

It is estimated that between 50 and 125 million - or 10-25% - of EU citizens live in energy poverty. That number is even higher in South-Eastern Europe where 30% or more households struggle with covering their basic energy needs. As winter temperatures reveal the depth of the problem in SEE, the European decision-makers are urged to address the specifics of the region in the Winter Energy Package.

The depth of the energy poverty challenge in SEE is due to the cultural, climatic and political characteristics of SEE. There is little political interest in the issue of energy poverty in the region, and hence the problem is less defined, monitored or tackled than in Western Europe. The number of people who are not poor but cannot afford adequate energy services is higher in SEE than in other parts of Europe.

Many dwellings in the region are inadequately built and highly inefficient. People often live in shockingly bad conditions, which adversely affect their health. Finally, many people in SEE are not aware of how to use energy efficiently, which leads to wasteful use and higher energy bills.

It is imperative that both the citizens and the governments of SEE make a change.

Therefore, Intelligent Energy Europe funded project REACH, which contributes to energy poverty abatement by empowering households to save energy and by calling for structural measures, has contacted EU decision-makers and proposed a few steps towards making a change. The key step in the SEE region is to recognise and define the energy poverty challenge, and to agree on monitoring indicators.

The next step is to integrate energy poverty into national energy efficiency and social care programmes, carefully designing them so that they are available and accessible to those in need. Apart from taking low-cost energy efficiency measures, other ways of tackling energy poverty should also include the replacement of inefficient household appliances and heating systems, different levels of retrofitting buildings, and subsidies which are suitable and useful for vulnerable households. State-owned social housing should be renovated to improve the housing conditions. Financial support, such as deduction of energy bills, should be used as a measure after all cost-effective energy efficiency options have been implemented.

The planning and implementation of energy poverty measures should be approached in a cross-sectoral manner, involving a wide range of stakeholders in the process, and especially focusing on creating links between the social, energy, health and environmental sectors. It is also important to work on aligning energy and social policies and linking energy poverty policies to a wider array of policies, such as employment, housing or pension policies.

Finally, governments need to ensure the sustainability of the energy poverty policies and

measures by transferring the responsibility of addressing the problem from local actors and NGOs to their own domain.

As the recently proposed Winter Energy Package works towards addressing energy poverty at the EU level, the recommendations of project REACH on the specifics of SEE must be considered by the EU decision-makers to ensure that these specifics are adequately covered by EU-level legislation.