

A year ago, the [European Commission](#) presented a new strategy to rapidly reduce the EU's dependence on Russian fossil fuels and speed up the energy transition towards renewables: **the REPowerEU plan**.

Under this new EU legislative framework, governments across Europe are required to properly map their territories to identify acceleration areas for renewables. This practice refers to establishing zones where permits for renewable energy installations can be issued in a simple and expedited manner.

For the first phase of spatial planning and selection of [renewable energy](#) acceleration zones, the EU rules call for sound environmental criteria. This is not a minor request. The climate crisis is closely linked to another environmental crisis: **biodiversity loss**. Our ecosystems are in steep decline, threatening the well-being of the entire planet and requiring urgent action. Reversing human-induced environmental damage is about much more than just energy.

Participation of the public is also fundamental. The less residents are involved and empowered, the more likely renewable energy projects are to face social opposition. There is also a risk that political forces will be able to exploit public resentment and steer the debate towards false narratives against renewables.

At first glance, developing solutions that meet all these criteria may seem like an overwhelming task, one that could actually hamper the energy transition towards more renewables. But this is far from the case. There is plenty of evidence from across Europe showing that when nature and communities are taken into account, planning and permitting for renewable energy becomes easier, faster and more beneficial for all.

Several governments, businesses, and cooperatives have taken effective action in recent years to roll-out and expand renewable energy systems through a nature-positive, participatory, and community-led approach.

### **Best-in-class**

In 2011, **Burgenland** became the first Austrian federal state with legally binding spatial planning for the construction of wind farms. With one third of its territory under nature protection, the suitable areas for onshore wind development had to be defined very carefully, in order not to harm biodiversity. Spatial planning can avoid conflict between different uses early on.

Through environmental sensitivity mapping, areas such as nature and landscape conservation areas, nature parks, etc. were first identified as "exclusion zones", removing the most biodiverse natural sites from the list of eligible spaces for new renewables. Later, the suitability of the remaining areas was assessed based on the possible combined effects

of the wind farms on the ecosystems and on settlements; these practices are called Strategic Environmental Assessments. The designation of suitable areas followed a bottom-up, participatory process in which all relevant stakeholders, such as project developers, municipalities, and environmental NGOs were involved in the decision-making process. The benefits of this approach are clear: by excluding the most biodiverse areas from suitable renewable energy sites first, the deployment of windmills and solar panels can be accelerated in areas where ecological stress can be minimised. This makes it possible to speed up the transition towards clean energy, in combination with wider regional and national plans to protect and restore ecosystems.

The strategy has proven successful: by 2013, Burgenland was able to cover 100% of its electricity needs with wind power. The average duration of approval procedures for new projects is among the shortest in Europe - 6.8 months - and the success of good and participatory planning is evident: only one legal objection was raised in more than 30 project applications.

### **Sharing is caring**

Despite its small territorial waters, **Belgium** has the sixth highest offshore wind capacity in the world. In planning for offshore wind development in the Belgian North Sea, two very different stakeholders have worked together in a unique combination of public participation, nature-friendly project design, and biodiversity protection: the Belgian Offshore Platform (BOP), an association of investors and wind farm owners, and 4Sea, a coalition of environmental organisations including Bond Beter Leefmilieu, Greenpeace Belgium, Natuurpunt and WWF-Belgium.

The two have developed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), a declaration of intent designed to address both the need to develop offshore wind energy and to protect marine biodiversity in the Natura 2000 network (the largest coordinated network of protected areas in the world).

This inclusive multi-stakeholder dialogue has enabled renewable energy developers and environmental NGOs to plan together and strike a balance between attention to natural ecosystems and renewable energy priorities where space is limited, while maintaining appropriate mitigation measures to reduce impacts on marine biodiversity. New areas for wind energy, as indicated in the Belgian Marine Spatial Plan for 2020-2026, are actually partly located in Natura 2000 areas, thanks to clear and strict conditions that ensure that the impacts of the projects are fully assessed and mitigated through nature-inclusive design solutions

### **Power to the people**

Social opposition to new renewable energy projects is typically recognised as one of the most prominent barriers to the rapid development of renewable energy in Europe. Evidence from many European countries suggests that conflicts between stakeholders and citizens over the implementation of renewable energy can often be resolved through inclusive dialogue and revenue sharing from electricity sales. Several examples show that when local communities are on board, people's participation contributes to faster deployment of renewables.

**Ecopower** is a Belgian cooperative founded more than 30 years ago that unites citizens to invest together in renewable energy through direct participation: all shareholders are co-owners of the production facilities. From its own production, Ecopower supplies around 90 GWh/year of clean electricity, enough to meet its members' consumption needs and drastically reduce their energy bills. It also helps its members to consume less and produce their own energy by installing PV panels.

Although Ecopower does not operate for profit, it creates value for the community by reinvesting its financial surplus in energy efficiency, local public services, less profitable renewable energy projects and job creation. This spirit of solidarity also enables underprivileged, low-income households to benefit from renewable energy, ensuring that renewable energy contributes to the well-being of surrounding communities.

Many citizens and local communities are eager to repeat Ecopower's success, and this is based on a great untapped potential: by 2050, around 45% of renewable energy production could be in the hands of citizens. However, if we are to realise this potential, priority must be given to enabling local communities to build up sufficient self-owned renewable energy production (e.g. by citizens, cooperatives, local authorities, etc.), in particular through Renewable Energy Communities (RECs).

With this in mind, the Irish government launched the Renewable Electricity Support Scheme (RESS) in 2018, which included measures to support local communities who want to develop their own renewable energy projects.

This scheme states the practice of auctions dedicated to 100% community-owned projects, which must remain so for at least 15 years. In addition to this, all projects that succeed in a **RESS** auction are required to establish a dedicated Community Benefit Fund for their local area: this fund ensures that residents can support sustainable initiatives and decide for themselves which worthy local causes to support. Finally, one of the key community provisions as part of RESS is the Community Enabling Framework, which provides administrative and financial support to foster a community energy sector in Ireland that can thrive sustainably over time.

In the face of the urgency to accelerate the deployment of [renewables](#) within the boundaries of environmental and social sustainability, these stories send a clear message: the key to maximising the uptake of renewables is to plan for the early involvement of residents, to promote community ownership, and to ensure good site selection and environmentally-friendly project design.

These initiatives and projects are setting an example for the EU and its member states to emulate and replicate. The impact of such an implementation would be incomparable to any other strategy: the EU would be able to quickly wean itself off **Russian fossil fuels** and fully exploit its domestic [clean energy](#) potential, without threatening and even improving ecosystems and social balances.

Source: Meta EEB