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Policy Brief #4: Achieving Socially Inclusive Wind Energy across Government Levels



Authors

Arthur Hinsch, Giorgia Rambelli, Julia Kittel
ICLEI Local Governments for Sustainability

Maria Rosaria di Nucci, Michael Krug, Dörte Theman
Free University of Berlin

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Achieving Socially Inclusive Wind Energy across Government Levels

With the introduction of the EU's Clean Energy Package, an Energy Union with citizens at the core is becoming more than just an ideal. By June 2021, Member States are required to put in place appropriate enabling frameworks for a more socially inclusive energy transition. The fulfillment of these obligations will not only depend heavily on concerted action, between market actors and the public sector, but most of all on an effective interplay between the different government levels.

The WinWind project has shown that, while policies on the European and national levels are instrumental for setting the scene, action at the regional and local levels are crucial for truly achieving socially inclusive wind energy projects by getting people on board.

Local governments are instrumental to this task, and act as leaders, planners, informers, enablers and mediators, which should be supported in their roles accordingly ([see WinWind Policy Brief #3](#)).

This policy brief provides a series of selected recommendations targeted at policy makers, on how to foster social inclusion through action at the European, national/regional and local levels. The document is based on a comprehensive report¹ covering the policy lessons and final policy recommendations generated by the WinWind project.

By sharing the overall key lessons of the project, the brief shows how different government levels can support the uptake of more socially inclusive wind energy in Europe and contribute to the achievement of European and national renewable energy targets.

Key Lessons

The local acceptance of wind energy projects always depends on the **local context**. What influences acceptance differs from country to country, region to region and community to community? There is **no one solution** guaranteeing social community acceptance, however, there are a **number of drivers** which are applicable across the board which help to enhance it. Acceptance can be promoted by **transparent, open and fair planning processes** as well as by **sharing the benefits** of the projects **with local communities and citizens** in a fair and open

manner. **Positive impacts** for the **local economy** and creation of **local added value through tax revenues, local contracting, local jobs** and **community funds** are instrumental measures to bolster local acceptance.

WinWind has developed a set of **principles & criteria for fair and socially inclusive wind energy**². These should serve as guidance for commercial developers and operators of wind energy plants, and might be integrated into existing policy support frameworks by policy makers on a “**pick & choose**” basis. The principles & criteria can

¹ That report (Krug, Di Nucci, Themann 2020) incorporates policy lessons learned from the activities carried out in the country stakeholder desks established by the project, from the analysis of good and best practices, as well as from the results of the knowledge transfer experiences. It contains EU related, cross-country and country-specific policy recommendations. The comprehensive list of Principles & Criteria for Socially Inclusive Wind Energy developed by the project has been integrated there as well.

² Kudrenickis, Themann, Krug 2020

serve as an orientation for the development of labelling schemes and might be integrated into the **design of RES support schemes**, e.g. as **pre-qualification** or **award criteria** in the frame of auctions.

Selected recommendations for European policy makers:

In line with the targets and objectives set by the new European Green Deal, wind energy has to be considered instrumental in achieving carbon neutrality by 2050³. Member States will face challenges to achieve their renewable energy targets if they fail to establish the right enabling frameworks. The European level can influence how these frameworks on the Member State's level.

Renewable Energy Communities (RECs) are considered to be instrumental for socially inclusive wind energy projects as they provide the legal structure for effective and real community participation and ownership and create new opportunities to increase the acceptance of wind energy. To fully benefit from their contributions to the energy transition, in addition to monitoring the current transposition of the Clean Energy Package as well the development of legal and enabling frameworks for renewable energy communities, it is therefore important to ensure that the REC definitions and provisions are not misused.

The European Commission should:

- Help to identify and disseminate best practices of effective enabling frameworks for RECs, the participation of local governments and encourage European best practice transfers. The best practice transfer guide developed in the frame of WinWind can serve as a guidance.

- Promote the establishment of national and regional advisory organisations providing neutral information to local communities, local governments and citizens.
- Strengthen the social dimension of Environmental Impact Assessments and provide guidance to Member States on how to practically assess impacts.

Actions on the local level are significantly affected by funding decisions on the European level. Through its funding programs the European Commission can considerably influence the rate of implementation to which wind energy projects will be carried out in a socially inclusive manner. The provision of financial support for wind and other renewable energy projects, should be made conditional on the compliance with specific fairness criteria promoting socially inclusive projects (“social conditionality”).

The European Commission should:

- Encourage the development of RECs via the InvestEU program, the European Regional Development Fund, Cohesion Fund as well as Horizon Europe.
- Strengthen bottom-up approaches like the Community-led Local Development (CLLD)/LEADER initiatives and promote the development of renewable energy communities as well as informal participation/dialogue formats in the context of renewable energy developments.

³ [Wind Europe 2020](#)

Selected recommendations for National Policy Makers

Just as the WinWind principles & criteria for fair wind energy can serve as a baseline for European policy on how socially inclusive wind energy projects can be best promoted throughout the EU, it is up to Member States to apply this to their national context. In fact, some Member States are already undertaking visible steps in this direction and are **formulating political targets for the development of renewable energy communities**. Considering the spread of increasingly volatile and price-based remuneration schemes, a clear target goes a long way in providing planning security for market actors and citizens involved in community energy projects.

Going forward Member States should:

- Provide financial incentives for renewable energy communities and take their specificities into account when developing support schemes. This should also entail exempting smaller community-led projects from auction schemes and to reduce red-tape such projects face.

National auctioning authorities might create tailored bidding windows for renewable energy communities. This can also entail fully exempting Renewable Energy Communities from auctions and to enable remuneration via direct support. Experience, particularly from Germany, has shown this to be the most effective way to encourage projects with high citizen involvement and therefore high community acceptance. In fact, community engagement and benefit sharing might also be established as part of pre-qualification criteria.

- Make sure that communities hosting wind farms can use the electricity from the wind farms and/or benefit from special electricity prices or price discounts.

Alternatively, the evaluation and selection of bids might be based on multi-criteria assessments, which in contrast to price only systems, take also social and environmental benefits of community wind energy projects into consideration. Therefore, depending on the national context, Member States should, as a minimum:

- Develop national criteria for fair wind energy and consider the development of national labels for fair wind energy. The WinWind principles & criteria can serve as a guidance in this regard.

The right legal enabling framework is instrumental in incentivising the socially inclusive market uptake of wind energy. But not everything should be subject to incentives. National and regional regulatory frameworks should define the procedures and operational principles regarding investor's co-operation with local communities and should:

- Oblige wind farm developers and owners to undertake community information and engagement throughout all stages of deployment. This should also be done in case repowering takes place.

Transparent provision and dissemination of information from the very beginning of the project should be required as a condition for obtaining permits. This is key in order to avoid situations in which the local community does not experience being heard.

Member States should:

- Require developers to enable financial participation of host communities and to offer benefit sharing mechanisms in cooperation with the local communities.

There are many different ways to do this such as donations to the local community, in kind benefits, as well as establishing non-profit

associations or foundations to enhance social welfare.

Developers also have considerable influence over how much impact projects have on the surrounding environment and should be obliged by national or regional instruments to map local risk of wind turbines for nature and wildlife. In the planning and permitting phase, it is crucial to acknowledge minority rights and take seriously opposing positions on the basis of landscape/nature conservation and place attachment.

- Exclude areas with high biodiversity value from the development of wind farms (e.g. nature reserves, national parks, protected biotopes). Where [Natura 2000](#) sites are not excluded, a careful case-by-case assessment should be performed.

Not setting in place the right platform for discussions around wind energy, place attachment and nature conservation can lead to considerable opposition. As regional and local governments have a very important role in the overall planning process, being the closest to the local population, they need to be financially enabled to ensure “genuine” formal and informal participation of citizens in planning, siting and permitting procedures.

- With increased attention to renewable energy communities, it is highly important that local governments are legally allowed to acquire shares in community wind farms.

Becoming part of a (partially) community-owned wind park enables local governments to lead by example, which increases trust and can encourage further investment from citizens.

Selected Recommendations to Regional and Local Policy Makers

Regional, and particularly local governments, have a key role as leaders of the local energy transition. Just as the right enabling framework is being created at European and national level, local governments should be considered promoters of community-led wind farms and renewable energy communities. They should push for wind parks to be established in legal forms which enables citizens to hold shares. The concept of **community energy** is gaining traction around Europe and should be actively taken up on the local level as a means for democratic and inclusive participation of citizens in the local energy transition.

- Local governments should consider choosing to own a certain share in renewable energy communities with citizens also holding shares.
- Integrate community-led wind energy measures and projects into local plans and targets.

In doing so, they are ensuring that the economic benefit generated is kept locally, something which can also be done via taxation or contractual arrangements. Local governments should increasingly take up their institution building function and:

- Set up civic associations, or local foundations in order to make the local community benefit from wind farms.

Regional and local governments, if able to do so, should:

- consider linking the lease of publicly owned land to certain requirements concerning procedural or financial participation of local communities/citizens. The WinWind principles & criteria might serve useful here as well.

It is also recommended to adopt pre-qualification criteria for bidders to fulfil. This can, for example, entail requesting all bidders to present a community engagement and benefit sharing plan.

Of course, all of the above steps can only be effective if they are properly communicated. Here, regional and local governments have a key role to play. Not only can they require developers to provide transparent, non-jargon information and communication as a condition for obtaining permits, they are also the key actors for informing citizens about local energy transition plans and should:

- Ensure transparent provision and dissemination of information from the very beginning of the project together with project developers as well as ensuring effective formal and informal participation of citizens in planning, siting and permitting procedures.

While being subject to financial capacities, it is recommended for developers and regional, local authorities to work together providing additional consultation procedures beyond statutory requirements. This has been shown to significantly increase local acceptance.

Conclusion:

In several regions across Europe, wind energy deployment is facing a stalemate due to a lack of local acceptance. This is despite a proven overly positive attitude of Europe's citizens towards wind energy⁴. A key finding of the WinWind project is that no actor can increase wind energy uptake independently. Equally, policy action at the different government levels will not result in more acceptance if policies are not geared towards enabling socially inclusive projects on the local level. Transposition of the revised Renewable Energy Directive should be used

as a chance to create a multi-level and multi-stakeholder enabling framework for onshore wind energy. Citizens' protests and concerns manifest themselves at the local level. Therefore, as long as European and national policies for wind energy are not geared towards enabling inclusive planning and participatory procedures at the local level, onshore wind energy will not be developed at the required scale and speed. The spread of misinformation regarding wind energy should also be addressed at all levels through transparent information campaigns.

Now is the time for genuine socially inclusive wind energy. Only with effective policy action, across government levels, can onshore wind energy contribute to Member States' renewable energy targets while at the same time providing value to local communities.

⁴ [Topline Results](#) from Round 8 of the European Social Survey

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