one fifth of the population (or over 100 million people) cannot afford to keep their homes comfortably cool in summer [3]. This means that we should not think of energy poverty in Europe only in terms of people suffering from cold homes, but also in terms of summer energy poverty.

● Summer energy poverty hits disproportionately the most vulnerable

Heat waves and their accompanying extreme weather events – droughts, fires, storms – are disproportionately hitting the most vulnerable parts of global populations. When heat waves occur, those with lower incomes, people of colour, unemployed, elderly, women, people with health issues and homeless people are on the frontlines, as they tend to live in the most inadequate homes (or none at all) and have the least access to cooling [1], [4], [5].

● Summer energy poverty to rise in the future

The on-going climate change is predicted to yield a growing number of extreme climate events which will increase in both intensity and frequency [4]. Studies show that heat waves could increase 50-fold by 2100, leading to increased number of deaths caused by intense summer heat [1]. Future climate scenarios point to an increase in the number and intensity of heat waves in Southern Europe, making it a particularly vulnerable region to the adverse impacts of high temperatures on thermal comfort [6]. Coupled with signs that show more and more people are subject to various vulnerabilities (low income, unemployment or precarious employment, advanced age, etc), this leads to an estimate that summer energy poverty is going to be on a rise in the future.

● More attention needed for the issue of summer energy poverty

Summer energy poverty still receives little attention of the media and decision-makers. Summertime issues are not included in energy poverty definitions [7]. Also a significant information gap remains [7]. While statistical services are monitoring winter energy poverty, little data is available on summer energy poverty [1], [5]. Indoor cooling is becoming an increasingly relevant issue in Europe, but data on the final energy demand for space cooling within the EU residential buildings' profile is still scarce [6]. Summertime energy poverty and space cooling difficulties are relatively under-explored aspects of energy poverty in Europe, despite many researchers arguing for a year-round conceptualisation of the issue that includes all energy services in the home [8], [5]. This is why more attention is needed for the issue of summer energy poverty, especially among decision-makers. Energy poverty—traditionally understood through the lens of wintertime heating and comfort—requires an effective or more decisive recognition of summertime cooling needs [9]. Cooling and summertime thermal comfort need to be recognised as important aspects in current energy poverty imaginaries. An enhanced, broader understanding of energy poverty will lead to a better assessment of the problem and give the opportunity of setting better solutions for impacted households [9].

Plans and policies for tackling summer energy poverty are urgently needed

What we urgently need is to start developing plans on how to address summer energy poverty. Climate change adaptation plans considering hotter summers need to include heat wave scenarios, more green spaces in cities, investments in comfortable energy-efficient dwellings, well-designed street vegetation, green roofs and walls providing insulation and shade to buildings [1], [5]. These plans need to be especially adjusted for the most vulnerable. Rather than to social energy tariffs for vulnerable consumers, priority needs to be given to policies and strategies related to building retrofit in order to improve overall building stock energy efficiency and leverage the potential of renewable energy sources [6]. When retrofitting, it is necessary to consider occupants and their profiles as well as the dwelling construction details when choosing the most appropriate interventions [10]. Urban-scale interventions aimed at mitigating heat islands in urban areas are also important, such as the incorporation of green areas and urban shading systems [9]. Because studies have suggested that neither heat nor cold risks are perceived as personal risks by vulnerable individuals, raising awareness of temperature-induced health risk and inequalities remains important [11], [12].

Summer energy poverty in a wider context

Because energy poverty is deeply rooted in our current economic and societal set-up, we need to look at a wider context when talking about summer energy poverty. To tackle summer energy poverty and energy poverty in general, we need to radically change our economic model. Current climate policies are far from adequate, especially when being undermined by plans for economy-boosting activities, such as new pipelines, airport runways, fracking rigs and subsidies to fossil fuels. To have the chance of a safe and cool climate future we need the strongest action now to get Europe fossil-free [1].

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