

Stakeholders' participation in regional energy planning processes. Case study from RES H/C SPREAD project

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Abstract: The article briefly describes, through the illustration of four best practices, a successful experience concerning the involvement of external stakeholders in the realization of regional energy plans for the fostering of the renewable energy technologies for heating and cooling in different EU countries. This participatory activity was carried out within the RES H/C SPREAD project (EU Intelligent Energy Program 2014-2016). Project objective was to strengthen the capacity of regional and local authorities for planning in a sustainable development framework.

Keywords: regional planning, participatory governance, stakeholders' participation, RES heating and cooling technologies

Introduction

The RES H/C SPREAD (RES Heating and Cooling – Strategic Actions Development) project¹ carried out by ISINNOVA

¹ Contract number: IEE/13/599/SI2.SI2.675533. Duration: March 2014 – October 2016. Project coordinator: ISINNOVA (Italy). Partners: CTI (Italy), CRES (Greece), EREN (Spain), BSERC (Bulgaria), EKODOMA (Latvia), AEA (Austria), ARM (Bulgaria), ANKO (Greece), RPR (Latvia), ARPAE E.R. (Italy). Website: www.res-hc-spread.eu, accessed 6.2.2017.

and ten other partners within the framework of the EU Intelligent Energy programme was made successful through intense stakeholders' participation. The project, which finished in October 2016, provided European regional authorities with support in terms of knowledge and best practices in order to strengthen their planning capacity in a sustainable development framework.

The planning methodology developed by the project was applied in six pilot regions within six EU countries: Austria, Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, Latvia and Spain. The final product of the project was the issuing of six regional plans to encourage the use of renewable energies for heating and cooling. The whole planning process was carried out in close collaboration with the Country Governance Committees (CGCs) in order to ensure the active involvement of the major stakeholders of the participating regions (regional and community leaders, entrepreneurs, managers and energy distributors, consultants, researchers, etc.) in a co-design process from the beginning. The CGCs have proven to be key factors in the success of the project, having significantly raised awareness in both the private and public sector, in terms of the potential for investment in renewable thermal energy and the policies to be implemented to overcome economic and regulatory barriers, respectively. All of the plans developed within the RES H/C SPREAD project have been officially endorsed by the regional authorities and now are part of the wider regional planning policies.

Case study

The following are four examples of success stories in Spain, Bulgaria, Greece and Italy.²

In Castilla y León, the organization of these governance groups and stakeholder participation has contributed to the development of the regional plan as, once the involved stakeholders and public administrators realized

¹ More information on these case studies available at: http://www.res-hc-spread.eu/en_GB/resources/country-governance-committees/ and http://www.res-hc-spread.eu/en_GB/resources/reports/. See also CRES (2016).

the importance of the topics proposed by the RES H/C SPREAD project for their region, they strongly encouraged the Castilla y León Region to entrust the Regional Energy Agency (EREN) with the development of a detailed regional policy. Following this official request, EREN has, for the first time, developed a very detailed model for the assessment of regional heating demand at municipal level and analysed the corresponding renewable energy supply potential. Based on this evidence and in agreement with the governance group, EREN formulated then the strategies and policies for the development of sustainable technologies in this field.

In Bulgaria, the CGC played a key role in the plan's success. Communication between stakeholders allowed for a better understanding of regional needs, sharing of best practices, and consensus regarding objectives and planned policies. CGC members helped with data collection, dissemination, and the engagement of authorities in the implementation of the plan and contributed to the identification of regional priorities for the implementation of heating technologies and underlying policies.

As in the other participating countries, the role of the CGC in the Greek region of Western Macedonia was essential for the development of the regional RES H/C plan, as all the members of the CGC contributed to the identification of needs and priorities; to the evaluation of the RES technologies; to the improvement of the implemented methodology and to the selection of the most effective policy measures. The constitution of the CGC was well-balanced and took into consideration the peculiarities of the region. The majority of the initially identified stakeholders participated in the planned meetings, while additional stakeholders were invited to participate by covering specialized issues during the development of the plan. All the members of the CGC declared their willingness to participate in the committee after the project's completion. The main result of this participatory activity was the reinforcement of the regional policy framework in the RES H/C field, especially concerning the improvement of district heating efficiency and sustainability by combining lignite with biomass and by more efficiently exploiting biomass for heating purposes.

The participative process in the Italian Emilia Romagna region involved almost 100 stakeholders and municipal administrators. These participants developed a comprehensive strategy for the development of RES heating technologies composed of several policy measures. The role of the CGC was essential for the development of the regional H/C plan as all of its members contributed to the identification of needs and priorities, to the evaluation of RES technologies and to the selection of the most effective policy measures. Similarly to Greece, Italian CGC also balanced the public and private sectors, taking into account regional specificities. All of the CGC meetings held were evaluated very positively and all of the members of the CGC declared their willingness to participate in the committee after the project's completion. The combined efforts of the project's working team and the stakeholders who participated in the CGC were welcomed by regional authorities, who have decided to include the RES H/C plan in the third regional plan, officially issued at the end of May 2016.

The success of this participatory activity was mostly due to the careful design of its implementation phases, having identified in advance the objectives and the contents of each participatory event in accordance and in parallel with the development of the regional planning process. An important ingredient for this success was the accurate selection of the stakeholders invited to take part in this participatory activity by considering their interest in the topics to be discussed, their potential capacity to provide useful input to the project teams and their actual power in terms of decision making. The Emilia Romagna case shows an effectively designed, prepared and managed example of stakeholders' meetings. From the beginning, the planning process was thought of as a co-design activity split into four phases corresponding to four informally conducted regional workshops, typical of "design thinking methodology",³ which led to the real commitment and involvement of the participants.

The first workshop aimed for so-called "visioning": the participants were asked to project themselves into a future

³ See for example: Yayici (2016) or <http://designthinkingmethodology.weebly.com/>, accessed 6.2.2017.

reality in which the development of renewable sources for heating and cooling was effectively realized. The second workshop was more operational as the stakeholders were asked to discuss and propose a path that would lead to the achievement of the goals envisioned in the earlier work of visioning. During the third and fourth workshop the participants got into the heart of the debate, focusing on knowledge requirements, regulatory rules and the financial tools required for the implementation of sustainable heating and cooling technologies. A set of policy measures including tools, implementation time and targets was then envisaged.

Conclusion and lesson learned

As outlined in the introduction and in the case studies, the whole planning process carried out by the six regions participating in RES H/C SPREAD project has been implemented in close collaboration with the Country Governance Committees (CGCs) in order to ensure, right from the first phase of work, the active involvement of the major stakeholders of the region (regional and community leaders, entrepreneurs, managers and energy distributors, consultants, researchers, etc.). These regional governmental committees have then become an integral part of the plan's development process having in fact substantially increased the awareness of both the private and the public sectors: the former, as regards the potential for investment in renewable thermal energy and policies to be implemented to overcome economic and regulatory barriers; the latter, so as to allow the insertion of the project's plans within the wider regional planning policies.

The lessons learned from the participatory activity carried out in this project can be finally resumed as follows:

- Stakeholders' processes should generally be clear and understandable to the participants. Therefore, the goals have to be defined right at the beginning. It is moreover advisable to agree on the necessity of the planning exercise and the responsibilities of the stakeholders involved.

- Stakeholders' processes are "living" processes: mutual learning and making adaptations is essential.
- Trust between all parties involved is a precondition of an effective working relationship and it shall strictly be avoided to raise expectations that can't be met.
- Main advantages of stakeholders' involvement are increased transparency and "better" decision making. The most suitable and effective participation techniques should be then introduced to facilitate the involvement of the stakeholders and to elicit their attitudes and positions (see the Emilia Romagna case).
- Communication among all relevant stakeholders is the key to success and prevents possible future barriers. Active involvement of key decision makers is utmost important for a successful regional planning. Feedback from key stakeholders has to be incorporated accordingly in order to make clear that the stakeholders' involvement influences the decisions. It should therefore precisely be explained what input is needed from the stakeholders and how it might (will) be used.
- The composition of stakeholders might change during the phases of the planning process. It does not mean that it is necessary to involve all participants with the same level of intensity all of the time; it is more important to prioritize and to act strategically. This is considered to be an option in order to increase the effectiveness of the stakeholder participation process.

References

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