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Abstract

Energy justice is essential for ensuring just and equitable transitions, yet justice remains contested and perpetually negotiated within complex socio-political environments. While sociotechnical transitions literature often relies on static accounts of agency, regional development perspectives on structural transformation fall short in explicitly accounting for justice outcomes. We contribute to these scholarships by theorizing how justice outcomes are shaped through dynamic agentic processes on temporal and spatial dimensions. We propose a theoretical framework that conceptualizes Justice Claims (JCs) as discursive devices that distill and align fluid, multi-level storylines to mediate the co-evolution of local opportunity spaces (OS) and multi-scalar human agency.

We operationalize this framework through an empirical analysis of two striking grassroots mobilisations: energy grid remunicipalization in Hamburg, Germany, and slum electrification in Mumbai, India. We demonstrate that while human agency is inherently asymmetrical within transition governance, under-resourced grassroots actors leverage JCs to mobilise collective agency - rendering themselves as legitimate ‘agents of justice’ capable of reshaping the parameters of the local OS. In Hamburg, activists braided macro-level Energiewende discourses with local "Right to the City" storylines to expand the local OS and legally mandate grid buybacks. In Mumbai, slum residents hijacked top-down universal service obligations and privatisation mandates to force formal grid access within a splintered utility landscape. our findings demonstrate that initial structural gains do not automatically dissolve agentic asymmetries; sustained place-based leadership and the progressive institutionalization of decentralized deliberative spaces are required to permanently translate normative JCs into durable policy and infrastructure mandates.

Keywords: Energy transitions; Opportunity space; Justice claims; Human agency; Just transitions

1. Introduction

Debating energy justice is essential for ensuring that sustainability transitions do not merely produce new energy systems, but are also equitable, fair and democratic in terms of participation, decision-making processes, and the distribution of benefits and burdens. While increasingly integral to the energy transition discourse, energy justice remains contested and is perpetually negotiated within complex socio-political environments. This calls for a focus on human agency - the capacity of actors to purposively and meaningfully act, make choices, and influence socio-political structures and processes (Cleaver, 2007; Haldar et al., 2024; Sotarauta & Grillitsch, 2023). Understanding how human agency evolves and operates within these justice negotiations is thus crucial and is also increasingly gaining traction in energy transition scholarship (Becker et al., 2017; Geels, 2011; Nguyen Long et al., 2024; Pearse, 2021).

While existing literature on sociotechnical transitions has extensively discussed contentious politics and conflicting imaginaries shaping sustainability transitions (Geels, 2018; Pearse, 2021; Pesch, 2015), an explicit treatment of how agency unfolds and interacts with energy justice warrants attention. This is because existing studies tend to focus predominantly on structural determinants and often static accounts of agency, which overlook how actors actively shape and reshape justice-related outcomes over time (e.g. (Duygan et al., 2019; Graf & Jacobsen, 2021; Upham et al., 2018). In contrast, burgeoning literature in economic geography and regional development studies has generated new insights about transformation processes by unpacking the dynamic interplay between structure and agency over time (e.g. special issues Uyarra et al., 2017, Sotarauta and Grillitsch, 2023, Kinossian et al., 2024). Yet, these studies often fail to explicitly account for justice outcomes and connecting industrial transformations and path development with broader development outcomes (Breul et al., 2025).

With this paper, we aim to contribute to both literatures by i) theorizing how justice-related outcomes are shaped in dynamic agentic processes in concrete temporal and spatial settings, and ii) empirically illustrating the relevance of the suggested theoretical framework.

A dynamic perspective pays attention to the temporal embedding of human agency, which is to different degrees a) informed by the past in its recognition of routinised practices, b) situated in the present via its capacity to evaluate, contextualise and adapt to current situations, and c) future-oriented through its capacity to imagine alternative possibilities (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Linking structures and past dependencies with a dynamic perspective of agency, recent scholarship leverages the concept of 'opportunity spaces', which captures the possibilities for agency in a specific temporal and spatial settings (Grillitsch et al., 2024; Kurikka et al., 2023; Grillitsch & Sotarauta, 2020). Integrating this concept explicitly into analyses of energy justice negotiations represents an emerging area of inquiry that merits deeper exploration (Haldar et al. 2026; 2025; Hearn et al., 2021). Our approach for doing so is to develop the notion of justice

claims (JCs) as discursive devices that are leveraged to align perception (what change is perceived possible) and directionality (what change is desired) of transition processes across different stakeholder groups, embedded in specific constellations of place-specific, agent-specific conditions, and national and subnational institutional and policy dynamics. By centering energy justice analytically, we investigate how agency evolves within contested storylines and political dynamics that underpin justice claims (JCs) (Gürtler, 2023) and outcomes spatially and temporally.

Empirically, we explore this dynamic through a comparative analysis of slum electrification initiatives in Mumbai, India, and an initiative for the remunicipalisation of the energy grid in Hamburg, Germany. The selection is informed by two principles in comparative case study designs (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007): i) striking cases in the sense of grassroot agency shaping opportunity spaces and justice outcomes, and ii) variation in terms of historical legacies, governance structures, and socio-economic inequalities.

Mumbai, India's financial capital vividly exposes urban contradictions through stark spatial inequities and uneven access to critical infrastructure. While generating 13.88 percent of India's GDP and housing its wealthiest citizens, over 41 percent of Mumbai's 22.1 million residents, dwell in slums (World Population Review, n.d.), often denied formal access to electricity due to administrative 'de-notification' (Chattaraj, 2012). Among few of the Indian cities, Mumbai's electricity system features a unique 'parallel licensing' model, empowering consumers to select from a combination of four public and private providers. However, such institutional innovation has deepened urban divides, enabling grid reliability for formal sectors while marginalizing informal settlements reliant on mainly private distribution companies (Discoms). This complex infrastructural landscape stimulates grassroots agency, as civil society led slum communities mobilise to contest systemic inequalities and advocate for equitable access to essential public services. Thus, we position informal settlements in Mumbai as an empirical entry point to understand how human agency evolves around navigating justice in contentious energy infrastructure contexts.

Hamburg is a city-state with its own constitution and representation in the German federal legislative body. The metropolis is an important port and with 1.78 million residents, it is Germany's second largest city (Municipality of Hamburg 2026). Between 2014 and early 2019, the city bought back its electricity, gas and district heating grids from private concessionaires, after having privatised these grids in the early 2000s. As part of a broader trend of remunicipalisation of energy services in the context of the energy transition in Germany (Becker 2017), the initiative to bring back energy grids under public ownership was embedded in activist efforts to achieve a transition of the local energy system away from large-scale, fossil fuel-based generation. Since the privatisation of energy grids had reshuffled actor relations in Hamburg's energy governance, strengthening the role of private concessionaires (Cheung & Oßenbrügge

2020), a key aim of the remunicipalisation initiative was to strengthen local grassroots perspectives and agency in the local energy transition (Arifi & Späth 2025). This successful mobilization by a broad coalition of activists was enabled by a constitutional provision in Hamburg to influence politics through a particularly accessible scheme for achieving a referendum.

The Hamburg case focuses on the mobilization of grassroots activists and civil society actors to advance justice in local energy infrastructure, particularly around democratic control and the de-fossilisation of the energy grid. The Mumbai case demonstrates grassroots agency among slum residents and allied civil society actors to contest exclusionary infrastructures and assert energy access as a citizenship right (Haldar et al., 2025; Peddibhotla et al., 2024). Through these two cases, we illustrate and validate the proposed theoretical framework by asking three specific questions.

- How was the opportunity space for shaping justice outcomes perceived with regards to local energy infrastructure?
- What practices were leveraged to achieve justice through local energy infrastructures?
- What justice claims were made in relation to local energy infrastructure? How did agency for grassroot actors evolve in these contexts?

Even though the distinct local contexts color the relationship between human agency and opportunity spaces, we draw some general lessons: Agency is unevenly distributed, and visions of energy transitions are politically contested through discursive practices. Rather than being external to one another, agency and opportunity spaces are co-produced through these discursive practices, which establish the boundaries of political legitimacy. Concrete configurations of opportunity spaces in time and space, and for sets of actors, are important to understand the constitution of justice claims; they define which claims can gain traction, the discursive practices through which they are articulated, and the perceived legitimacy of the actors who voice them. By tracing how agency interacts with and shapes opportunity spaces and vice versa (i.e. how they are mutually co-constituted through discursive practices), this paper offers a nuanced, context-sensitive account of how equitable energy transitions can be negotiated across diverse socio-technical landscapes.

2. Theoretical framework

To analyse how human agency coevolves with opportunity spaces in transition contexts, we integrate the discursive concepts of ‘storylines’ and ‘justice claims’ with literature on local agency and opportunity spaces. In this section, we first define storylines and justice claims and then embed them in relation to local agency and opportunity spaces.

2.1 Storylines as discursive devices

Discursive perspectives highlight actors' meaning-making practices in the context of both national (Lovell, Bulkeley & Owens 2009, Scarse & Ockwell 2010, Roald Bern & Winkel 2013; Curran 2012) as well as regional and local energy debates and infrastructure conflicts (Späth 2012, Rafey & Sovacool 2012, for an extensive review see Isoaho & Karhunmaa 2019). Maarten Hajer's (1997, 2003) argumentative discourse analysis (ADA) approach, with its key concepts of storylines and discourse coalitions, has been particularly popular. Here storylines are defined as condensed statements that summarize complex narratives and allow for the clustering of knowledge, the positioning of actors, and the creation of broad coalitions (1995, p.63). Discourse coalitions are defined as "the ensemble of (1) a set of story lines (2) the actors who utter these story lines; and (3) the practices in which this discursive activity is based" (1995, p.65). The concept of sociotechnical imaginaries (Jasanoff & Kim, 2009) has also been used to reflect on durable and collectively held visions of social life and order, delivered through nation-specific technological or scientific advancements. It mainly focuses on broader, macro level political developments and defines economic priorities and the direction of infrastructure and technology development (Jasanoff & Kim, 2009). However, discursive contestations and meaning making related to energy (and similar) infrastructure also occurs at very localised policy arenas, often resulting in competing or supportive coalitions across multiple scales. In this regard, we argue that a study of place-specific (localised) discursive contexts would allow to understand how specific values get attached to specific forms of infrastructure – as in this case energy infrastructure – and hence influence how actors navigate structures and how agency coevolves with opportunity spaces (see next section) in energy transition processes.

We thus find 'storylines' around which diverse actors coalesce a useful concept because it allows us to foreground discursive politics including on subnational scales (Sovacool et al., 2020). Storylines are often intuitive and may appear uncontroversial. This very nature makes them resilient even though there is a possibility that they might be proven wrong (Molle, 2008). Storylines as a discursive tool allow actors to legitimise certain views. Despite their local embeddedness, storylines can change and evolve based on shifts in subnational, national and supranational conditions (Geels & Verhees, 2011; Isoaho & Markard, 2020).

2.2 Local agency and opportunity spaces

The concept of local agency captures the ability of actors embedded in a local context to work for and affect development outcomes. While foregrounding a bottom-up and people-centric perspective on development processes, studies on agency aim to navigate between structuralist and individualist explanatory frameworks (Giddens 1984; Granovetter 1985). Consequently, studies on agency are based on an ontological understanding that attaches power to material and social structures in terms of making certain actions possible, while hindering other actions. Yet, human agency is seen as necessary for reproducing and changing social structures. Human agency

can be differentiated by the intent of actors, whether actors aim to reproduce and maintain existing structures (reproductive agency), or transform them in line with a more desirable future state (change agency) (Bækkelund 2021; Jolly, Grillitsch, and Hansen 2020).

The concept of opportunity spaces was brought to this debate by Grillitsch and Sotarauta (2020) to link structure with change agency. Opportunity spaces capture the time and set of circumstances that make it possible for actors to realise a change. The authors suggest a layered conception of opportunity spaces focusing on properties of actors, and the conditions in a particular spatial and temporal context. The actor-specific level of opportunity spaces is relevant as, firstly, the will of working for a more desired imagined future is a necessary cause for action, and, secondly, actor properties such as experience, skills, networks, personality etc. shape the ability of the actor to work for such a change. The place-specific conditions are typically framed as mediating, enabling or hindering agency. This level has structural power in as much as it creates tendencies for certain agency patterns to emerge but does not determine them. Furthermore, place often relates to shared narratives and imaginaries that act as social filters for what actions are deemed possible or acceptable (Kurikka et al. 2023; Roessler et al. 2025). Change agency is often about mindful deviations from such place-specific narratives (Garud and Karnøe 2001). Mindful deviation is possible because different actor groups embedded in a place still have different experiences, perceptions, desires, and needs. Finally, actors' ability to work for a change is also conditioned by structures beyond the place, such as multi-level governance structures, technologies or industries.

2.3 Integrating justice claims as discursive devises of change agency in opportunity spaces

In this paper we integrate justice claims as important mechanisms for mobilising local agency to realise justice outcomes. Current work on local agency has emphasised the importance of collective agency and place-based leadership for regional development (Görmar and Kinossian, 2022; Roessler et al. 2025; Sotarauta et al. 2022) but has not always been explicit about the mechanisms through which this can be achieved. We argue that justice claims (and storylines in general) can be important mechanisms for enabling change agency in the context of local energy transitions. Storylines are devices through which actors can align their perceptions of opportunity spaces, i.e. their views of what change is possible, with their intent, i.e. the directionality in terms of what change is desired. Aligning actor perceptions and directionality creates a common motivation and cause for collective action. The ability to articulate and mobilise around storylines can thus be considered as a key ability of change agents.

This is particularly relevant for the agency of communities or civil society organisations where power structures tend to be less formalized than, for instance, in the context of firms, universities, or municipalities, which have been in the centre of conventional regional development processes. This is to be seen in the context of a shift in policy rationales calling for a reorientation towards societal challenges and thus paying more attention to social needs and the inclusion of civil society or grassroots actors (Grillitsch, Coenen, and Morgan 2025; Pontikakis et al. 2022). Yet, despite this call for inclusion, communities and civil society organisations are often at the fringe

of regional development processes and lack the agency to engage meaningfully (Molica et al. 2025). As structuring devises storylines facilitate collective action of communities and allow them to enhance their agency to influence the course of events. Through developing storylines, communities and civil society actors can thus shape opportunity spaces for action towards more just transition outcomes.

In relation to the idea that agency and opportunity spaces are both emerging phenomena, coevolving over time, we argue that storylines are developed in relation to specific local and non-local events, the latter being events that materialise at other scales but affect the local context. This speaks to the idea that multiple storylines linked to different key events may be articulated by varieties of actor groups, and that these storylines can to different degrees be complementary or contradicting. In a sense-making as well as political process actors may distil multiple storylines to carve out justice claims (JCs), which can be described as central directionality-giving themes that in consequence also influence the future shaping and (re-)articulation of storylines. Justice claims would then allow to link different storylines and mobilise across different grassroots actors, combing both shared perceptions of what is possible and what ought to be.

We thus foreground the role of discursive devices, storylines and specifically justice claims, in shaping how the opportunity spaces are organised in often localised contexts (Gürtler 2023). Actors at multiple levels leverage storylines to attach value to different social and physical phenomena (Hajer, 1997). We argue that multiple storylines related to energy infrastructure emerge at national, supra- and sub-national levels. They become contested and negotiated by local actors who attach different meanings to the physical and institutional organization of these infrastructures. Over time, different storylines can converge at local levels around initially broad but shared problematizations of energy infrastructure, in terms of their justice outcomes. For instance, the claim that energy access is central for urban citizenship, that decarbonisation is imperative, and that housing justice is the right to access a basket of basic services, can be understood as a set of storylines proliferating at multiple national and subnational arenas that are brought to converge into a collective shared meaning of what actors value in a particular place. However, such JCs are not static and respond to shifts in discursive and political contexts across different scales. Grassroots actors advancing JCs may gain legitimacy as important interlocutors in local energy political debates, hence rendering themselves into ‘agents of justice.’

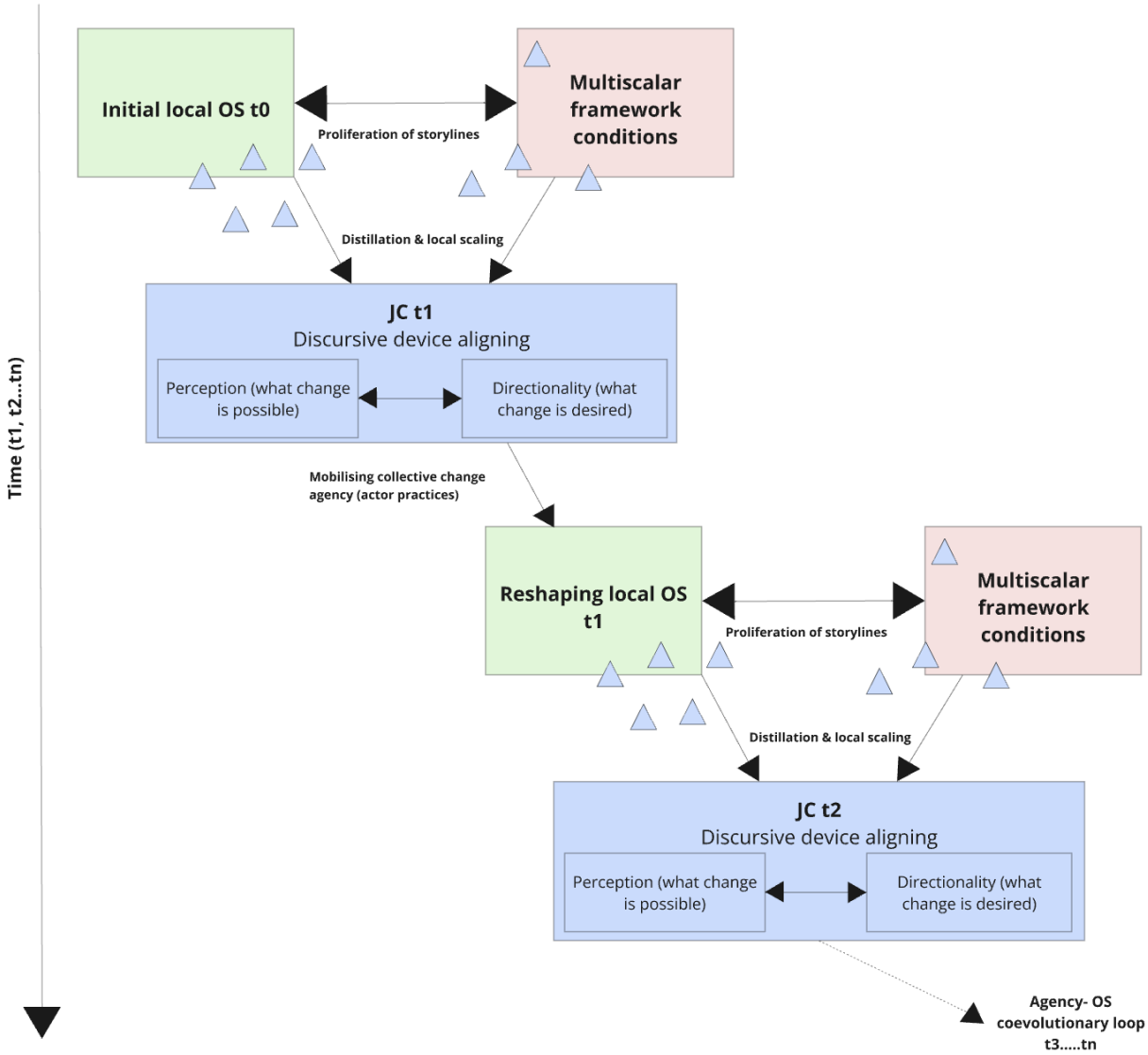

Figure 1. Justice claims (JC) as discursive devices mediating change agency and opportunity space (OS)
Source: Authors' composition

So, JCs can be seen as *socially constructed discursive devices that are leveraged to align perception (what change is possible) and directionality (what change is desired) of transition processes across different stakeholder groups, embedded in specific constellations of place-specific, agent-specific conditions, and national and subnational institutional and policy dynamics*. These JCs thus can be leveraged by actor groups to mobilize change agency and to reshape local opportunity spaces for more just outcomes (Figure 1). We propose that, at local levels, opportunity spaces for realising desired justice outcomes emerge as a constellation of agent specific, place specific and multi-scalar framework conditions, organised around defined JCs at a given moment in time.

3. Research design and methods

Anchored in an interpretivist approach, we mobilize an inductive qualitative research design to explore how human agency and opportunity spaces (OS) co-evolve through discursive interaction. Beyond an apolitical, technical assemblage of wires and grids, we understand energy infrastructure as a relationally structured and politically contested arena. This framing allows us to trace how multi-scalar framework conditions and place-specific contexts interact over time with actor-specific positions and capabilities. Rather than executing a traditional Global North-South binary comparison, we employ a relational comparative urbanism framework. This approach analyzes how under-resourced grassroots actors navigate the inherent asymmetries of transition governance by distilling fluid, multi-actor storylines into robust, normatively guiding Justice Claims (JCs). By tracking these discursive and practice elements longitudinally from the early 2000s to the mid-2020s, our design captures the precise mechanisms through which marginalized groups render themselves legitimate change agents- the so called 'agents of justice'.

3.1 Case Selection

Hamburg and Mumbai offer interesting relational parallels for examining transition politics. Both cities function as economically vital gateways and regional innovation hubs, making them prime targets for top-down, market-driven infrastructure strategies initiated in the early 2000s. Hamburg experienced the privatization of its energy grids to multinational concessionaires, while Mumbai underwent radical unbundling and privatization via the national Electricity Act 2003. These parallel neoliberal 'sociotechnical' restructuring projects created intense local structural exclusions - mass slum demolitions in Mumbai and coal-dependent lock-ins in Hamburg- provoking strategic grassroots mobilisation. Despite these parallels, the two cities offer divergent institutional pathways to energy justice: Hamburg advocates leveraged a referendum to enforce grid remunicipalization, while Mumbai's informal settlements tactically captured regulatory fissures within a splintered public-private utility geography to gain grid access. This divergence provides a robust comparative foundation for theorizing change agency within asymmetrical socio-institutional structures.

3.2 Sampling and Data Collection

We deployed a qualitative toolkit comprising semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and localized field observations, tailored to be case- and place-sensitive. Across both sites, data collection was organized in distinct temporal phases to trace the longitudinal evolution of JCs. In Hamburg, we analyzed 95 documents (including position papers, legal assessments, and parliamentary reports) and conducted 14 in-depth interviews between 2022 and 2023 with environmental organizers, cooperative leaders, church representatives, and municipal utility managers, supplemented by field observations. In Mumbai, fieldwork spanned three phases between 2022 and late 2023. Our sample comprised 55 respondents, including informal

settlement residents (n=25), civil society groups (n=12), public distribution utility actors (n=9), academic experts (n=5), and municipal officials (n=4), backed by reviews of municipal records and court rulings. We conducted the interviews in Mumbai and Hamburg in the context of the research project (ReSET) with a focus on the concept of institutional work (Hoffman et al. 2021, see Arifi & Späth 2025 and Haldar et al. 2025). For this article, the material has been analysed and new case studies have been developed and juxtaposed with the current framework in mind.

3.3 Ethics consideration

To ensure ethical alignment given the profound structural vulnerabilities of the participants - such as informal settlers facing dispossession in Mumbai and activists navigating institutional pushback in Hamburg - our approach prioritized trust-building and interpretive validity. In Mumbai, the phased data collection allowed us to iteratively ground macro-policy shifts in localized lived realities over multiple visits. In Hamburg, credibility was reinforced through a 'second visit' protocol (Hajer, 2006) involving formal reflection sessions with core interlocutors to validate preliminary interpretations. Data was analyzed iteratively using constructivist grounded theory methods (Charmaz, 2006) accounting for the initial opportunity space, critical temporal milestones, and the progressive institutionalization of JCs.

4. Case Analysis: Hamburg (2006-2022)

Hamburg privatised its energy utility company in the early 2000s, following the EU energy market reform and the 1998 amendment of the Energy Industry Act (Bremeier et al. 2006). The city sold its electricity and district heating grids to the Swedish energy company Vattenfall, and its gas grid to E.On. The privatisation decision prompted divergent positions over ownership of energy infrastructure and urban energy governance (Becker 2017). The privatisation process occurred at the backdrop of a consolidating energy transition discourse with the introduction of the Renewable Energy Act in 2000. The Federal government committed to replacing nuclear and fossil fuels with renewable energy in the long run and negotiated a so-called 'nuclear consensus' with the 'big four' energy corporations (Buschmann & Oels 2019; Hake 2015; Lauber & Jacobsson 2016). Activists mobilised around a set of justice concerns, which they sought to address through the remunicipalisation of energy grids. Following a referendum in 2013, activists continued to work toward democratising and decarbonising the development of energy grids in a way that is socially just, culminating in a new coal phase-out law. In what follows, we trace the practices involved in articulating a series of JCs around energy grids, highlighting the co-constitution of opportunity spaces and agency for a just local low-carbon transition at different phases (Figure 2).

JC 1: Framing grid ownership as a matter of democratic control

During the privatisation process, activists expressed concerns that private concessionaires could undermine local energy political aims. These concerns gained further traction when Vattenfall's plans to construct the 1600 MW coal-fired combined heat and power plant Hamburg-Moorburg (henceforth Moorburg CHP) were approved in 2008 (Wärme Hamburg & BUKEA Hamburg, 2021) following a court ruling, despite opposition by the local government. A siting conflict emerged once Vattenfall's plans to connect Moorburg CHP to the district heating grid through a new pipeline became known and approved in 2009. The so-called Moorburg pipeline would run through an inner-city park area and result in nearly 400 felled trees (Greenpeace 2014). Environmental and anti-privatisation activists mobilized under the umbrella initiative 'Stop the Moorburg pipeline!' (Stoppt die Moorburgtrasse!) and joined the *right to the city* network (Gegenstrom 13 n.d.). In their storyline, concerns over the ecological and social justice effects of further entrenching coal in local heat supply were articulated in terms of averting local environmental degradation, gentrification, global climate change impacts of coal-based electricity and heat generation (Arifi & Späth, 2025; Gegenstrom.13 n.d.b). Activists opposed the private concessionaires' quasi-monopoly in local heat supply. They anticipated that the Moorburg pipeline was crucial for the financial viability of the Moorburg CHP (Interview Civil Society H-1, 2022) and that it would further consolidate Vattenfall's influence in energy decision-making (Colell and Pohlmann 2019).

Acts of civil disobedience in the form of tree sittings in a local park by activists during the winter of 2009-2010 were crucial for mobilising the local population (Interview Civil Society H-2, 2024). The initiative joined the Friends of the Earth chapter in Germany in a lawsuit to contest the legality of the licensing process (Moorburgtrasse stoppen 2020; Greenpeace 2014). The pipeline was halted in 2010, following a ruling of the higher administrative court (Wärme Hamburg 2021). This contestation led a group of activists to establish the cooperative heat generation project KEBAP (KulturEnergieBunkerAltonaProjekt e.V.), prefiguring a more democratic, decentralised and climate compatible alternative to the private concession model of coal-based district heat provision in the city (Arifi & Späth, 2025).

A key reconfiguration of the opportunity space during this phase pertains to the repolitisation of grid infrastructure and sharpening public attention around the increasingly entrenched powers of private concessionaires in local energy policy. The practices involved in blocking the materialisation of Vattenfall's pipeline plans, ranging from protest and acts of disobedience to litigation and prefiguration, problematised the concessionaire's resolve to entrench coal in Hamburg's energy supply in spite of the will of the local government and the city's progressive climate and energy goals (Cheung & Oßenbrügge 2020). By repoliticising energy grid

infrastructure as a matter of concern for energy democracy in particular, activists opened the topic of grid infrastructure ownership to further contestation.

JC 2 (consolidating JC 1): Problematising prioritization of private interests at the cost of public interests

In 2009, in a move that was opposed widely, the Federal Government announced that it intended to withdraw its plans to phase out nuclear power and extend the life of several nuclear power plants (Hake 2015). Around this time, Hamburg's citizens found out that the extent of a 2007 fire in Vattenfall's Krümmel nuclear power plant (NPP) had been played down (Interview Civil Society H-2, 2024; Süddeutsche Zeitung 2010). The incident in Hamburg and the shift in Federal nuclear energy policy prompted massive anti-nuclear protest in April 2010, around the 24th anniversary of the Tschernoby disaster. Between 100.000 and 120.000 protesters from all over Germany formed a human chain along a 120-kilometre route along river Elbe between two NPPs, Krümmel and Brunsbüttel (Hamburger Abendblatt 2010), with NPP Krümmel in Hamburg acting as a place of symbolic importance (Della Porta & Diani 2006). This event strengthened the determination of local actors to tackle Vattenfall's oversized power in local energy supply and politics (Interview Civil Society H-2, 2024).

This critical event in NPP Krümmel and the mass anti-nuclear mobilization significantly shaped the opportunity space for the next phase. It allowed remunicipalisation advocates in Hamburg to connect place-specific concerns over Vattenfall's nuclear business with the national anti-nuclear discourse, which gained renewed traction at the national level after the Fukushima accident in 2011, alongside the energy transition discourse (Buschmann & Oels 2019). Whereas previously local actors problematised the limits to democratic decision making around the future of the local energy system due to private ownership, this phase of mobilisation consolidated public opinion around the claim that private concessionaires in general, and Vattenfall in particular, were unreliable and pursued private interest at the cost of the interests of the public. This would become their key argument in favour of remunicipalisation.

JC 3: Energy grids as a lever for consolidating social justice, energy democracy and climate objectives

After the pipeline project was halted in 2011, grassroots activists and civil society organisations saw an opportunity to address their concerns over the private concession model of energy supply and its implications for local energy governance, as concession contracts for the energy grids were nearing their end. They decided to make use of the constitutionally available instrument of the referendum to compel the municipality to buy back the electricity, gas and district heating grids (ibid.; Cheung & Oßenbrügge 2020; Arifi & Späth, 2025). The referendum initiative organized the 'Our Hamburg-Our Grid' campaign and brought together grassroots activists and representatives

of over 50 civil society organisations, including the Consumer Advice Centre, the charity organisation of the Protestant-Lutheran Church (Diakonie), and BUND-Hamburg, the local chapter of Friends of the Earth (Unser Hamburg – Unser Netz 2013). Representatives of these three organisations championed the key JC of the initiative, broadly summarised in the second sentence of the referendum ballot, namely that aside from buying back the electricity, gas and district heating grids, the city ought to transform energy grids in a socially just, democratically controlled, and climate compatible way.

The framing of energy supply as a provisioning system connected to human agency and dignity became a key argument in the storyline of remunicipalisation advocates, alongside the aim of democratising local energy governance and decarbonising supply by returning energy grids to the public hand (Arifi & Späth, 2025). To underpin this framing, activists had to produce and disseminate information on the benefits of grid remunicipalisation. In particular, they had to counteract storylines of remunicipalisation opponents, who sought to depoliticise grid infrastructure, by making the case for the district heating grid as a key lever for the city's climate political goals (Interview Civil Society H-3).

Campaigners managed to collect the necessary signatures to petition for a referendum on the 22nd September 2013, the day of federal parliamentary elections. Several factors helped remunicipalisation advocates navigate the opportunity space during this phase. Their anti-privatisation stance aligned with the national anti-nuclear and energy transition policy ambitions, which, as previously noted, were framed as being at odds with the interests of corporations like Vattenfall. Previous experiences with the privatisation of hospitals (Holsten 2014) and the fight against the privatisation of Hamburg's water supply strengthened the argument around the importance of public ownership of energy grids as a provisioning system (Interview Civil Society H-3, 2024). Beyond such claims, the success of activists in bringing back grids under municipal ownership was predicated on the successful advocacy of Mehr Demokratie e.V., an NGO working on democratization, to reform rules in the city's constitution around the timing and the bindingness of referendums (ibid., Mehr Demokratie e.V. 2018, see also Arifi & Späth, 2025).

The successful referendum legally mandated the city to take over energy grids and reconfigure energy supply following locally articulated justice goals. However, asserting the mandate and ensuring that the city would ambitiously operationalize the three imperatives of social justice, democratic control and climate compatibility remained a challenge. During a meeting of the parliament's environment committee, activists felt dismissed (Interview Civil Society H-3, 2024). This prompted them to establish alternative venues that could facilitate a public dialogue around the future of heat supply, a key source of carbon emissions in the city. The result was a long-running series of 'Heat Dialogues', staged and moderated by activists between the years 2014 and 2021. These dialogues became a key arena for activists to position themselves as experts,

continuously frame the debate around the configuration of the future district heating grid in terms of justice outcomes, and to include the broader public in the debate. The Heat Dialogues prefigured how the imperative of 'democratic control' could be operationalised more ambitiously. In parallel, activists engaged in knowledge production, often in cooperation with technical and legal consultancy companies, in particular when it came to advocating for the remunicipalisation and transformation of district heat infrastructure (for a more detailed account, see Arifi & Späth, 2025). These debates occurred in the backdrop of reforms of the Renewable Energy Act in 2014 and 2016, which marked a regression of the earlier committment to replacing coal with renewable energy sources by capping the growth of renewables through a shift in the subsidy regime, driven by a cost/affordability and energy security discourse (Buschmann & Oels 2019; Lauber & Jacobsson 2016).

The remunicipalisation initiative channeled public sentiment against coal and Vattenfall towards a phased process of enforcing a referendum, which they won, albeit by a small margin. The positive objectives of the referendum, namely achieving a socially just, democratically controlled and climate compatible reconfiguration of energy grids under municipal ownership, facilitated coalition building. While challenging, these objectives were framed as achievable. Overall, the remunicipalisation mandate enhanced the agency of activists in the debate over the implementation of referendum objectives.

JC 4: Phasing-out coal for climate justice

Several participatory structures and processes followed the Heat Dialogues (for a more detailed account, see Joost 2022; Arifi & Späth, 2025). The most recent and significant process was an expert advisory board on the replacement of the coal-based Tiefstack CHP with innovative and low-carbon sources of heat in the Energy Park Tiefstack (Arifi & Späth, 2025). This advisory board and participatory process were negotiated in the context of a new referendum initiative for a coal phase-out by 2025, which was organized by Tschüss Kohle! (transl. Bye coal!), a constellation of remunicipalisation and other activists who sought to institutionalise the objective of a climate compatible reconfiguration of energy grids. The activists' storyline around this referendum centred on climate justice and the city's climate obligations. Campaigners managed once again to collect the necessary signatures to initiate a referendum vote. This time, however, activists entered a negotiation with parliamentary factions based on a draft for a coal phase-out law, which they had devised (Arifi & Späth, 2025). The result of this negotiation was a law that fixed 2030 as the end date to coal-use in heat provision. The law also included the abovementioned advisory process to plan the replacement of the last coal-fired CHP. During the proceedings of this planning process, the municipal utility reported to the expert advisory board. Activists were able to bring in grassroots perspectives, and to compel the utility company to swiftly start working on an

ambitious but robust and timely replacement concept for the CHP (ibid.; Interview Civil Society H-2, 2024).

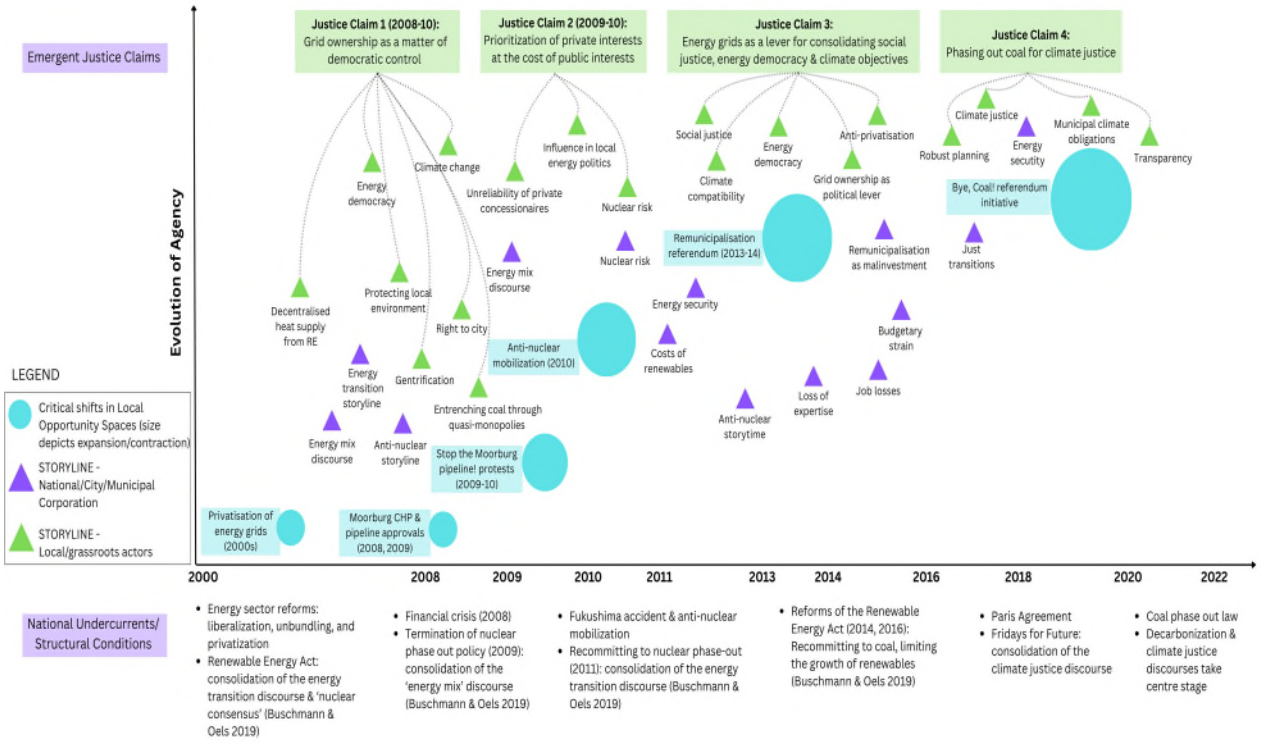

Figure 2: Timeline of discursive shifts in justice framing in response to multi-scalar framework conditions and local dynamics (Hamburg).
Source: Authors' composition

The shift in local agency in shaping a just supply with energy resulted from a sustained engagement by activists over a prolonged process of grid remunicipalisation (Arifi & Späth, 2025). Activists gained recognition as experts. Through the new coal phase-out law, they were able to institutionalise the goal of a climate-friendly reconfiguration of heat supply and gained some access to planning and decision-making processes. Engaging with both confrontational and more collaborative strategies helped foster a close working relationship and deepened trust between activists and utility managers and the local administration (ibid.). At the same time, closed-shop dynamics emerged: outward transparency was limited and only certain activists were included (ibid.).

Through their sustained efforts, remunicipalisation activists may have widened the opportunity space for activism around socially just local low-carbon transitions. In October 2025, a new

generation of local activists brought the so-called 'Referendum on the Future' to a success. Through this referendum, and through an explicit reference to social justice, the voters have mandated the city to amend the climate protection law anew, moving the date for carbon neutrality from 2045 to 2040, and by setting annual objectives toward this goal.

5. Case Analysis: Mumbai

A striking instance of collective agency reshaping institutional conditions for energy justice is the mobilisation of slum residents and civil society actors in Malad West, Mumbai, between the early 2000s and 2022. The area includes both notified and denotified slums, the latter excluded from formal infrastructure entitlements. The Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC), responsible for urban planning and service provision, delivers water, sanitation, and electricity (through Brihanmumbai Electric Supply and Transport (BEST) Undertaking). However, BMC's Development Plan routinely designates informal settlements as 'open spaces', denying them recognition and public infrastructure access (Chattaraj, 2012). Mumbai's electricity system is governed by a multi-actor regime, including BEST, the state-owned Maharashtra State Electricity Distribution Company Limited (MSEDCL), and private companies - Tata Power and Adani Electricity Mumbai Ltd. Grassroots actors strategically navigate this splintered institutional landscape, mobilizing legal reforms and electoral politics to contest exclusion (Focus Group, Civil Society 2, 2022). In doing so they reframe electricity access as a question of urban citizenship, and rights-based development.

Moving ahead we analyse how storylines were mobilised to converge into concrete JCs by grassroots actors, shaping the opportunity space at different phases of energy infrastructure deployment in Malad West region of Mumbai (Figure 3).

JC 1: Electricity as lever for urban citizenship

In the early 2000s, national reforms championed liberalisation, unbundling and privatisation as the route to an efficient power sector. Policy-makers framed electricity as a backbone for economic growth and regulatory interventions were made to prevent vulnerable groups from being left behind. At municipal level, Mumbai's elites pursued a 'world-class city' strategy that valorised consumer choice and competition while discursively portraying slums as infrastructural disruptions (Banerjee-Guha, 2009; MacLeod, 2011). The Electricity Act 2003 cemented these narratives into law. By unbundling the sector, it opened space for private participation and introduced a Universal Service Obligation that required distribution companies to supply electricity to anyone who applied. Yet this obligation carried a provision- applicants had to furnish proof of legal tenancy. For denotified slums like Ambujwadi and New Bhabrekar Nagar, which the Municipal Corporation designated as 'open spaces' (Chattaraj, 2012), this requirement effectively institutionalised exclusion.

Grassroots actors responded by constructing a *right-to-the-city* storyline. They argued that energy access was a marker of citizenship and that denying connections to those without formal titles undermined the very notion of universal service. Local committees organised residents to document their economic contributions through survey reports, highlighting how informal settlements underpinned the city's service sector. De-notified households denied legal connections improvised by pilfering electricity and buying power from neighbours with formal access. These workarounds met immediate needs but revealed the inconsistency between universal-service rhetoric and tenure requirements. Civil-society-led slum communities argued that recognising residents as legitimate consumers would end such improvisations, cut distribution losses, improve efficiency and advance social justice (Interview, Civil Society 2, 2022).

This discursive reframing reconfigured the opportunity space for just energy transitions. The EA 2003 created a universal-service obligation that activists could mobilise, yet its requirement for proof of tenure simultaneously curtailed access for denotified informal settlements. Civil-society groups seized on this contradiction to recast universal access as a question of recognition and rights, thereby opening up the space for advocacy focused on broadening eligibility and ensuring that statutory obligations encompass all informal residents.

JC 2: Tenency rights and recognition justice get linked to energy access

In the aftermath of the previous phase, national urban policy turned towards poverty alleviation and slum rehabilitation. Large-scale programmes financed by the World Bank culminated in the launch of the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM) in 2005, which promoted inclusive growth and the integration of informal settlements. Despite this rhetoric, electricity infrastructure remained outside JNNURM's core agenda, and municipal authorities continued to advance a world-class urban vision that saw slums as infrastructure disruption. This contradiction came to a head in Malad West. In 2004 the municipal corporation demolished around 10 000–13 000 households in the Ambujwadi and New Bhabrekar Nagar slums (FGD, Civil Society 1, Slum residents, 2023). These settlements were classified as de-notified and denied grid connections. Their destruction created a critical normative rupture that exposed how energy deprivation and housing insecurity were intertwined.

Local and national actors engaged with this crisis in contrasting ways. Nationally, JNNURM's discourse of slum rehabilitation signalled that informal settlements should be included in urban development, yet it overlooked electricity. Municipally, officials justified demolitions as necessary for redevelopment. In response, slum residents and civil-society organisations forged a counter-storyline- denying energy was part of a broader pattern of dispossession and marginalisation. They soon realised that access to the electricity grid could serve as documentary proof for tenancy. Thus, civil society led local communities, documented their economic

contributions through social audits and mounted a strategic performative collective action to be recognised as legitimate consumers. In 2005 more than 3 000 residents marched 1 400 km from Azad Maidan, Mumbai to the Indian Parliament, demanding an end to evictions and recognition of tenancy rights. Influential local, national and international NGOs mediated between communities and authorities, organised protests and built political alliances (Interview, Civil Society 2, 2022; FGD, Slum communities, 2023). Leading to the then Chief Minister's order to stop slum demolitions in Mumbai in 2005.

This articulation of energy access as linked to tenancy and recognition justice broadened and reoriented the opportunity space for just energy transitions. By tying electricity provision to formal tenure, activists leveraged JNNURM's inclusionary language to argue that infrastructure upgrades must include energy. The demolition of thousands of homes underscored the urgency of recognising slum dwellers as legitimate urban residents. Grassroots institutional work - social audits, coalition-building and performative protests, pushed electricity into policy debates and compelled regulators to consider that universal-service obligations could not be fulfilled without addressing tenancy. JNNURM's omission of electricity exposed the limits of its inclusionary rhetoric. This gap advanced JCs where grassroots actors argued that genuine urban renewal requires integrating energy access into redevelopment plans and called for sustained advocacy to make electricity access intertwined with tenancy rights a core policy objective.

*Consolidation of JC 1 and JC 2: E*nergy justice broadened to housing justice & rights-based development

Following the State order to halt slum demolitions in 2005, a new phase of institutional work unfolded in the informal settlements in Malad West. With eviction threats temporarily suspended, the terrain of contestation shifted from displacement resistance to formalisation and inclusion. Slums are also large electoral constituencies so, leveraging their agency as voters, slum communities led by civil societies negotiated with local policymakers leading to a cut-off date of 2000 introduced by the municipality. All residents able to show proof of residence in the area from this date were deemed eligible to be documented as legal tenets. This eligibility criteria marked a selective form of recognition, allowing certain households to access low-cost housing schemes, and formal electricity access while continuing to exclude others.

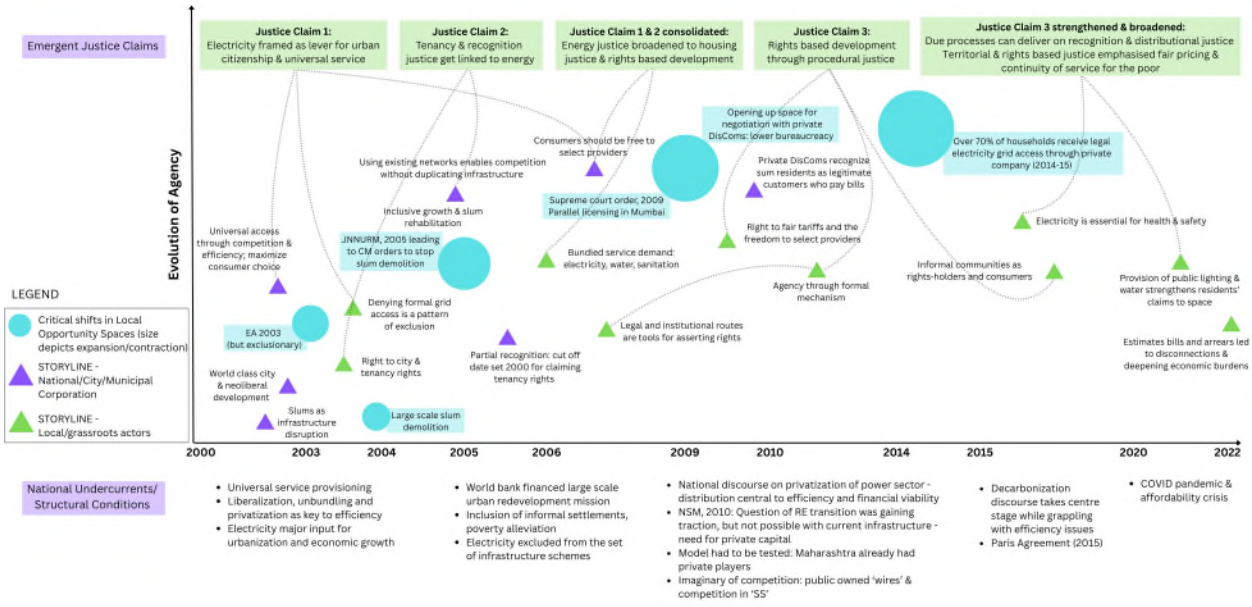

Figure 3: Timeline of discursive shifts in justice framing in response to multi-scalar framework conditions and local dynamics (Mumbai).
Source: Author's composition

During this period, JCs around electricity access and tenure recognition began to converge into a more expansive demands- 'housing justice' as a bundle of essential services. Residents and civil society intermediaries articulated storylines positioning electricity, water, and sanitation not as technical add-ons, but as co-constitutive of just urban development. This bundling narrative shifted focus from individual entitlements to collective infrastructural citizenship.

Simultaneously, a maximizing consumer-choice, storyline gained prominence in national and municipal policy circles- enabling competition through shared infrastructure was seen as key to improving efficiency and access (Interview, Public distribution company, 2023). Although intended to benefit all, this narrative was leveraged by developers and regulators primarily to promote privatised service delivery without addressing structural exclusion.

Grassroots actors engaged in sustained institutional work, organising local camps for documentary proof of residence, negotiating with private housing developers, and distribution companies. Developers, in turn, sought clearances from collector's office and the municipal authorities, allowing distribution companies to extend internal grid access, embedding electricity provision into rehabilitation efforts. Yet, residents resisted framings that separated housing from basic services, insisting that true inclusion meant infrastructural justice, not just physical relocation to formal low-cost housing.

This period thus consolidated earlier claims and opened a new opportunity space. Rights-based development became both a strategic frame and a practical mechanism for navigating Mumbai's evolving energy and infrastructure governance landscape. These developments laid the groundwork for the tactical leveraging of regulatory reform in the upcoming parallel licensing regime post 2009.

JC 3: Rights based development through procedural justice

The 2009 Supreme Court judgment legalising parallel licensing redefined the institutional terrain of electricity access in Mumbai. Private distribution companies were allowed to supply power over incumbent public networks via regulated wheeling charges following a long lobbying and litigation process (Alagh, 2010; Interview, Public distribution company, 2022). This reform operationalised national discourses that framed privatisation and competition in distribution as essential for sectoral efficiency, infrastructure upgrades, and eventual renewable energy integration. Mumbai, already home to private players, became a testing ground for this model.

Private distribution companies coalescing with grassroots actors promoted a new storyline- slum residents as legitimate, paying consumers, no longer viewed as risks but as untapped markets. Private companies, unburdened by the bureaucratic inertia of public utilities, were willing to engage. This shift widened the opportunity space for grassroots agency and subsequent institutional work. Local actors reframed their demands through a procedural justice lens. Building on earlier claims for recognition and bundled services, they now asserted a right to formalised access, fair tariffs, and transparent billing.

Civil society organisations mobilised documentation camps, social audits, and regulatory engagement, while problematising the municipalities neoliberal development plan. Residents framed themselves as both rights-holders and consumers, using formal processes to legitimise their claims (FGD, Civil Society 1, 2023; Interview Slum communities, 2022, 2023).

This institutional work culminated in a landmark moment in 2014; the municipal commissioner issued a No Objection Certificate allowing a private distribution company to establish a substation and supply power in the area. By 2015, over 70 percent of households in Ambujwadi and New Bhabrekar Nagar had secured legal electricity access through private provision (Interview, Slum communities, 2023).

Thus, JCs in this phase consolidated earlier justice demands into a routinised procedural framework. Legal access was no longer an exception but a norm, institutionalising energy justice as a key pillar of rights-based urban development in informal settlements (FGD, Civil Society 2, 2022).

Justice Claim 3 Strengthened: Towards territorial and distributive justice by leveraging institutional processes

By 2020, the institutional gains achieved through procedural access were tested by new crises. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic and escalating affordability concerns, longstanding infrastructural exclusions re-emerged in new forms. The private distributor struggled to register meter readings in informal settlements in Malad West, citing perceptions of slums as unsafe and inaccessible due to poor transport infrastructure. This resulted in estimated billing, triggering inflated arrears, and service disconnections for low-income households.

At the national level, energy policy discourse had shifted decisively toward decarbonisation and renewable integration, yet affordability and distributional justice remained unresolved. The pandemic surfaced these gaps, as energy became essential for health, education, and safety. In response, slum residents and civil society organisations revived the JC 3, now broadened to emphasise fair pricing, continuity of service, and spatial recognition.

Local storylines framed electricity as infrastructure for survival. Social audits documented how erratic supply and excessive bills deepened poverty, compromised food security, and excluded the most vulnerable. Community-based organisations led collective petitions, demanding that the private distribution utility waive arrears and revise approximated bills. Residents also lobbied the municipal corporation, slum rehabilitation authorities, and the Collector's office for relief. This sustained institutional work produced tangible results. In 2020, the private utility agreed to exempt overdue payments for many slum households. Simultaneously, municipal provision of solar streetlights and water connections between 2020 and 2022 bolstered residents' territorial claims to the settlement. Public infrastructure investments were no longer seen as concessions, but as affirmations of tenancy rights and legitimacy as urban citizens and consumers.

In this phase, JCs matured into a powerful frame, linking procedural, distributive, and territorial justice. The opportunity space for just energy transitions expanded beyond access, embedding energy into broader struggles over urban equity, spatial belonging, and the right to infrastructural continuity.

6. Discussion

Juxtaposing trajectories of Hamburg and Mumbai allowed us to operationalize our theoretical framework, by demonstrating how opportunity spaces and human agency co-evolve over time through discursive interaction. We understand opportunity space as a dynamic, temporal constellation emerging from the interplay of multi-scalar framework conditions, place-specific contexts, and actor-specific properties. Within these shifting constellations, human agency is

inherently asymmetrical. It is not a neutral resource distributed evenly among stakeholders, but a relationally structured capability that historically marginalizes certain actor groups.

Our cases show that Justice Claims (JCs) function as critical discursive levers to overcome these structural deprivations by acting as aggregators and distillations of fluid, multi-level, and multi-actor storylines. By converging disparate storylines into robust, normatively guiding JCs, under-resourced local actors generate a form of discursive devise, rendering themselves as legitimate ‘agents of justice’ capable of reshaping opportunity spaces.

In Hamburg, JCs consolidated a diverse confluence of top-down and bottom-up storylines across distinct temporal phases. Following the structural frictions of privatization since the early 2000s, the material conflict over the Moorburg CHP pipeline and the symbolic rupture of the Krümmel nuclear plant fire provided critical windows for alignment around specific JCs. Remunicipalization advocates distilled macro-level federal Energiewende and nuclear phase-out discourses (Buschmann & Oels, 2019), alongside narratives of citizen-led energy cooperatives (Arifi & Späth, 2025), and braided them directly with localized "Right to the City" and anti-privatization storylines. This discursive consolidation crystallized into a unified JC demanding a socially just, democratically controlled, and climate-compatible energy infrastructure. Supported by Hamburg's institutional self-representation as a climate leader (Cheung & Oßenbrügge, 2020) and constitutional referenda rules, these consolidated JCs served as levers to wield local agency, and expanded the opportunity space for realizing just outcomes, legally mandating grid buybacks and establishing a 2030 coal phase-out law.

Conversely, in Mumbai, grassroots change agency faced a hyper-urban-commercial terrain where the multi-scalar conditions resulting from the Electricity Act 2003 in a sense, weaponized tenancy proof to institutionalize exclusion, while municipal "world-class city" visions drove violent slum demolitions (Banerjee-Guha, 2009, 2016; MacLeod, 2011). To navigate this, slum residents and civil society intermediaries deployed JCs that strategically integrated muti-level narratives. They hijacked the state’s top-down tropes of Universal Service Obligations (USO) and the poverty-alleviation rhetoric of JNNURM 2005, consolidating them with bottom-up storylines of housing justice, territorial identity, and constitutional rights to life (Chattaraj, 2012; Graham, 2010). This discursive aggregation re-authored informal settlers from marginalized "pilferers" into legitimate consumers and urban citizens. It enabled them to tactically capture the 2009 Supreme Court parallel licensing judgment, forming pragmatic alliances with private distribution utilities to bypass municipal bureaucratic inertia. Thus, collective agency reshaped the opportunity space securing legal grid access for over 70% of households by 2015 and establishing a baseline to demand further distributive concessions during post-pandemic billing crises in 2020.

Thus, both cases illustrate the temporal co-evolution of agency and opportunity space as an ongoing process of contestation rather than a singular institutional fix wherein the discursive

elements lay the groundwork for what is possible within a given context and timeframe. Winning single legal or structural victory for vulnerable or underrepresented stakeholder groups does not dissolve the inherent asymmetry of agency during the implementation phase. Because the multi-scalar and place-specific conditions structuring the initial opportunity space remain skewed toward dominant incumbents, hard-won structural openings risk being neutralized by reproductive agency of dominant (elite) actors. Consequently, as change agency and the opportunity space co-evolve across successive temporal phases, grassroot actors must continuously leverage place-based leadership to actively defend and develop the opportunity space for just transition outcomes, ensuring that JCs, including such that are codified in policy or legal documents, are translated into durable local practices rather than being discursively decoupled during implementation. Continuous discursive and practical work is required to permanently entrench democratic provisioning systems (Arifi & Späth, 2025; Steinberger et al., 2024) and prevent reconfigured opportunity spaces from reverting to institutional states that lock in the marginalization of local actors by curtailing their change agency.

7. Conclusion

Overall, we demonstrate that integrating Justice Claims (JCs) as socially constructed, discursive devices mediating the co-evolution of opportunity spaces and human agency provides a robust analytical framework applicable across highly divergent socio-institutional contexts. By operationalising our framework against two distinct transition trajectories of Hamburg and Mumbai, we substantiate its explanatory and interpretive validity for future comparative studies exploring transition processes across spatial and temporal dimensions. In these ongoing temporal processes, JCs serve as vital discursive devices that continuously bind localized perceptions of what is possible to a shared normative directionality, thereby sustaining the capacity for change agency against systemic regression. It is through this enduring alignment that marginalized groups render themselves into '*agents of justice',* durably reshaping the constituents of the opportunity space to deliver structurally just and democratic transition outcomes.

Our contribution is hence threefold:

First, we advance local agency and opportunity space scholarship by integrating the discursive and normative dimensions of storylines, specifically JCs. This integration provides an analytical vocabulary to examine the mediation between immediate, place-specific experiences of infrastructure and long-term, multi-scalar transition visions. We argue that long-term structural outcomes are deeply contingent upon these localized present realities; by analyzing the tension between material exclusions and discursive contestations, we can systematically detect and trace the shifting normative directionality of transition processes over time.

Second, we elaborate on how opportunity spaces for change offer foundational conditions for bridging abstract macro-normative goals with operating institutional processes. Our empirical evidence shows that macro-imaginaries of just transitions need to be structurally aligned with

the accumulation of place-specific micro-gains. We observe that these incremental successes must be progressively institutionalized across successive temporal phases to challenge dominant regimes and establish a more democratic equilibrium across market and non-market service provisioning systems.

Third, we advance the mechanics of theorizing how localized discursive elements (JCs) serve as critical levers to catalyze and strengthen collective change agency across multiple actor constellations. As the positions of these actors mutate and evolve alongside the shifting opportunity space, our framework uncovers the specific pathways through which fluid, multi-actor storylines converge into JCs – fostering collective agency. Hence, we offer insights into how under-resourced groups render themselves into 'agents of justice' building durable capacity for change within asymmetrical power structures.

Hence, our insights carry critical implications for contemporary transition policies and regional development pathways. This framework is particularly relevant for unpacking the agency of communities and civil society organizations, where institutional structures and power relations tend to be far less formalized than those of firms, universities, or municipalities, which have conventionally occupied the center of regional development processes. This distinction is vital given the contemporary shift in policy rationales that increasingly call for a reorientation toward grand societal challenges, thereby demanding greater attention to localized social needs and the active inclusion of grassroots actors (Grillitsch, Coenen, and Morgan, 2025; Pontikakis et al., 2022). Yet, as our analysis illustrates, despite this normative rhetoric of inclusion, communities and civil society organizations frequently remain at the fringe of formalized planning processes, lacking the institutionalized agency required to engage meaningfully (Molica et al., 2025).

Based on these theoretical and empirical insights, we point to an imperative for strengthening localized deliberative spaces as essential counterpoints to hegemonic, top-down policy and normative decisions. Rather than leaving less-formalized actors at the periphery, structural support for these democratic arenas provides the necessary baseline for grassroots change agency to coalesce and institutionalize collective JCs. So, prioritizing these decentralized, deliberative spaces ensures that ground-level realities can actively reshape multi-scalar governance frameworks, explicitly recognizing the profound heterogeneity of local policy reception while mitigating the systemic friction and long-term socio-political costs of transition policies.

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