

Social Capital and New Institutionalism: A Governance Perspective on the Clean Energy Transition

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Abstract In a context marked by accelerating climate change and the urgent need for sustainable innovation, understanding how institutional frameworks adapt to complex governance challenges has become increasingly crucial. This article employs the concept of social capital as an analytical lens to explore the multifaceted nature of neo-institutionalism, with a particular focus on governance dynamics. Through a comparative analysis of two case studies related to the Clean Energy Transition (CET), the study highlights how institutions influence coordination between public and private actors. Special emphasis is placed on the formal and informal relationships that develop within institutional and interorganizational contexts, which are seen as central to the processes of information exchange and circulation. Social capital plays a key role in building these ties, affecting access to knowledge, mutual trust, and the adaptability of decision-making structures.

The analysis is framed within the context of multilevel governance, showing how shared norms, social networks, and trust-based interpersonal relations can facilitate—or hinder—the effectiveness of decision-making processes. By integrating the three main strands of neo-institutionalism—historical, sociological, and rational choice—the article offers a nuanced interpretation of the institutional mechanisms underlying European energy and climate policies.

Drawing on two case studies (Navarra in Spain and Skåne in Sweden), the findings suggest that social capital plays a crucial role in adapting governance arrangements to the challenges posed by sustainable innovation. Survey results reveal that social capital is a key lever in energy transition governance processes. Informal relationships, especially among colleagues and local actors, prove essential for effective information exchange, at times compensating for the rigidity of formal channels. Trust, frequency of contact, and shared cultural values strengthen collaborative networks and promote coordination between public and private actors. Social capital—through its relational, cognitive, and structural dimensions—thus helps explain how institutional configurations adapt to—or resist—the challenges of sustainable governance.