

**Authors:** Marie Louyot-Gallicher and Vanesha Guirdarlal, EDF R&D

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The two great challenges for the European Union regarding the energy sector are energy security and energy poverty. Today, many societal factors lead us to believe that the world of energy is on the verge of a revolution. The foreseeable depletion of fossil resources and the collective awareness of the impact of human activity on climate complicate our relationship with energy: on the one hand, we are ready to look for practical and sustainable solutions for consuming less energy, but on the other hand, we are reluctant to give up the comfort gained through available and cheap energy. European Union works to ensure the energy supply security among its territory and try to cope with the growing phenomenon of energy poverty. Energy poverty can be defined as a condition wherein a household is unable to access energy services. As such, it is often considered synonymous with some definitions of 'fuel poverty' although this concept is often used in reference to issues of low energy affordability, rather than the broader problems that predicate inadequate energy access. Within the EU only the UK and Ireland have a definition of fuel poverty.

This paper focuses on the evolution of the phenomenon of energy poverty across different European countries. Member States react in different ways on the recognition of energy poverty and vulnerable customers. Northern Europe countries perform worst, with no official definitions of these two notions. Countries within Eastern Europe scored slightly higher than Northern Europe, with common usage of 'vulnerable consumer' found in Bulgaria, Hungary and Slovenia. In southern Europe, energy poverty is not recognized as a major social problem even if these countries suffer the most from this inconvenience. Western Europe countries do the best performance with official definition of fuel poverty in two countries, United Kingdom and Ireland and common usage of vulnerable consumer found in Belgium, Ireland and United Kingdom.

Energy poverty has many health consequences, but beyond physical illnesses such as asthma and influenza it can also affect mental wellbeing and social contact. People suffering from energy poverty reduce mobility and face social exclusion including depression. This form of deprivation obviously has an impact on happiness and wellbeing. The most extreme consequence of energy poverty is the phenomenon of excess winter mortality which is found across the EU especially in Spain and Portugal. This fact contradicts the perception that southern European countries are not affected by energy poverty due to their milder winter climates.

European legislation must address the problem of consumer vulnerability as a horizontal task, taking into account their different needs, capacities and circumstances. It must associate not only the authorities but also companies and suppliers in order to obtain a more transparent contractual balance. Services are considered "universal", no citizen should be deprived. Some consumers may find themselves disadvantaged in the case of non-delivery, which can lead to a situation of vulnerability. Member States are required to take appropriate measures and adopt adequate safeguards to protect vulnerable consumers, providing them with the ability to switch to a new supplier every 3 weeks and prohibiting disconnection of electricity in critical times. However, several experts pointed out that the delimitation of the causes of energy poverty to 'low income, inadequate building quality and high energy prices' ignores the socio-demographic circumstances which are also strongly related to energy

poverty. They underlined the lack of consideration of institutions to deal with energy poverty at multiple levels of governance.

To conclude, energy poverty is gradually entering the European political mainstream. Overall, the liberalization of energy markets has not led to general decline in prices but the added difficulty for consumers to determine the best rate that fits their needs and understand the contents of their energy bills. The single market must continue to provide a high level of protection for all consumers, by granting particular attention to vulnerable consumers to reflect their specific needs and enhance their ability to make optimal decisions.

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