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DRAFT

Renewable energy cooperatives and the promotion of eco-citizenship in Belgium

Franck Ronald Foadin (PhD student), Valérie Swaen, (Full professor) Both at UCLouvain_LouRIM

- *Presenter(s): Foadin Foadin Franck Ronald*
- *Session: Sustainability education and participatory methods in managing sustainability transitions*
- *Category : 1.b. TRANSDISC-PROTOCOL*
- *In-person participation*

The global energy transition is shifting from centralized systems to decentralized, community-driven models (Ahmed and al, 2024). In this context, Renewable Energy Cooperatives (RECs) have emerged as key actors, enabling citizens to engage in energy production, consumption, and governance (Coy and al., 2021). Scholars increasingly view RECs as catalysts for sustainable transitions, social inclusion, and local resilience (Boostani et al., 2024; Lennon & Dunphy, 2024).

Across Europe, RECs are expanding rapidly, contributing to renewable energy deployment, reducing energy poverty, and advancing Sustainable Development Goals (Roberto et al., 2023; Villanueva et al., 2024a). They also foster energy citizenship - defined as active participation in shaping energy systems beyond mere consumption (Laakso et al., 2023; Svennevik, 2022). However, while REC outcomes such as installed capacity are well-documented, the processes that cultivate committed eco-citizenship remain underexplored (Dobson, 2010; Dudka & Magnani, 2024). Key questions persist regarding which strategies—education, participatory governance, partnerships—are most effective, and how challenges like regulatory barriers and limited engagement are addressed (Barbaro & Napoli, 2024, Villanueva and al., 2023).

This research investigates how Belgian RECs strategically manage social interactions to foster active and sustained eco-citizenship, examining both the benefits and challenges of these processes. It builds on a conceptual framework combining Energy Citizenship, Participatory Governance, and Community Empowerment. RECs are theorized as platforms that enact these principles through democratic control, education, and collaboration (Adu-Kankam & Camarinha-Matos, 2023; Coy and al., 2021).

To analyze these dynamics, the study applies Erhard Friedberg's sociology of organized action (1993), which views organizations as evolving entities shaped by actors' strategies, negotiations, and power relations. This lens reveals how shared values and eco-citizen behaviors are constructed through interaction, rather than imposed from above.

The research addresses the following research questions: How do REC governance models promote inclusive decision-making and influence environmental policy? What synergies and tensions emerge among stakeholders (e.g., government, investors, communities)? What strategies help RECs overcome participation barriers, and how do these affect citizenship outcomes?

A qualitative, inductive case study approach (Aberdeen, 2013; Yin, 2009) will be used, focusing on 3–4 Belgian RECs selected for diversity in size, age, and region (Wallonia, Brussels). Data will be collected through semi-structured interviews with internal (founders, staff, members) and

external (local officials, partners) stakeholders (Musselin, 2005; Dubois and Dethier, 2016), complemented by document analysis and observation of events such as assemblies and workshops.

Interview data will be analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase thematic analysis framework, combined with Hiernaux's (1995) structural method and Friedberg's principles, focusing on actor strategies, resource mobilization, and evolving governance norms. The study will also map REC governance models and engagement strategies, such as energy cafés and political alliances with municipalities and NGOs.

Ultimately, this research extends Friedberg's framework (1976) to community energy, showing how micro-politics and strategic conduct shape eco-citizenship and energy transitions. Findings will inform best practices for RECs, offering insights into effective governance, citizen engagement, and community empowerment.

References

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