

# Setting the Scene for the Workshop

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Good morning to everybody and thank you very much for having accepted the invitation to our workshop. We are extremely grateful to all the invited speakers and to all JRC colleagues who have decided to join our discussions. This is for us an invaluable opportunity to benefit from your presence to advance in a research and policy area which presents in our opinion formidable challenges and offers important opportunities for a more participative transformation towards energy sustainability.

I have to say that the topic we are exploring today (local communities and social innovation for the energy transition) is relatively new for us. The relevance of this quite unexplored area (quite unexplored at least within the JRC) came to our attention for the first time in 2015 when, together with a series of external scientists, we decided to embark in a quite ambitious endeavour aiming to explain to researchers and policy makers how complex systems and social practice theories allow reframing the energy sustainability challenges at stake with the so-called energy transition. Since then I think we have managed to make good progress in better understanding the role that community-led social innovation initiatives can have for this transition and the reasons why these initiatives are often neglected or are probably still not sufficiently considered by researchers and policy makers.

What we would like to do through this workshop and further research activity proposals we are trying to develop within the JRC is certainly to try to further advance in our understanding of this complex phenomenon. At the same time, however, events like the present one are being organised to discuss how to define and possibly create appropriate means whereby community-led social innovation initiatives can be concretely supported in

the European Union and by the JRC in particular (I will come back to this point in a moment).

As stated in our workshop description: “Local communities take with them a huge and often neglected potential for the development of social innovation initiatives that can foster a radical transformation towards renewables”. But...How can this potential be characterised? Which are the benefits that its expression takes with it? Why can it be assumed that this potential is important? And, if so, how is it possible that it often escapes detection and does not receive the consideration it deserves from researchers and policy makers? How can its expression be stimulated and which are the conditions possibly enabling the replication and scale up of single initiatives without perverting the aims of their initiators?

These are examples of quite general research questions we would like to address during the workshop and we are sure that important and articulated answers to these questions will be produced during this event.

We have consciously not provided any definition for what should be meant by local communities and social innovation in the preparatory material you have received. We have done this being aware of the performative and biasing character of definitions that can be produced and employed within discussions as well as research and policy activities. Existing studies indicate however that local collective actions of social innovation which are relevant for the energy transition represent a phenomenon that has particularly intensified in Europe as of 2005 and the reasons and dynamics of their development are probably still poorly investigated. One main aspect, if not the most important aspect, that needs to be taken into account when dealing with this phenomenon is certainly that people participating in these initiatives are typically motivated by reasons that go well beyond economic, technical and energy considerations. They typically appear as eager to actively contribute to improve their

living conditions and increase social well-being while reducing the environmental impacts of their daily activities.

Initiatives that can be considered as example of community-led social innovation relate to wind energy, community supported agriculture, social technologies, car clubs, maker spaces, participatory design, agro-ecology, eco-housing, recycling, shared machine shops, rainwater harvesting, socially useful production, seed swapping, community energy cooperatives, garden sharing, community forestry, green spaces and many, many other fields of activity.

One of the main reasons why these initiatives are extremely interesting is that they typically represent re-combinations and re-compositions of demand and supply. They can represent very effective ways to recompose traditional dichotomies established between e.g. producers and consumers, experts and laypersons, administrators and administered; dichotomies that have consequences that are usually very problematic to be dealt with by researchers and policy makers. Incidentally, it may be also worth noticing that these re-compositions are what makes it possible that local communities' social innovation initiatives can greatly contribute to the energy transition even without being explicitly undertaken to address energy production and consumption.

Unfortunately, however, what makes these initiatives extremely interesting and potentially transformative is also what makes it often difficult that their innovation potential can be noticed and that the expression of this potential can be stimulated. The impact of single initiatives can indeed be very modest, whilst when they are considered in some aggregate form or under a large scale perspective, they can result highly diversified and difficult to replicate because they are deeply shaped by and rooted in the context in which they are generated. Overall, their social impact also typically escapes comprehensive quantitative assessments and they are extremely difficult to be taken into account within scenarios and

forecasts used by researchers and policy makers and the main reasons for these difficulties have to be often found exactly in how quantitative assessments and forecasts inevitably split and are blind to endogenous dynamics of demand and supply co-evolution.

After these general considerations, it has probably to be pointed out that social innovation initiatives developed around renewable energy sources and technologies play a central role in the social innovation initiatives we are interested in. Being highly distributed and mostly linked to land, renewables can re-define energy sources and equipment ownership and re-compose demand and supply in new ways through the active participation of local communities. Renewables can in principle allow to partially or totally (re)conduct consumption-production cycles under the responsibility of the people who they serve. Clearly, a large number of synergies between reductions of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and improvement of social well-being can in principle be identified and exploited in this way. As it will be discussed also during this workshop, researchers and policy makers are becoming increasingly aware of the fact that economic, technical and quantitative considerations concerning substitution or reduction in the consumption of non-renewable energy inputs are certainly important but cannot be the only starting point to design and implement actions for wide scale decarbonisation. Despite the previously mentioned challenges, social and environmental benefits associated with the diffusion of local renewable energy communities are therefore being increasingly understood and the role that the European Union can have in the generation of these benefits becomes particularly important in a time of diffused Euroscepticism.

Overall, it has to be finally stressed that the diffusion of local renewable energy communities should not be considered as a kind of panacea in relation to the energy transition. A large scale energy transition cannot e.g. generally take place without energy redistribution and the

implementation of the technical solutions that can enable local energy communities' integration and energy redistribution within large energy networks. In a way, that is quite similar to what is assumed to happen within globalised market economies. It is exactly the redistribution of energy generated from local renewable energy sources within complex networks that is supposed to make the energy transition possible while generating the benefits typically associated with it. The question is therefore also how and whether local communities' social innovation initiatives can contribute to generate the organised complexity and the level of energy systems resilience and flexibility that is needed for this transition to happen.

To conclude, we have organised the present workshop a) to study local communities' social innovation potential for the energy transition under both theoretical and practical lenses and b) to formulate policy and research recommendations allowing to stimulate the expression of this potential. What we would like to do with your support and the debates we have organised is to provide practical and concrete research and policy indications and to collect suggestions and proposal concerning how the JRC can contribute to support the social innovation initiatives we are studying.