



GOOD PRACTICE WEBINAR

Highlights report

Rural areas in the energy transition

Introduction

This good practice webinar brought together 61 participants – practitioners, public authorities, experts and researchers – representing 20 EU Member States and 3 non-EU countries. The event, organised in cooperation with the [Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy Europe](#), was an opportunity to highlight EU-level initiatives and local experiences that boost energy transition in rural areas, and to build the participants' capacity and motivation to design and implement high-quality projects responding to the rural needs. It also stimulated exchange on how to foster and build renewable energy communities, to implement Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plans in rural areas, and how to drive positive change in energy poverty.

Organiser: Rural Pact Support Office



24 October 2023



Online



61 participants (local practitioners, researchers, public authorities, experts and researchers, other EU-funded projects, etc.)



Presentations & recordings ([here](#))



If you see this icon, click to watch the recording

What is the Rural Pact and where does the energy transition fit in the rural vision?



Silvia Nanni (DG AGRI) introduced the [Rural Pact](#) as a key flagship initiative of the European Commission to involve a wide range of stakeholders in the implementation of the Long-Term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas ([LTVRA](#)). One of the shared goals of the LTVRA refers to rural areas as providers of food security, economic opportunities, goods and services for wider society, including bio-based materials and renewable energy, while retaining a fair share of the value generated. She also presented an update on the Rural Pact Community: by October 2023 there were over 2000 members of the Community, and over 115 stakeholders have made a specific commitment to act for Europe's rural areas.

Setting the scene: EU initiatives to foster energy transition in rural areas



Veronika Madner (DG AGRI Unit for Environmental Sustainability) outlined the key tools supporting the production of renewable energies under the Common Agricultural Policy. She mentioned in particular support in the form of grants for investments, e.g. in energy production, improving energy efficiency or small-scale rural infrastructures, rural business start-ups, cooperation – including support under LEADER and EIP-AGRI, as well as knowledge exchange and information dissemination. She said that 22 Member States have envisaged in their CAP Strategic Plans targeted intervention to support the production of renewable energy.



Ion Liviu Stochita (DG ENER) presented the rationale and achievements of the [Energy Poverty Advisory Hub](#) (EPAH), which provides tools, examples and expertise to support municipalities and other local actors in designing concrete programmes to address energy poverty. In addition to direct support to 35 municipalities across the EU, the Hub has developed guides and other learning material, training courses and networking opportunities to facilitate sharing of experience among key stakeholders in Europe to tackle energy poverty.



Andrea Carosi (the Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy Europe) briefly presented this organisation: a movement of cities taking action in the field of mitigation and adaptation to climate change and tackling energy poverty. The Covenant of Mayors helps its signatories develop (within two years of formal signing), implement and monitor their Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plans (SECAPs), by providing methodological guidance, capacity building, knowledge sharing and other tools.



Pouyan Maleki-Dizaji (Ecorys) introduced the [Rural Energy Community Advisory Hub](#) (RECAH) – an initiative of the European Commission to accelerate the development of sustainable energy communities, which are of key importance in advancing the European Green Deal in rural areas. RECAH provides technical assistance to selected communities in the form of investment and financial support, legal and regulatory support, technology and system-related support, capacity development and knowledge transfer, as well as communication support. In addition, a database on energy communities, 20 case studies and an EU report have been developed.

Learning from inspirational projects and practices

Mullingar Sustainable Energy Community



MULLINGAR
Sustainable
Energy
Community

Gerard Keena (Mullingar, IE) presented the experience of [Mullingar Sustainable Energy Community](#), created in 2018. Following the development of an Energy Master Plan (with technical support from RECAH), the community is planning to build a community-owned solar plant in a former landfill owned by local authority but it is facing a number of challenges to finance their project. There are 700 such communities registered in Ireland, working together to be more sustainable in using energy for the benefit of their community.

Tackling energy poverty



Two short examples of local communities addressing energy poverty were presented: **Julien Denis** (Grand Chambord and Beauce Val de Loire, FR) outlined the activities of the intercommunal initiative "[Maison de l'Habitat](#)" which provides advice and support to citizens on potential thermal renovation of their houses, while **Myrto Skouroupathi** (Cyprus Energy Agency) presented the experience of the local authority in raising awareness and supporting inhabitants, especially elderly people, and helping them improve their thermal comfort.

The presentation of these examples was followed by a discussion involving two experts: **Thomas Schwab** from the Bertelsmann Foundation shared preliminary results of a recent study commissioned by DG REGIO, which showed that many EU rural areas are potentially more likely to benefit, in terms of value added and employment, from energy transition than more developed regions.

Chris Vrettos from [REScoop](#) stressed the importance of citizen-led cooperatives in speeding up the energy transition in rural areas, and the need for capacity building and accessible funding sources. He also pointed out – using the example of the [Energy Community in Karditsa](#) (Greece) – that such communities are often "living organisms" that continuously undertake new projects and mobilise additional funds for community initiatives.

Collaborating towards energy efficiency and sustainable environment

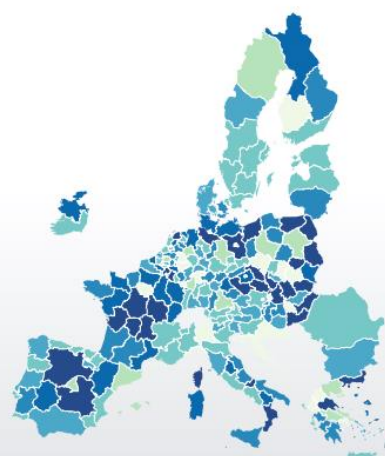
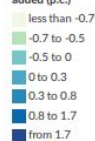


Giulia Mazzi (Rimond, IT) showed how the company she represents, together with Roma Tre University, supports Biodistretto Via Amerina, a group of 13 municipalities and other local actors working on initiatives for a sustainable agriculture and rural development, with a joint SECAP as a common goal. The project "[Eyes, Hearts, Hands](#)" implemented within the New European Bauhaus involves such activities as installation of building-integrated photovoltaics (BIPV) on public buildings and raising awareness about energy consumption and saving.

Figure 1: Potential added value of energy transition

Value added

Percentage difference in value added (p.c.)



Source: Bertelsmann Stiftung - [Energising EU Cohesion](#)

Main messages from the group discussion

Building and implementing a renewable energy community

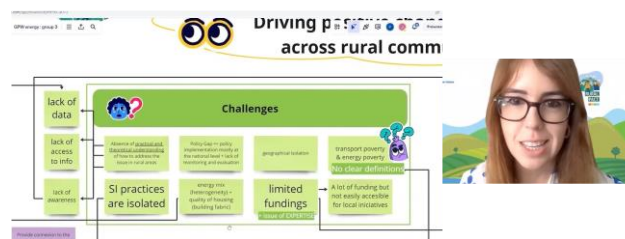
- > Awareness of the role and potential benefit of energy communities is still rather low; therefore, the **involvement of local associations, volunteers and media** (e.g. local radio) would be important to mobilise the population.
- > Political support is needed for energy communities, it requires **education and networking at various governance levels**. This is particularly important as in some Member States EU legislation has not been fully translated into the national contexts.
- > While it is essential to get the **private sector**, especially SMEs, involved in energy communities, it would be important to avoid that some big market players try to preserve their monopolies and block all changes.
- > Dedicated **financing mechanisms** and adapted business models may be needed to facilitate transition in rural areas. Credit unions can be of help, where they exist. LEADER LAGs can play an important role, both as a local stakeholder and as a funding source adapted to local needs.

Implementing Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plans (SECAPs) in rural areas and identifying needs for support

- > **Mayors** have a key role to play in stimulating energy-related initiatives in rural areas. However, they often lack expertise, especially in small rural municipalities. Such municipalities can benefit from cooperation around common goals, ideally implementing a joint SECAP within the European Covenant of Mayors. This can happen if the local officials are willing to look beyond the short term of their office and political differences.
- > Such **cooperation** bringing together several small municipalities can be facilitated by regular meetings or locally established municipal networks, and it can involve, for example, joint purchases of material (e.g. PV panels).
- > Crucial support can come from the **regional authorities** and from Energy Agencies, many of them already active in the European Federation of Agencies and Regions for Energy and Environment ([FEDARENE](#)).
- > It is important to ensure the involvement of the **local population** in the SECAP. This can help ensure continuity in spite of political changes. For this, the plan must be simple and easy to understand, and communication must focus on mission and values.

Driving positive change in energy poverty across rural communities in Europe

- > A key challenge is **lack of data** on energy poverty, lack of access to information and sometimes a lack of clear understanding of what energy poverty entails. Thus it would be important to raise local awareness of the issue (e.g. through events), carry out energy audits to provide more data and to have clearer legal frameworks defining energy poverty in a comprehensive way. Transport poverty should also be considered a form of energy poverty.



- > A positive change requires **intermediaries** active in the social dimension, for example energy social workers. It is important to rely on already established, multi-actor structures (such as LEADER LAGs) and to also involve youth.
- > **Social innovation** can help address energy poverty, but it needs more recognition, networking and showcasing of good practices which can be replicated.
- > Access to **funding** can be difficult for local actors and technical support is needed. Addressing energy poverty should be a condition for access to funding schemes for energy projects in rural areas.

More information from group discussions is available on the whiteboards uploaded on the [website](#).

Concluding remarks



In the final session, **María José Manjón Rodríguez** from Comillas University in Madrid stressed that an opportunity given to rural stakeholders to transform their energy systems must be accompanied with facilitation and support from intermediary organisations.

Technological development is very fast and there is a risk of leaving some people behind; hence the need to prioritise social issues before technology. This social aspect is often disregarded in policy recommendations, because civil society is not adequately represented in policy making.



Andrea Carosi from the Covenant of Mayors pointed out that in recent years rural municipalities have made significant progress in energy and climate action, but capacity building and support from intermediary organisations is needed. Small municipalities are well aware of the challenges they are facing, and they

can benefit from networking and sharing good practices.

Finally, **Pascale Van Doren**, Team Leader of the Rural Pact Support Office, outlined briefly the upcoming Rural Pact activities and events.

Join the Rural Pact Community and online platform

https://ruralpact.rural-vision.europa.eu/become-member_en



 <https://ruralpact.rural-vision.europa.eu/>

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