



Report on first workshop and policy lab of the Belgian/Dutch country desk (25-05-2021)

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Horizon 2020 project COME-RES

On 1 September 2020, the research project "COME RES" was launched. With a duration of 30 months, this project aims to support the roll-out of renewable energy communities in nine European countries and thus stimulate and facilitate collective renewable energy production. The results of the project can be consulted via the project website: [COME-RES | Home](#). Interested parties can also register on the website for the COME RES Newsletter and follow the project on Twitter and LinkedIn.

The COME RES project works directly with market players and stakeholders and organises solution-oriented dialogues with stakeholders to jointly create solutions to overcome existing barriers to the growth of renewable energy communities. To facilitate these dialogues, each country has a so-called country desk.

Belgian/Dutch country desk

Also in Flanders (Belgium) and the Netherlands, the partners of the project, VITO, TUEindhoven and REScoop.eu, want to have a regular dialogue with stakeholders through the so-called 'country desk'. Together with local partners, they reflect on the factors that stimulate or inhibit the growth of energy communities.

The participants of the Country Desk meet at least three times during the lifetime of the project and exchange ideas and good practices in order to promote the roll-out of renewable energy communities in Flanders and the Netherlands. The thematic focus in Flanders and the Netherlands is on integrated approaches (e.g. microgrids, virtual power plants). The reports of the country desk meetings in Flanders and the Netherlands are also available on the project website: [COME-RES | Belgium](#) and [COME-RES | The Netherlands](#).

Aim of first thematic workshop and policy lab

The first thematic workshop and policy lab took place on 25 May 2021. During this thematic workshop and policy lab, the interaction between local policies and energy communities was explored together with stakeholders: how can local policies stimulate the start-up and further growth of energy communities, and vice versa, how can energy communities contribute to the realisation of local policy objectives?

The workshop and policy lab were a joint initiative of VITO/Energyville, TUEindhoven and RESCOOP.eu. The plenary session was chaired by Erika Meynaerts (VITO/Energyville), coordinator of the Flemish Country Desk. The panel debate was moderated by Erik Laes (TUEindhoven), coordinator of the Dutch Country Desk. The event was facilitated by Sara Tachelet (RESCOOP.eu) and Kelsey van Maris (VITO/EnergyVille). Rien de Bont and Kellan Anfinson (TUEindhoven) and Stavroula Pappa and Dirk Vansintjan (REScoop.eu) helped to shape the workshop and the policy lab.

The next activity of the Country Desk will take place in November/December 2021 and will aim to present the progress of the COME RES project to stakeholders and to validate some project results.

Agenda

9u00 – 9u10: Welcome & agenda

9u10 – 9u30: LICHT Vlaams-Brabant: Lokaal Initiatief voor Hernieuwbare Transitie
(Hilde Hacour – Province of Vlaams-Brabant)

9u30 – 9u50: Citizen participation and public-private partnership accelerate climate transition in Oost-Brabant
(Leo D’haese – ECoOB)

9u50 – 10u10: Stimulating - operating - connecting
(Martijn Messing - Project Manager Social Innovation Programme, Province of Brabant /Enpuls collaboration)

10u10 – 10u30: Different views on the promotion of energy communities in the Dutch context of multi-level governance
(Rien de Bont – TUEindhoven)

10u30 – 10u50: Panel debate

11u00 – 11u10: Introduction to the policy lab

11u10 – 11u50: Policy lab break-out sessions

11u50 – 12u0: Plenary feedback & next steps

Participant list

A total of 35 stakeholders from 26 different organisations participated in the thematic workshop and policy lab, with representation from local and national governments, intermunicipal organisations, energy cooperatives, transition experts, project developers, grid operators and research institutions:

- Stad Mechelen
- Coöperatie Energiecentrale Sparrenburg
- ECoOB cv
- VVSG
- IOK
- LEC's HvB
- WVI
- Kamp C
- Rabobank Project Finance
- Energie Samen
- REScoop.Vlaanderen
- VITO
- TU Eindhoven
- Enexis
- Enpuls - Provincie Brabant
- Provincie Antwerpen
- Leiedal
- REScoop.eu
- Provincie Vlaams-Brabant/dienst leefmilieu
- Provincie Oost-Vlaanderen
- Provincie Noord-Brabant
- Provincie West-Vlaanderen
- Kabinet Viceminister-president Bart Somers
- Brainport smart district
- Metropoolregio Eindhoven
- Vlaams Energie -en Klimaat Agentschap

Summary of presentations

Erika Meynaerts (VITO/EnergyVille) gave a brief overview of the objectives and activities of the COME RES project.

During the workshop, four speakers were asked to give their vision on the interaction between local policies and energy communities, each from their own context and perspective. Hilde Hacour, policy officer Climate within the Environment Department of the Province of Vlaams-Brabant, explained the project "LICHT Vlaams-Brabant" that brought citizens together around non-private, collective sustainable energy projects through smart participation guidance. She

also presented the Interreg project RHEDCOOP that develops ESCO variants to make homes and public buildings sustainable through citizen cooperatives.

Leo D'haese, director of the renewable energy cooperative ECOoB and the non-profit organisation Minder=meer, illustrated how citizen participation and public-private partnerships accelerated the climate transition in Oost-Brabant and how the government can further support citizen cooperatives.

Martijn Messing, project manager of the Social Innovation Programme of the Province of Brabant/Enpuls, illustrated how local energy communities can contribute to the energy transition (through stimulating, operating and connecting) and also made a number of critical remarks on the future development of local energy communities and the role that authorities play in this.

Rien de Bont, Masters student from TUEindhoven, presented the different views on the stimulation of energy communities in the Dutch context of multi-level governance that are also the subject of his master thesis.

The presentations were followed by a panel debate, moderated by Erik Laes (TUEindhoven). During the presentations, participants could send their questions to the speakers via chat. These questions were compiled and presented to the speakers:

- The transition to a renewable energy system needs to be radically accelerated. Does this also imply that energy communities have to accept a further professionalisation?
- Energy communities must ensure that they continue to defend the interests of the whole community. What alliances should they form with local policies (which rely on mechanisms of representative democracy) to do so?
- Is the way in which energy communities are anchored in national legislation sufficiently transparent? And if not, how can this be remedied?

In the policy lab, the participants were divided into two groups. In each group, four propositions were discussed with the participants in an interactive way (via dot voting in Miro):

- To what extent should local governments (e.g. municipality, province, RES region) facilitate energy communities?
- Assume that as a local government you can only support one energy community. Which criterion is then decisive in making a choice?
- How can local governments ensure that energy communities have the broadest possible support?
- What type of energy community should local authorities (e.g. municipality, province, RES region) stimulate in particular?

The morning session was closed by Erika Meynaerts (VITO/Energyville) with a look ahead to the next activities of the Country Desk. The participants were asked to fill in a Zoom survey to assess their satisfaction with the content and organisation of the first thematic workshop and policy lab.

Summary of panel debate

The transition to a renewable energy system must be radically accelerated. Does this also imply that energy communities will have to accept further professionalisation?

Both professionalisation and voluntarism are important. Certainly when it comes to local embedding, voluntariness is crucial. If the local participants in an energy community are also paid employees, there is a real danger that they will no longer be seen as representatives of the local interest. But professionalisation is also important to manage the complexity of energy projects. Compromises are therefore necessary. For example: local initiatives professionally supported by professional platforms operating on a higher geographical scale (e.g. the RES regions in the Netherlands). Other compromises are also possible: e.g. managers of a cooperative are volunteers, implementers are professionals.

An underlying question remains: who organises the professionalisation? Is that a provincial government, for example, or is it organised by an alliance of the cooperatives themselves? The latter option fits better in the idea of empowering citizens, for example.

The answer to this question may depend on the different roles that a provincial government can play (to stimulate - to operate - to connect). Energy communities have to operate profitable projects themselves, but it can be a role of the government to set up the necessary structures to facilitate the construction of profitable projects - for example, through an environment fund that provides the necessary resources that have to be paid back later in the operational phase. In terms of 'stimuli', volunteers from energy communities are also often used, for example, to staff energy desks. Although, there is a danger of 'volunteer fatigue'. It is certainly not the intention that volunteers should take over unpaid tasks from a local authority, so in 'stimulating', the local authority certainly has an important role to play.

Professionalisation can be further organised through three pillars:

1. Via (European) research (pilot) projects such as RHEDCOOP, Interreg cVPP, ...
2. Self-study by volunteers
3. Through the umbrella organisations: Rescoop.eu, Rescoop Flanders, EnergieSamen, ...

Energy communities must ensure that they continue to defend the interests of the whole community. What alliances do they need to form to this end what kind of local policies (which rely on mechanisms of representative democracy)?

Representation should be seen in a broader sense than just the mechanisms of representative democracy; it should be thought of in terms of broad coalitions between different local stakeholders. In Leuven, for example, a broad coalition of local government, citizens' associations, companies and knowledge institutions worked on a climate plan for the city that was widely supported.

Especially in the case of the local heat plans that have to be drawn up in the Netherlands at district level (in the context of the transition to a gas-free society), it is important to first work on broad participation so that 'everyone is on board'. In the case of renewable energy (electricity) communities, however, it is often the case that such projects cross municipal boundaries (look, for example, at the postcoderoos projects in the Netherlands). Here, too, it would be nice if municipalities could work on local support through broad participation processes, but there is still work to be done.

Is the way in which energy communities are anchored in national legislation sufficiently transparent? And if not, how can this be remedied?

The debate is not transparent, but this may also be due to a lack of insight and knowledge. A good example is the regulation of peer-to-peer supply that is now included in the draft energy law in the Netherlands: peer-to-peer supply is only possible at secondary allocation points, which means that a large party (a recognised energy supplier) still has to be contracted for supply at the primary allocation point, under the guise of protecting the interests of citizens. Whereas the local energy community is often better placed to defend the interests of the citizens. But it takes a lot of insight to read this between the lines of the legislation. A good example is Denmark, where a heat encyclopaedia exists that contains in detail all relevant information for local heat projects (even the price per metre of pipeline of a heat network). This would help energy communities and also municipalities tremendously, for example in the near future when in the Netherlands municipalities have to appoint local heat companies for the construction and operation of heat networks. Transparency and insight lead to a strong negotiating position.

In Flanders, too, there is still a great deal of confusion among local authorities about the regulations on energy communities. So there is certainly a task here for projects such as COME-RES.

Additional question from the audience: how does the panel see the role of energy communities (in Noord-Brabant) now that no large wind or solar projects will be permitted in the next few years due to congestion problems on the grid?

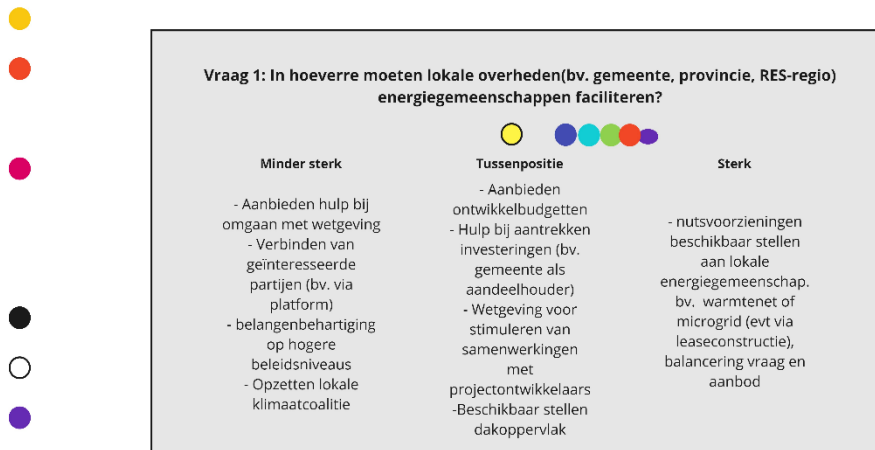
In pilot projects such as Interreg cVPP (in which the Flemish cooperative Energent is involved), work is being done on the development of a technical protocol (a kind of solidarity mechanism) whereby, in the event of congestion on the grid, the production shutdown of all production units connected to that grid will be evenly distributed. Congestion is an opportunity rather than a barrier for local energy communities. If such a local energy community succeeds in connecting, for example, heat and electricity generation, and in matching local supply and demand, it can make a significant contribution to the energy system of the future.

In addition, where it is not possible to connect new production capacity to the grid, energy communities can also devote themselves to numerous other projects such as sustainable mobility, heat networks, sewage treatment, and so on.

Summary of break-out sessions

Group 1 – moderator Rien de Bont (TUEindhoven)

Question 1: To what extent should local authorities facilitate energy communities?



Strong" facilitation is seen as desirable mainly in cases where there is a real danger of monopoly. With heat networks in particular, the end user no longer has the freedom to choose the heat supplier, and thus becomes completely dependent on the operator of the heat network. In this case, a strong case can be made for the government (or a highly regulated party such as a grid operator) acting as the owner and operator of the infrastructure, so that through regulated tariffs and social services (for example for vulnerable households) the public interest can be safeguarded.

The majority of votes went in the direction of an 'in-between position' as most desirable:

- The LICHT project in Leuven was mentioned as a good example of such an "intermediate position". LICHT Leuven is investigating large roofs, for example of schools, companies and government buildings, in order to install solar panels together with citizens and other partners. For each project, a call for tenders is issued with conditions concerning citizen participation.
- It should be noted, however, that small municipalities in particular often lack the capacity to take on an 'intermediate position'. Depending on the specific local circumstances, for many municipalities 'limited' facilitation is already quite an effort. Because of capacity problems, local administrations are happy to be supported by other parties, such as intermunicipal companies or (large) cooperatives.

The possibility was also raised to consider the various options, ranging from a 'weak' to a 'strong' facilitation, as different phases within a step-by-step approach rather than as a discrete choice. In the case of municipalities that have yet to take their first steps in the field of energy communities, for example, a start could be made with 'soft' facilitation through the transfer of information (about the possibilities of energy communities, the relevant regulations, etc.), and

then (as the first coalitions and possible projects take concrete shape) move on to the 'intermediate position'.

Question 2: Assume you can only support one community energy project as a local government, which criterion is decisive?

Vraag 2: Stel je kunt als lokale overheid maar aan één van een aantal energiegemeenschappen ondersteuning geven. Welk criterium is dan doorslaggevend bij een keuze?

Het project met de meeste potentie om de uitstoot van CO2 te reduceren	Het project wat met het minste risico het meeste rendement voor individuen realiseert	Het project wat met het minste risico het meeste gemeenschappelijke waarde produceert
Het project wat burgers het meeste grip op hun eigen energievoorziening geeft	Het project wat burgers (van overal in NL/BE) het meeste controle geeft over hun energie-infrastructuur	Het project waarvan de baten het meest toegankelijk zijn voor alle burgers in een gebied



Some arguments:

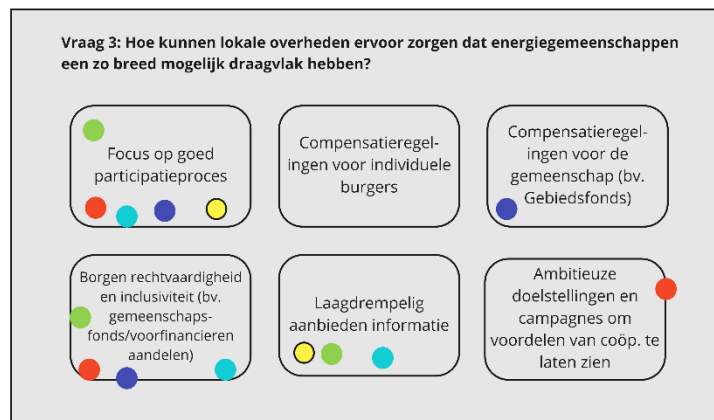
Criterion 3:

- The project that produces the most value for the community with the least risk is also likely to enjoy the greatest support.
- This criterion is also in line with European directives, which stipulate that energy communities must provide social and ecological added value to the local community in addition to economic benefits. However, it is not yet clear how this will be embedded in a legal framework; we will have to wait for the publication of the implementing decrees.
- If a local authority acts as a facilitator for the establishment of energy communities, it is logical that the local authority also expects a local 'return on investment'.

Criterion 6:

- Inclusiveness is an important principle for energy communities (also included in the ICA principles).
- It is important to monitor this criterion as the European Directives in principle allow the establishment of a renewable energy community consisting, for example, only of companies on an industrial site. In such cases, it must be ensured that the benefits of such projects also reach citizens, for example through energy sharing with households in the neighbourhood of the industrial site.

Question 3: How can local authorities ensure that energy communities have the broadest possible support?



Some arguments:

Criterion 1:

- It is important for energy communities to match the wishes and needs of the local community. The question "How can the energy community add value to the local community?" should always be paramount. It is therefore important to pose this question to the local community itself through an inclusive participation process.
- Embedding the energy communities in the local needs is also a good guarantee for making the energy community 'future-proof'.
- However, the comment was made that in project development there is often no time for an extensive participation process (although the proverbial 'starting from scratch' together with the community is of course preferable). There is often a 'rush' to find suitable locations and as a result cooperatives sometimes encounter local resistance, just like the traditional project developers.

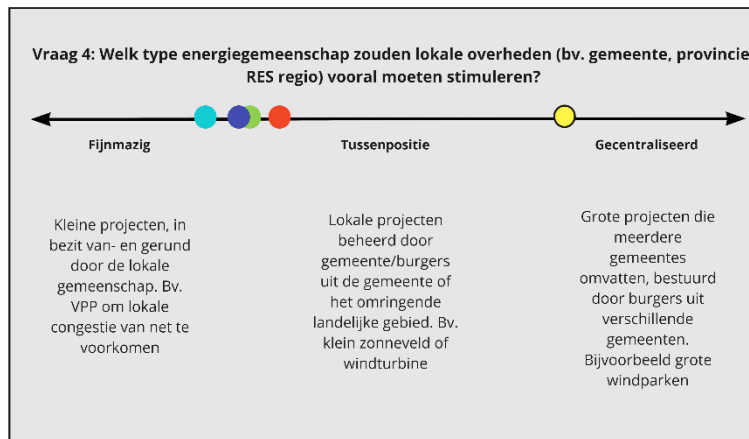
Criterion 4:

- Inclusiveness is an important principle for energy communities. There are also practical ways of achieving this, for example by keeping entry costs low (minimum price for a cooperative share) or pre-financing a cooperative share by municipalities.

Criterion 5:

- Offering easily accessible information is complementary to a good participation process.
- Often, energy communities are not yet well known to local policies or are sometimes even negatively perceived as a 'club' of citizens defending only their own interests. The provision of accessible information can remedy this.

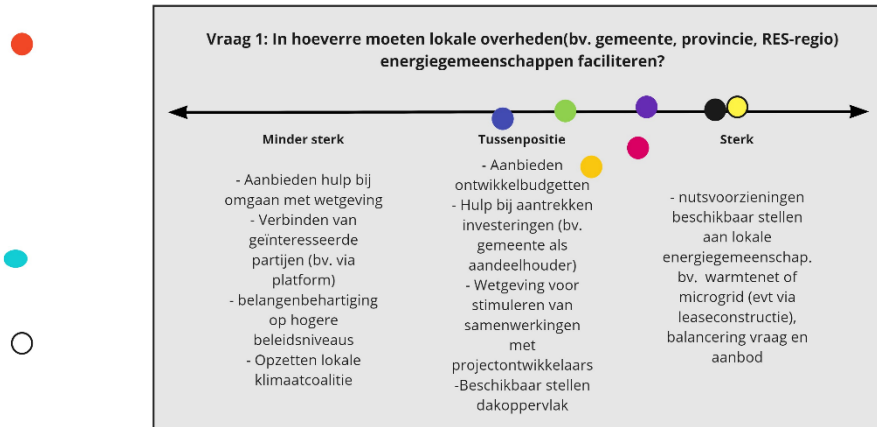
Question 4: What type of energy community should local authorities promote in particular?



- Large projects also provide immediate CO₂ benefits, and can be facilitated by higher governmental levels (e.g. provinces).
- Most participants in this group felt that the top-down philosophy often behind large projects goes against the 'spirit' of an energy community. One participant problematised the participation of large rural cooperatives in such centralised projects as a possible threat to the energy community movement. According to this participant, large energy cooperatives in the Netherlands have become mere investment products: according to a Dutch study, only 2% of the cooperants buy electricity from the cooperative, which shows that 98% of the participants are only interested in the dividend. On the other hand, it was argued that in the Flemish context (at Ecopower, the largest cooperative) 70% of the members have only one share of € 250 and all members together buy 80% of the electricity produced, so the benefit through service provision via the energy bill is a multiple of the dividend. It shows that members do not see their cooperative as an investment but as a way to access renewable energy in the neighbourhood.
- On the other hand, there was also a prevailing view that it is highly inefficient to establish small independent cooperatives everywhere. It was also noted that geographically 'small' projects are often not 'small' at all when looking at project implementation. For example, projects that coordinate electricity and heat supply at the neighbourhood level through demand and supply management are quite complex and certainly fall outside the competence level of a local, citizen-led cooperative.
- Most participants therefore opted for a position in between the 'finely meshed' and the 'in-between': for example, by stimulating cooperation between a '(medium) large' (and more professional) cooperative and a local citizens' initiative. This cooperation can range from supporting the local citizens' initiative to leaving the implementation of the project to medium-sized and large cooperatives.

Group 2 – moderator Erika Meynaerts/Kelsey van Maris (VITO/Energyville)

Question 1: To what extent should local authorities facilitate energy communities?



- The facilitating role of the government should not jeopardise the independence of energy communities. The current monopoly position of the grid managers on the gas and electricity distribution network in Flanders is experienced as a barrier to the further development of energy communities.
- A facilitating role for local authorities is necessary to guarantee equal access to the (renewable) energy market for everyone, both private investors and energy communities. Only if the equal access to the market is not guaranteed (e.g. wind turbines), government intervention is considered necessary.
- More and more municipalities in Flanders are taking the initiative to reserve a part (20-50%) of the environmental energy to citizens' initiatives through municipal council decisions. This facilitation by the government is important so that citizens' cooperatives can grow to a level that they can generate sufficient income to employ people in the cooperative and to professionalise. In Flanders, it is not yet legally enforceable to reserve a part of the environmental energy to citizens' initiatives. In the Netherlands, 50% ownership was included in the Climate Agreement, but this does not necessarily mean that 50% is reserved for citizens' initiatives. The ownership can also be in the hands of a local project developer.

Question 2: Assume you can only support one community energy project as a local government, which criterion is decisive?

Vraag 2: Stel je kunt als lokale overheid maar aan één van een aantal energiegemeenschappen ondersteuning geven. Welk criterium is dan doorslaggevend bij een keuze?

Het project met de meeste potentie om de uitstoot van CO ₂ te reduceren ●	Het project wat met het minste risico het meeste rendement voor individuen realiseert	Het project wat met het minste risico het meeste gemeenschappelijke waarde produceert ● ●
Het project wat burgers het meeste grip op hun eigen energievoorziening geeft ● ● ●	Het project wat burgers (van overal in NL/BE) het meeste controle geeft over hun energie-infrastructuur ● ●	Het project waarvan de baten het meest toegankelijk zijn voor alle burgers in een gebied ● ● ● ● ●



Criterion 6:

- Local ownership is an obvious criterion for an energy community and is in line with the 50% ownership in the Netherlands. The disadvantage of 50% ownership is that you have to buy in, but people with smaller budgets do not always have the means to do so. So not everyone can benefit and this creates a divide in society. In the A16 windmill project, for example, 25% of the revenue goes to the local community. In this way, the whole community benefits, including those who do not have the money to buy in.
- This is the criterion by which energy cooperatives, but also energy communities in the broader sense of the word, distinguish themselves from the rest, namely to provide a benefit to the community as a whole. Is also the criterion that local authorities should include in public procurement tenders.

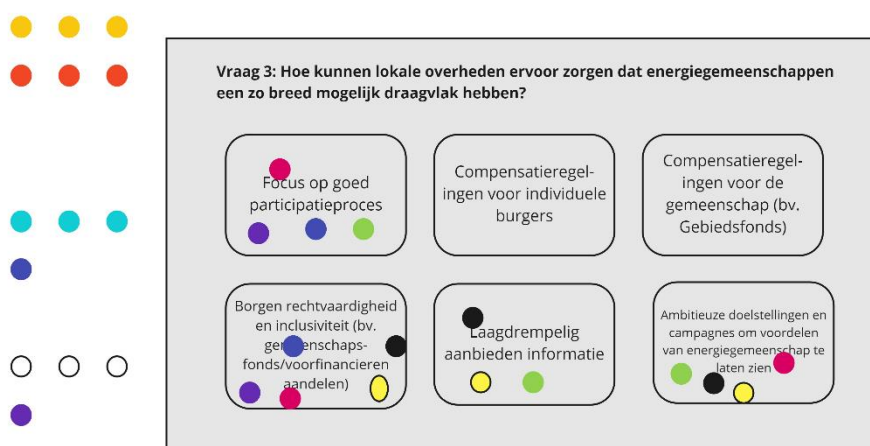
Criterion 4

- If citizens have control over their own energy supply, they also have a say in where the benefits go. In this sense, the reduction of CO₂ (criterion 1) and benefits to society (criterion 6) are rather results. The local government in the Netherlands mainly looks at projects with the most societal value or the lowest societal costs (e.g. infrastructure, maintenance, ...).
- Criterion 6 is the consequence of the fact that citizens have energy projects in their own hands and can therefore decide themselves to whom the added value goes, to whom the benefits go and how they will distribute it, e.g. dividend or projects for the local community.
- Energy communities are working on different projects, on different themes. Government should not discriminate. All energy communities that meet the definition of the European Directive must have equal opportunities.
- It is nicer if you can strengthen society by, for example, realising new projects instead of just paying dividends. These projects can then be a flywheel instead of a one-off profit distribution.
- The benefits of the services that cooperatives receive are many times higher than the dividends paid out. This also distinguishes rescops from fincoops that only pay out dividends (which are also higher than that of a rescop). The rescops ensure that the benefits are

distributed in such a way that everyone who becomes a member benefits from it, and this is not only in the form of dividends.

- Ecopower has 60,000 cooperators, 70% have only one share of 250 euro and 80% buy electricity from Ecopower at cost price. The benefit on the energy bill is many times greater than the annual dividend you get on a share of 250 euro. Currently, the Board of Directors can allow people who do not immediately have the money to buy a share and save the amount for the share with the benefit they get on their electricity bill.
- At the moment, there is also a cooperation between Ecopower, Beauvent and the municipality of Eeklo in the framework of a European project in which it is being investigated whether the municipality can pre-finance the share for people with a small budget. This has a relieving effect on people with a small budget, but also makes it possible for these people to pay off their share with the benefit of the services provided by the energy cooperative. In Flanders, 3% of residential customers cannot pay their energy bills and can not turn to commercial energy suppliers because they have too many debts. Only 2% of residential customers are connected and buy electricity from an energy cooperative. If this 3% were to join an energy cooperative, it would be overwhelming and the energy cooperatives would not be able to bear it. That is why cooperation with the local authorities is being sought.

Question 3: How can local authorities ensure that energy communities have the broadest possible support?



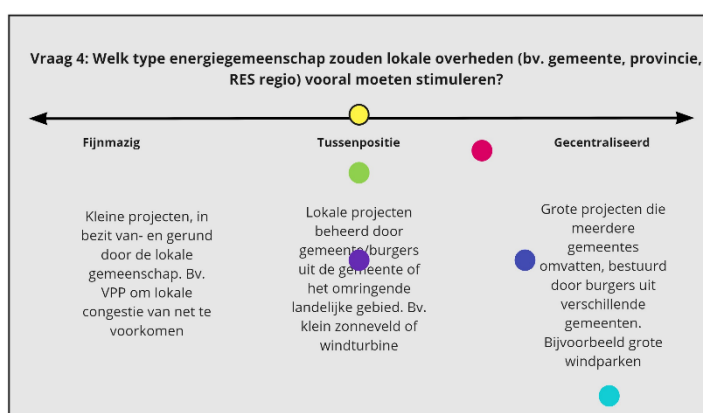
Criteria 5 & 6

- It is important to explain how an energy market works, what the benefits are and what an energy community is (cf. CVPP project). For this, you have to set up campaigns to provide easily accessible information. Municipalities and local governments are formed by the people who live there. And if you want to get people on board, you have to provide easily accessible information in order to have the broadest possible support.
- It is a change of culture that is needed from the people and the municipalities. If people see that something is happening, they will think and act differently. You have to do this at different levels and with different approaches because a municipality and province is very diverse (other cultures, other languages, other ages, etc.). People must be given good examples of how something like this can be set up and what the benefits are. For example:

via website and newsletter. Volunteers who are energy ambassadors in a neighbourhood and speak with the people living in the neighbourhood. You need a toolbox to easily enter into dialogue with local residents. The municipality's environmental newspaper can highlight good examples. This is a win-win situation for both the municipality (e.g. marketing to local residents that they are also involved in energy) and the energy cooperative. Municipalities are somewhat further removed from citizens in comparison to citizens' initiatives and cooperatives, but the scope of their communication is broader. It is good to work together on this: How to make a vision with regard to the marketing of your energy policy? How to approach local residents from the citizens' initiatives? The government does not pay enough attention to how local residents can be approached directly.

- There are some costs involved if you want to change from a citizens' initiative to an organisational structure such as an energy cooperative. For some citizens, this is a threshold and it helps if there is funding to reduce these costs. It helps if a local government supports the establishment of an energy cooperative by, for example, a letter of recommendation.
- In the A16 windmill project, there is a compensation scheme and this helps to compensate local residents in the immediate vicinity, but it is a second best solution. At the base, you want everyone to be able to participate and enjoy the benefits. It's a nice gesture if ownership lies primarily with project developers, but it's not preferred.

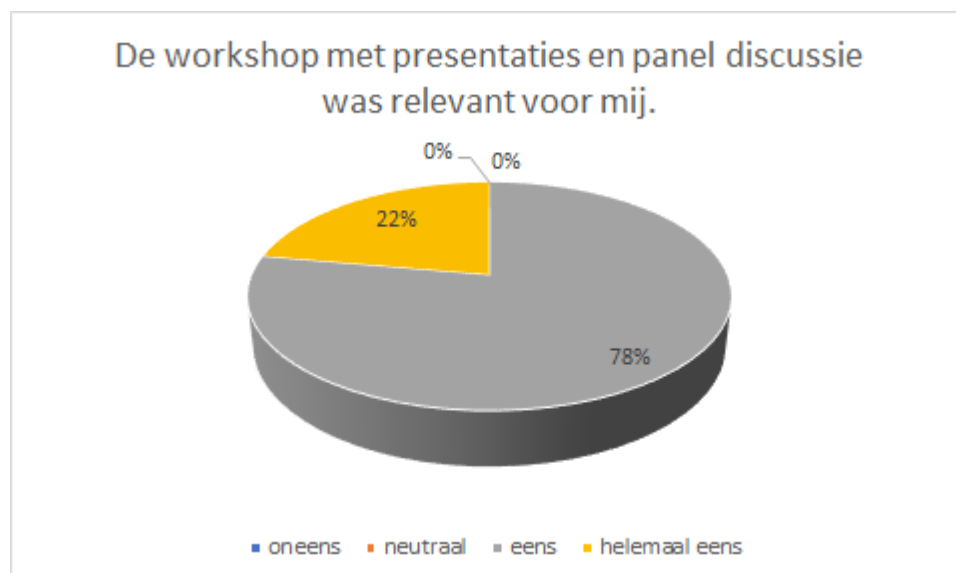
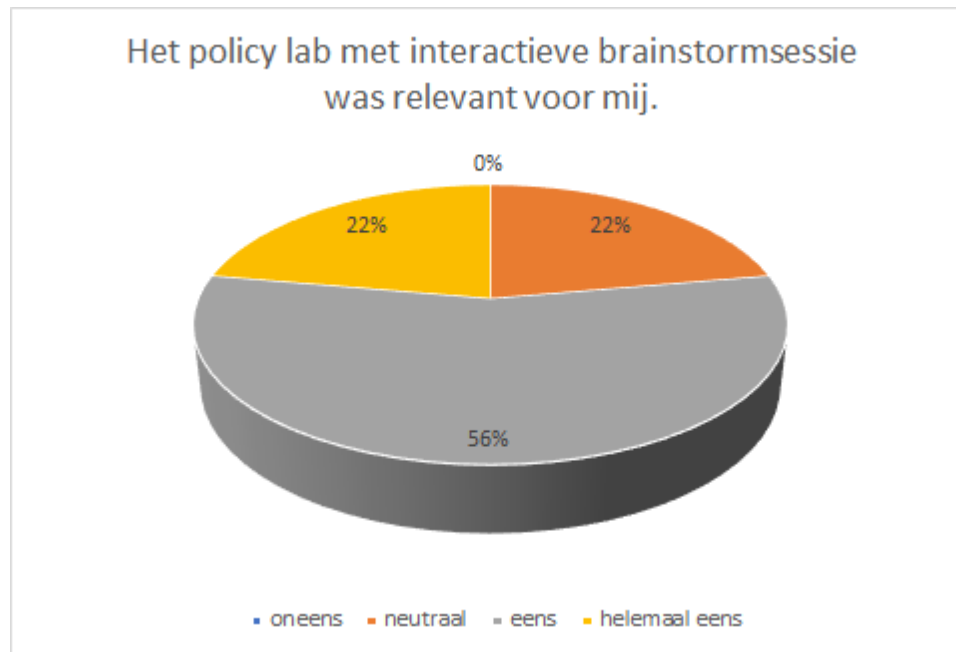
Question 4: What type of energy community should local authorities promote in particular?



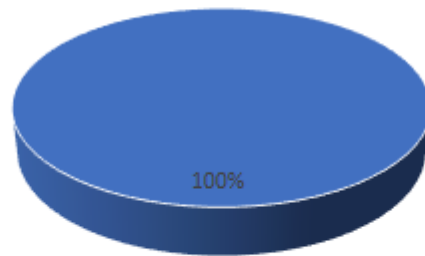
- All three types of energy communities need support from the local authorities. If one has to be chosen, centralised is preferred because it only becomes more complex on the axis from finely meshed to centralised.
- In Flanders, the experience is that, with current regulation, a scale larger than a municipality is needed to set up a viable energy community.
- With the more centralised, large wind farms you are more likely to meet the renewable energy targets, as well as the CO₂ reduction. The question is whether the ownership and self-regulation of the energy supply for local residents is still guaranteed. If you go more decentralised (finely meshed), the impact will be less. Current citizen initiatives result in small energy cooperatives. In order to achieve your objectives, you need to set up something larger. What business or organisational model is possible where centralised and meshed come

together more? We are once again moving from more privatisation to more centralisation. Local authorities are needed for legislation and regulation and energy companies for infrastructure. We need a hybrid form of cooperation between energy communities, municipalities, provinces and energy companies.

Survey results



Bent u van plan om volgende keer opnieuw deel te nemen aan een bijeenkomst van de COME RES country desk?



■ ja ■ nee

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