SCIENCE4POLICY BRIEFING

Local participation in European energy transition

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Introduction

This roundtable convened MEPs, policy researchers, civil society, businesses and local government representatives to discuss how to strengthen citizen and community participation in the EU clean energy transition. Discussions will feed directly into a forthcoming Shared Green Deal policy brief (publication: late 2026), drawing on a series of social experiments conducted with local stakeholders across Europe. The brief will focus on the role of EU and national institutions in supporting local participation in the energy transition.

Host

MEP Bruno Tobback - S&D

MEPs Contributing

MEP Bruno Tobback - S&D

MEP Brigitte Van den Berg – Renew Europe

MEP Benedetta Scuderi - Greens/EFA

Moderator

Chris Foulds - Professor of Sustainability & Society, Anglia Ruskin University

Speakers

Chiara Antonelli – Topic Lead, IEEP

Irene Chiocchetti – Policy analyst, IEEP

Monika Helak - Senior Public Policy Analyst, Reform Institute, member of Think Sustainable Europe

Chris Vrettos - Senior Policy Advisor, REScoop

Claire Simpson - Deputy Head of Department, Climate and Town Transition Team, Brussels City

Key highlights

- Participation must be early, continuous and inclusive; late-stage information-sharing and top-down governance does not build trust.
- Sustained financial and institutional support for local actors, not just policy ambition, determines whether community-led energy initiatives succeed. Municipalities will increasingly need help diversifying funding sources, including private capital, as direct EU funding tightens.
- Intermediaries (like national federations, the Committee of the Regions, regional contact points for EU projects, and other bridging institutions) are essential to connect EU-level programmes with local actors who cannot navigate complex application processes alone.
- Inclusive participation requires actively designing policy around excluded groups (e.g. shift and outdoor workers unable to attend evening meetings) and addressing residents' immediate, non-energy concerns alongside transition goals.
- Power imbalances between incumbents and emerging community actors require EU-level safeguards and minimum standards (e.g. on benefit-sharing definitions) where national governments lack the incentive to act, as fragmented regional implementation in some member states illustrates.
- Energy communities face active lobbying from established energy interests and must organise and advocate with comparable intensity and scale.
- Three live legislative files - the Grids Package, the next Multiannual Financial Framework, and the Citizens Energy Package - offer near-term opportunities, but long-term benefits, to embed participation and benefit-sharing requirements, alongside the Governance Regulation's post-2030 KPI framework.
- Risk flagged for the next Horizon Europe framework: if competitiveness criteria dominate, the procedural and societal-readiness focus discussed at the roundtable could be lost.
- Findings will inform a Shared Green Deal policy brief, to be published in late 2026.

Summary of the discussion

Framing the transition

The energy transition is being presented as one of Europe's few genuinely hopeful, forward-looking economic projects - an opportunity for industrial renewal, jobs (over half a million already in the EU energy sector), and prosperity. Energy communities give citizens direct ownership and tangible local benefit rather than a compliance burden. Contrary to common assumptions, environmental permitting is rarely the main bottleneck for projects; administrative capacity and funding are bigger obstacles, and early, genuine public participation is what unblocks projects.

Key findings

"Participation" was defined as a two-way dialogue and genuine involvement in decision-making, not one-off consultation. Three structural challenges were identified:

- One-size-fits-all policy design - EU regions differ sharply in context; local co-creation processes produced more targeted, locally-owned outcomes than top-down approaches.
- Weak institutional and financial support - local authorities often lack the capacity to sustain engagement; community initiatives rely on under-resourced volunteers; funding remains a persistent barrier.
- Low trust and perceived unfairness - trust is slow to build and easily lost (citing the 2018-19 backlash in France); consultation on instruments, such as National Energy and Climate Plans and Social Climate Plans has been inconsistent - a particular risk for ETS2, which will raise fuel costs.

Recommendations: recognise community and local actors as central drivers of the transition; build flexibility through continuous, early-stage dialogue; institutionalise structural support (one-stop shops, energy-advice hubs) via sustained funding and the Citizens Energy Package; and prioritise EU funding instruments (Just Transition Mechanism, next MFF) for long-term, place-based participatory processes.

Power asymmetries and legislative opportunities

Power asymmetries between the state, incumbent energy companies and emerging energy communities were flagged as routinely overlooked, particularly in centralised, coal-legacy systems where only a fraction of energy cooperatives actually generate electricity. Calls were made for EU-level safeguards, such as public registries of grid-connection contracts.

Three legislative files were highlighted: the Grids Package (national facilitator role and benefit-sharing thresholds at risk of being weakened in Council negotiations); the next MFF 2028-2034 (partnership plans currently being drafted will determine fund allocation for seven years, with low public visibility); and the Citizens Energy Package (targets of 90-250 GW of community energy requiring translation into national strategies). Engagement should speak to lived realities - bill savings, energy independence - rather than technical language, citing an estimate that household participation in an energy community can save up to €930 per year.

Lessons from local practice

Timing is critical: participation initiated too early leaves citizens without context; too late, feedback cannot be meaningfully integrated. Outreach tends to reach the same recurring organisations, missing vulnerable and underrepresented communities. Tangible incentives (grants, bonuses) and accessible, non-technical framing (comfort, affordability) increase participation, alongside sustained investment in frontline implementers - municipal staff, one-stop shops, local energy agencies.

On capacity-building, European funding has been crucial for municipalities, though direct EU funding is likely to become harder to access. Cities will increasingly need support in identifying alternative sources, including private capital - a mode of working that municipalities are not traditionally equipped for. Two funding models were cited: a standing mechanism financing roughly 11 projects per year on climate-relevant topics open to citizen-led ideas, and projects implemented directly by the municipality.

On EU funding processes, municipalities often participate in projects rather than coordinate them - signalling interest and letting external consortia carry the administrative burden, which becomes easier as inter-city networks grow.

Reaching excluded groups

Outdoor manual workers who shift to early-morning hours during hot periods are structurally unable to attend evening engagement meetings, yet are often among those who feel compelled to protest energy and climate policy. Suggestions included adjusted seasonal working arrangements, targeted fiscal measures recognising heat exposure, and differentiated pricing - to help these workers feel like protagonists rather than people simply absorbing costs. This was echoed by a broader call to take everyday lived experience into account, referencing the European Green Deal's commitment that no one be left behind.

Intermediaries and facilitators

National federations were cited as an effective intermediary model - for example, a federation working with government-backed revolving funds to proactively reach households for renovation and energy-community support, generating far higher uptake than top-down approaches (a model featured in the Commission's Action Plan for Energy Communities). Horizon Europe National Contact Points and bridging organisations convening researchers, industry, MEPs and Commission officials were also cited - though MEPs themselves were noted as often the hardest stakeholders to bring to the table.

The Committee of the Regions was noted as a facilitator in its own right, having published opinions on the Grids Package, and it was argued that local and regional authorities should be more deeply involved in the design, not just the implementation, of energy policy. The Grids Package's mandatory benefit-sharing scheme was called a partial but insufficient step. Upcoming revisions to the energy security framework and Governance Regulation were flagged as key opportunities, along with a forthcoming study (July 2026) on countering climate and energy disinformation at the local level.

Benefit-sharing and minimum standards

Mandatory benefit-sharing in the Grids Package was welcomed, alongside a warning of reluctance among more conservative member states. Germany was cited as a cautionary example: despite a strong citizen-energy movement, benefit-sharing has been implemented differently in each federal state, creating a fragmented patchwork that undermines a level playing field - from required municipal payments in some states to none in others. A strong, common EU-level minimum standard was argued to enable rather than weaken simplification.

While 27 member states cannot apply identical rules, the EU should establish shared definitions distinguishing engagement, public participation and benefit-sharing, so all stakeholders - including citizens who cannot attend meetings - share a common understanding. Benefit-sharing was linked to justice both procedurally (genuine engagement) and distributively (sharing project profits), with a suggestion that energy communities be reflected in the Governance Regulation's post-2030 KPI framework to give the 90 GW target operational meaning.

On funding design, EU mechanisms typically originate from a defined policy problem, are translated into rigid call texts, and are assessed against fixed checklists - making it structurally difficult to deviate from predefined priorities once a call is published.

Competition, advocacy and social justice

Citizen and cooperative energy initiatives are in direct competition with for-profit energy interests, which actively lobby to weaken benefit-sharing and cooperative provisions. A call was made for energy communities to organise and lobby with comparable intensity to incumbent industry - mobilising the scale of citizens already benefiting (roughly €700 per household per year was cited) - and for EU-level support for aggregator and organiser roles.

While energy communities are not inherently disadvantaged within electricity market reform, the broader transition - including network tariff changes citizens cannot opt out of - carries real distributive impacts. Instruments like the Just Transition Fund and Social Climate Fund exist but operate too indirectly for citizens to connect benefits back to EU policy. Implementation is where the link between energy communities and social justice is most often lost in practice; more work is needed to integrate social and transition-focused framing together.

Closing reflections

The discussion was summarised as moving from questions of method toward questions of procedural justice - whose voices are included and when, whether processes are open or ongoing, and how multi-level governance can build trust during a period of uncertainty. A Europe-wide "societal readiness" pilot (€200–300 million, 27 projects) placing societal needs at the centre of climate, energy and mobility projects was flagged, to be evaluated over three and a half years. A closing plea was made not to lose this procedural richness in the next Horizon Europe framework if competitiveness considerations dominate.

Final remarks reflected that the goal is for citizens to become genuine owners and protagonists of the transition. Citizen-led ideas routinely run into the same barriers raised throughout: poor fit with policy priorities, lack of guidance, insufficient funding, or excessive red tape. The EU's role should be to create space for local initiative rather than over-regulate it - setting ambitious targets, ensuring long-term funding certainty, and keeping rules stable once set - while acknowledging real power asymmetries that the EU has a role in addressing. An example from a social housing renovation project in the Netherlands illustrated the value of listening to non-energy concerns: resident enthusiasm rose once small, immediate complaints (e.g. a malfunctioning door) were addressed alongside the energy upgrade. The discussion closed by endorsing benefit-sharing as essential, and cautioning that a just transition matters more, in the end, than a purely competitive one.

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