Communities and space-related conflicts over wind farms
Insights from the UK and Denmark

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Abstract:

Technological advancements in renewables, in particular wind turbines, have transformed wind farms into power plants and thus critical infrastructures that invoke an ideological battle between small traditional co-operative and large-scale commercial projects. While locally-rooted wind farm projects are supposed to feature an inherent local acceptability due to financial revenues, cooperate developers of commercial projects have to gain public acceptance by using the often limited tools provided by the planning process. Considering this context, the paper will present a synopsis of empirical findings from several research projects conducted in the UK and Denmark in order to illuminate the contentious interplay between community engagement, ownership, benefits and the siting of offshore and onshore wind farms in different institutional settings.

By applying a developer’s perspective it will be reiterated that wind farm developers are not a homogenous group, but consist of various constellations of different actors, such as energy companies, regional utilities, associations, citizens or private landowners, with different characteristics and approaches to the development of wind farms. While the delivery of community benefits from and the provision of opportunities for local co-ownership of commercial projects in the UK usually take place on a voluntary basis, efforts of large developers have led to a wide range of different benefit models for onshore and offshore wind farms beyond legal compliance. In contrast, although the Danish Renewable Energy Act comprises obligatory but confined measures to increase acceptance through community ownership and benefit, it will be shown that developers rather face novel challenges of finding adequate sites and getting access to land for large onshore wind farm projects in the first place which resulted in ‘new development practices’ to avoid spatial conflicts.

The paper will conclude with some preliminary thoughts on the socio-spatial implications of the tendering and auction support scheme for renewables imposed by the EU and currently being implemented in the member states.