



Lived Experiences of Energy Consumers at Panabo City, Philippines: A Phenomenology

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Abstract: *This study aims to explore the lived experiences of Panaboan energy consumers regarding energy policies. This qualitative study was conducted using the phenomenology method. The six participants were purposefully selected to participate in an in-depth face to face interview. The researchers obtained informed consent to assure the participants of their rights and privacy. The interview was audio recorded, and note-taking was present with the participants' permission for documentation reasons. The data were collected and transcribed verbatim, and the responses that were compiled were thematically analysed. The results of the analysis of the data reveal four interesting themes: the experiences, challenges, coping mechanisms, and insights of the energy consumers. Through the participants' shared stories from their experiences, it aids energy company stakeholders and the government's awareness and understanding of why there is a need to improve energy policies. Finally, implications were indicated about what measurements were needed to formulate in order to address the energy policy concerns of consumers.*

Keywords: *Panaboan Energy Consumers, Experiences, Challenges, Coping Mechanisms, Insights.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Energy-related issues are among the most significant and challenging problems the world is currently facing. Significant advancements in energy supply and efficiency will be necessary to meet the demands of a growing global population with rising living standards. It will be increasingly difficult to accomplish this while reducing the dangers of environmental degradation (Guild, 2019). It is going to require a substantial change in the historical pattern



of fossil fuel consumption as well as a big overhaul of the world energy grid. As a result of the said challenge, economic and scientific organizations have urged leaders to implement policies that support renewable energy as part of crucial worldwide efforts to meet consumers' rising energy needs while also reducing climate change for decades. However, in the long run, these policies seem to be ineffective. One of the main reasons is that consumers need to contribute to a higher cost of energy bills as payment for the technologies that will be used to generate renewable resources. Also, despite the transition, some energy companies are still using coal as their main source of energy. This dilemma is prevalent among countries across the globe (Kabir et al., 2018).

Moreover, Shahzad (2013) stated that in many nations, renewable energy is increasingly making up a sizable portion of the mix of the power supply. Commitments to national and international targets for the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions have been the driving force behind this expansion. The demand and popularity of renewable energy power plants can be attributed to the benefits they offer—they are sustainable and environmentally benign. A wider adoption of Renewable Energy (RE) is also expected to lead to decreased electricity prices, the development of a "clean energy industry," and an increase in employment prospects, according to experts. However, the issue with RE is that it requires a lot of money to create facilities like solar power plants and wind farms, and the returns are not all that great. For this reason, the government devised the "Feed-in Tariff" (FIT) system, a subsidy program designed to promote the development and investment in renewable energy (Guild, 2019; Zhang, Malviya, Tandoc, & Ho, 2022).

Numerous studies have examined FIT regulations in various nations and assessed how well they promote renewable energy. Sijm (2013) evaluated the impact of FIT on several European countries. FIT was introduced in 1991 with the passage of the Electricity Feed Law (EPL). Under the EPL, RE developers receive a feed-in tariff that is equal to a percentage of the annual average electricity rate per kWh. The corresponding feed-in tariffs for solar and wind were set at 90%, while other RE technologies received 65–80% of the average electricity price. As a solution to this crisis, the Feed-in Tariff Allowance (FIT-All) collection was recently suspended by an ERC Resolution. Due to the ERC's suspension of FIT-All collection, consumers won't have to pay PhP0.0364 per kWh for the following three billing cycles, from December 2022 to February 2023. One of the quick fixes ERC offered the DUs during the PSA Caravan was this. Representatives from Davao Light and Power Company (DLPC), Davao del Norte Electric Cooperative, Inc. (DANECO), Davao Oriental Electric Cooperative, Inc. (DORECO), Davao del Sur Electric Cooperative, Inc. (DASURECO), and Davao del Sur Electric Cooperative, Inc. (DASURECO) had a fruitful exchange of ideas regarding how to lessen the impact of rising fuel prices on the cost of electricity. Despite this effort, many critics of the government's energy policies and programs remain unconvinced. Some people think that consumers still stand to lose more, particularly after the FIT-All suspension is lifted (Kabir, et. al, 2018; Shahzad, 2013; Zhang et al., 2022).

To strengthen this study, the researchers anchored the debates on particular theories. The Resilience Theory of Rutter (1987) is the initial theory. When the current concept of



resilience focused on ecological systems, the idea of resilience was initially broadened to include both the ecological and social components of a system. As a result of climate change, increased efforts have been made to improve the sustainability of energy systems. As a result, the resilience issue has recently taken on more significance for energy systems. Whether they are caused by terrorism, climate change, or irregular energy supply, today's energy networks will be more susceptible to disruptions in the future. It is only financially feasible to defend energy systems against these threats, but it makes much more sense to build resilient systems, for example by putting in place effective policies and procedures that can quickly resume system operation after an interruption (Guild, 2019; Shahzad, 2013).

Henrik Lund (2009) put forth the Choice Awareness Theory as the second theory. This argument is reinforced by the observation that situations where there are no other options frequently occur from scenarios of this kind. Instances like "We have no choice but to build another coal-fired power station" have an impact on our entire civilization. We do have a choice, according to the Choice Awareness theory, hence this is untrue. The theory describes how to become aware of this possibility, enabling us to talk about our common future and make more responsible actions. The creation of official energy goals and plans has been significantly influenced by descriptions of new technology and alternative energy plans as a result of continual contacts between the government and the general population. Public involvement has improved the ultimate decision-making process and, as a result, raised choice awareness. In order to progress energy initiatives and programs in the future, it is critical to see the contentious debates as essential prerequisites (Kabir et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2022).

The Stage Model of Public Policy, which Howlett & Ramesh's (1998) framework for contemplating the steps needed in creating public policy. This paradigm describes policy or program development as a simple process that starts with idealization and concludes with evaluation. Howlett & Ramesh's method thus identifies stages as (a) problem emergence, (b) agenda framing, (c) consideration of policy choices, (d) decision making, (e) implementation, and (f) evaluation. Environmental groups' initial objective is to get a specific issue on the agenda for discussion and, if possible, consideration by decision-makers. Afterward, policy makers decide which course of action is best based on expert counsel, draft the policy, and then provide it to administrators for implementation. This stage-based perspective highlights the fact that policy is a process involving numerous government agencies. Additionally, it is easy to understand and appealing. However, in reality, policy concerns are interrelated, and decision-makers scramble to find solutions while dealing with a tremendous deal of ambiguity and several internal and external limitations (Guild, 2019).

The research objective of this study includes four questions: (1) What are the lived experience of Panaboans energy consumers on the energy policies? It is to know what are the changes with the monthly bill of participants as energy and now and towards the energy policies; (2) What are concerns and challenges in the energy policies? It is to unravel the concerns and challenges in dealing with the policies being implemented; (3) How did they cope with the problems that they encountered towards the energy policy? It is to determine



what are their ways in surpassing with the problem; (4) Based on their experiences, what are the insights and realizations of the participants? It is to know the perceptions and evaluations of research participants towards the policies.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The researchers conducted the study by utilizing a qualitative approach, particularly a phenomenological design. Varpio, Witkop, & Neubauer (2019) characterized phenomenology as a compelling qualitative research approach well suited for examining an individual's lived experiences within the world. The use of a qualitative-phenomenological approach in this study has aided in delving further into the Panaboan's experiences towards energy policies. The in-depth interview (IDI) was an innovative data-gathering approach that gives the researcher a wealth of information. Thus, Payne (2004) stated that an in-depth interview delves into a respondent's experiences, points of view, and feelings.

Research Respondents and Informants Selection and Sampling Procedure:

Qualitative Phase. To determine the participants of this study, the researchers used purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is a technique widely used in qualitative research to identify and select information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources, which involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals that are incredibly knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Creswell, 2013). Moreover, this method also allows the researchers to identify people who can and are willing to provide information under the categories of knowledge and experiences (Lewis & Sheppard, 2020). **Research instrument:** The researchers used the in-depth interview (IDI) method to gather information. The six participants were interviewed using the interview guide and questionnaire prepared by the researchers. The school's research experts checked and evaluated this to determine the accuracy and relevance of the interview guide questions. As noted by Creswell (2013), interviews are very effective for learning the story behind a participant's experiences and gathering in-depth information about a subject. According to Esterberg (2013), in qualitative research, interviews are used to analyse the meanings of significant themes in their respondents' perspectives. The primary goal of interviewing is to comprehend the significance of what interviewees say. A guide questionnaire in the interview was simply a list of high-level topics the researchers intended to cover in the interview, along with the high-level questions that were answered under each topic. The researchers used this tool to ask one or more participants in general and record their responses.

Data analysis: The data in this study was analysed using thematic analysis. It is typically used to describe a group of texts, such as interview transcripts. The researchers was scrutinized the data carefully to uncover recurring themes, subjects, ideas, and patterns of meaning (Caulfield, 2019). Thematic analysis is an excellent way to learn about people's experiences, views, and ideas, allowing the researchers to develop new ideas and concepts based on the data.



3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the data gathered have been conducted by researchers in one of the barangays in Panabo City. The researchers conducted one-on-one in-depth interview with randomly selected energy consumers around the area. The participants willingly answered four interview questions with the knowledge they have as energy consumers acquired from the experiences and trials they had overcome. The researchers found out that all of the participants have experienced challenges with energy policies, especially during the pandemic due to limited work opportunities. The participants were composed of 1 male and 5 females whose ages range from 27 to 45 years old. During the interview, and as the researcher was discussing with the participants the purpose of the IDI, showing the free and informed consent and the specific rights which, the participants are allowed to do during the conduct of the interview, the researcher noticed that the participants were quite excited to answer questions. Before the researcher asked the first question, the participants were requested to recall the times of their experiences in paying energy monthly bills since the year 2018 and to also discuss what were their challenges, especially during the pandemic. The researchers categorized the themes in accordance with the answers to the four research questions. First, what are the lived experiences of the Panabaons on the energy policies? The findings can be read on the themes of Energy Efficiency, A Big Challenge, Minimize Consumption and Energy Security.

Major themes and core ideas on the lived experience of the Panaboans on energy policies as electricity consumers.

Major Themes	Core Ideas
Energy Efficiency	Lesser payment before
	Double the energy cost
	Influence of electric supply on energy cost
A Big Challenges	High cost of energy bill
	Limited Income
	Catch-up in paying when on a tight budget
	Need to pay rather than to cut off the electrical line
Minimize Consumption	Less utilization of appliances
	Avoidance using high voltage sources of energy
	Mindful consumption
Energy Security	The advice of the government to the energy company

The first theme was Energy Efficiency. Based on the findings from the data obtained, the first question asked to the participants is about their lived experiences as energy consumers. Most



of them recalled how much they pay on their monthly bill and compared it before that made them aware of the significant difference in the energy cost. Informants narrated that:

“There is a difference, because before I paid lesser.” (IDI_#1)

“Before, it was cheap. My appliances are still the same. It was cheap before, but now it is expensive.” (IDI_#2)

“There are changes because before, the bill was lower, but now the electricity bill is much higher.” (IDI_#6)

Energy costs have generally been increasing over the past few decades. According to Sayed et al. (2021), in developing countries, the high demand for energy has resulted in higher energy bills for consumers. The cost of production and distribution of energy has increased, resulting in higher energy prices. This has particularly affected vulnerable populations such as low-income households, who have limited resources to pay for energy bills. Moreover, the increasing demand for energy has resulted in a lack of access to affordable and reliable energy sources. This has resulted in households relying on expensive and often unreliable energy sources such as kerosene or diesel generators.

A Big Challenge

The participants were asked about their challenges in paying their monthly energy bills. From the data gathered, all the participants find their situation a big challenge since they are struggling to pay their monthly energy bill due to their income insufficiency. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a significant increase in job loss and unemployment around the world. Governments imposed lockdowns, travel restrictions, and social distancing measures to control the spread of the virus. These measures caused many businesses to shut down or operate at limited capacity, leading to a massive loss of jobs. Also, they find it as a responsibility as well because they have no choice but to be obliged in paying than to cut off their line. As it is narrated:

“It is very difficult without money. Even if we don't want to pay, there is nothing we can do because it will be cut off. So, it is really necessary to pay.” (IDI_#2)

“The difficulties are that there is no proper income, and then the electricity is expensive.” (IDI_#6) The financial implications of energy consumption can pose a considerable challenge for households, especially those with limited financial resources. The monthly payment of energy bills can be a challenging obligation for numerous households. The juxtaposition of excessive energy expenses and limited financial resources can present a formidable obstacle to achieving equilibrium in domestic budgeting. Consequently, numerous households may encounter arduous decisions, such as prioritizing between settling their energy expenses and procuring fundamental commodities such as sustenance and medication (Lewis et al., 2020).

Minimize Consumption

One of their efficient ways is to minimize consumption. During the pandemic, one of the challenges that many households are facing is the increase in energy bills due to more people staying at home and using energy-intensive appliances. To help alleviate this burden, it is



important to minimize the consumption of appliances during the pandemic. As informants cited:

“Don't just use those rice cookers; practice budgeting for electricity. Those that are not important to use should not be used. Use wood for lighting a fire for cooking to save money.” (IDI_#2) “Don't use large voltages so that the bill will not increase”. (IDI_#1)

Ghiani et al. (2020) explained that one of the primary reasons for households to curtail their usage of appliances amidst the pandemic is to reduce their energy consumption. The augmented utilization of household appliances, including air conditioning units, refrigeration systems, and other energy-intensive devices, is anticipated to result in elevated energy bills for the home. Financially, this can be quite challenging, particularly for individuals who have been impacted by the pandemic and are either jobless or in need.

Energy Security

The government was beseeched by all of the guests to devise a better strategy to help people get past their issues with energy costs. Governments have the power to control the energy markets in order to preserve fair competition and prevent monopolistic behavior. By fostering competition among energy providers, governments can cut customer energy costs and boost cost effectiveness. Open rules, antitrust legislation, and strict market oversight promote a vibrant, competitive market. Informants expressed the statement saying:

"I'm hoping the government can help us with this problem." (IDI_#3)

"The government depends on the company's policies, but the government can counsel the business on the rise in electricity costs." (IDI_#1) In the past study, Safarzadeh & Rasti-Barzoki (2019) suggests that governments may control energy tariffs and prices to prevent astronomical price hikes and ensure fair pricing for consumers. This can include placing restrictions to stop price growth, capping prices, or freezing prices. Furthermore, governments frequently offer financial incentives for people to save energy through programs like energy audits, subsidies, tax rebates, or refunds. Supporting energy-saving practices and promoting the use of energy-efficient devices can help consumers reduce their energy use and expenditures.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In order to understand the experiences, challenges, and realizations of energy consumers in one of Panabo City's barangays, this study was successful in reaching its goal. We were able to identify and elucidate the experiences and challenges that the Panaboan energy users experienced during the preceding five years with the use of this study and the qualitative methodology of phenomenology. This thorough investigation produced significant data on energy consumers and exposed the Panaboans' experiences paying their monthly bills. The majority of them claimed that there was a considerable difference between the prices of power back then and currently. Even though they use the same appliances, their energy costs have been growing. At worst, the first wave of the epidemic occurred during a time of heavy stress. The increase in energy expenses was felt during this time due to the lockout and the



suspension of the commercial and labor industries, and the lack of money were quite evident. Many others also blame the cost rises on the regular brownouts. They adamantly assert that brownouts can result in higher energy costs since some appliances might need to utilize more energy to make up for the energy lost during the outages. The energy supplier also failed to alert clients to changes in their energy pricing. People can still learn some things through news sources like television, though. Throughout these encounters, the participants have urged the government to come up with a better solution to this problem. An answer to the problem of energy cost effectiveness. Customers have the power to lower their energy consumption, which will consequently lower their energy expenses, through encouraging the adoption of energy-efficient equipment and encouraging the promotion of energy-saving activities. Energy audits, subsidies, tax incentives, rebates, and rebates are just a few examples of programs. Consumers still want a rapid fix despite the difficulties, in general.

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