

Transition in Progress: Towards Circular Communities

POLICY
brief



Europe's future depends on a healthy planet.

The EU is committed to achieving **climate neutrality by 2050**, decoupling economic growth from resource use and shifting to circular production and consumption systems. **The European Green Deal (EGD)** outlines the steps for reaching the 2050 goal, including a 55% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 compared to 1990.

The **H2020-funded PHOENIX** project explores how **Democratic Innovations (DIs)** such as participatory budgeting, citizens' assemblies, council systems, and public policy forums and debates can contribute to the discussion and execution of the green transition.

We believe that achieving a **just transition** toward climate neutrality necessitates amplifying the voices of **European citizens, civil society organizations, and local authorities**. This approach involves identifying, promoting, and cultivating social practices and public policies that, once systematized, will enhance local community resilience and alleviate environmental pressures through democratic participation and social justice to implement EGD policies in the **farm-to-fork system, the circular economy and energy transition**.



DEMOCRATIC INNOVATIONS

Innovative forms of participatory and deliberative practices aimed at increasing and deepening citizen participation in the political decision-making process.

To unify these policy areas of the EGD, PHOENIX adopts the concept of a “**circular community**” as a social framework to ensure circularity and sustainability in energy, resources, and food flows at the local level.

KEY RESULTS

- 1 To achieve a **socially just green transition**, we must reassess economic and production processes and enhance citizen participation in decision-making.
- 2 The **circular economy, energy transition**, and the **farm-to-fork** system are among the key policy areas mentioned by the European Green Deal that can be better unified at a local level.
- 3 To ensure the green transition, the concept of a ‘**circular community**’ should be incorporated into the design of local policies and action strategies.
- 4 Local authorities play a pivotal role in implementing circular communities, thereby enhancing the European Green Deal and **meeting citizens' expectations**.
- 5 This Policy Brief provides some **recommendations for local authorities** to achieve this result.



CIRCULAR COMMUNITY

A local or regional social framework focused on adopting circular and sustainable practices in various aspects of life, including energy, food production, materials, and industrial processes.

Towards Circular Communities

Circular Communities focus on adopting circular and **sustainable practices** in various aspects of life, including energy, food production, materials, and industrial processes. They aim to create systems where resources are used efficiently, products are designed for longevity and recyclability, and waste is minimized through recycling and reuse, contributing to a **more sustainable and environmentally friendly way of living**.

These communities have the potential to **amplify the voices of citizens**, civil society organizations, and local authorities across Europe. Implementing this kind of community involves identifying, promoting, and developing social practices and public policies that, when systematised, would enhance local community resilience and alleviate environmental pressures through **democratic participation** and **social justice**.

On a community level, integrating **energy transition**, **circular economy principles**, and **farm-to-fork strategies** can effectively reduce reliance on non-renewable energy sources, decrease raw material imports, and foster environmentally sustainable food production.



Circular Economy

A circular economy stands in contrast to the traditional linear growth model, which hinges on escalating resource consumption to supposedly boost wealth production.

A circular economy embodies a **virtuous circular pattern** that not only generates wealth but also **reintroduces consumed resources** back into circulation after undergoing transformations.

Transitioning from a linear to a circular economy involves considering three fundamental concepts: efficient **resource utilization** and transformation, the **creation of innovative solutions**, and the **evaluation of adverse social and environmental impacts**, such as resource depletion, throughout the life cycle of products and processes.

To curtail overall resource depletion, at least **ten strategic circular actions** can be implemented:

REFUSE

Make product redundant by abandoning its function or by offering the same function with a radically different product.

RETHINK

Make product use more intensive (e.g., through sharing products or by putting multi-functional products on the market)

REDUCE

Increase efficiency in product manufacture or use by consuming fewer natural resources.

REUSE

Re-use by another consumer of a discarded product which is still in good condition and can be used for its original function.

RECOVER

Incineration of materials with energy recovery.

RECYCLE

Process materials to obtain either the same (high grade) or lower (low grade) quality.

REPURPOSE

Use discarded products or their parts in a new product with a different function.

REMANUFACTURE

Use parts of a discarded product in a new product with the same function.

REFURBISH

Restore an old product and bring it up to date.

REPAIR

Repair and maintenance of defective product so it can be used for its original function.



Energy Transition

Energy transition refers to the process of shifting from traditional fossil fuel-based energy systems to **sustainable and renewable energy sources**. This transformation is driven by technological advancements, the recognition of environmental impacts, and the urgent need to combat climate change. **Policymakers play a pivotal role** in facilitating this transition by providing technical, regulatory, and financial support.

Energy transition offers various benefits, including **decarbonization**, the **creation of jobs** in green and blue economy sectors, enhanced competitiveness, and greater consumer involvement through "**prosumer**" **models**, i.e., models where people are not only consuming a product or a service but also contributing to its production. Energy communities and prosumers are emerging as central actors in achieving zero-emission scenarios.

Monitoring and analysing the experiences of energy communities are essential for effective **energy governance, community participation, and democratic innovation**. Other forms of participation, such as public debates, are integral to the energy transition, as exemplified by recent discussions concerning nuclear reactor construction in France.



Farm to Fork

A key component of the European Green Deal, the Farm to Fork (F2F) Strategy is a comprehensive initiative aimed at **fostering fair, healthy, and environmentally sustainable food systems** while addressing the considerable environmental and social impacts associated with them.

The primary objective of the F2F Strategy is to facilitate a transition towards a food system that is either **environmentally neutral** or, ideally, has a positive impact on sustainability. This encompasses efforts to **mitigate climate change**, reverse biodiversity loss, **ensure food security**, enhance economic competitiveness and maintain food affordability.

Complementing the F2F Strategy is the **Biodiversity Strategy for 2030**, which proposes a set of measures to reduce the use of **pesticides and synthetic fertilizers**, restore high-diversity landscape features, promote increased organic farming, and curb nutrient loss.

The strategy encourages collaboration among all actors in the food value chain, with a strong emphasis on **supporting farmers and fishermen**. Sustainable practices in agriculture and fisheries not only align with biodiversity conservation but also offer opportunities for sustainable development through the promotion of **circular and small-scale bio-economies**.



Conclusions:

THE KEY ROLE OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES

Energy transition, circular economy, and farm-to-fork strategies can be effectively implemented at the community level. Defining diverse **small-scale local communities** that collaborate to reduce reliance on non-renewable energy, unsustainable resource imports, and non-ecological food is essential.

Renewable, **sustainable energy provision** can be combined with **energy-saving** through cost-effective retrofitting projects. Energy communities, encompassing residential, productive, and commercial activities, can be established after **minimizing energy wastage**. These communities can facilitate **second-hand product circulation**, repair initiatives, and waste reduction. Additionally, they can organize circular processes like **enhanced recycling**, composting, **rainwater reuse**, and **solidarity purchasing** from local organic farms.

Local authorities play a pivotal role in translating broader sustainability goals into actionable initiatives at the community level, where real change can be most effectively realized. Their ability to **shape policies, allocate resources, engage with the community**, and oversee local infrastructure development makes them essential in achieving the outlined objectives.



RECOMMENDATIONS

To create sustainable and circular communities, local authorities should consider the following recommendations, while actively **involving citizens in decision-making** through participatory and deliberative practices:



1 Environmental Planning and Urban Integration:

- Implement EU-promoted environmental planning tools that incorporate climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies into urban planning.
- Foster the integration of circular economy principles into urban development and redevelopment projects.



2 Decentralized Energy Production:

- Facilitate the establishment of decentralized energy production plants, focusing on smart localization.
- Promote cooperative efforts with citizens, civil society, and small businesses in renewable energy generation projects, enhancing local energy resilience.



3 Environmental Accountability and Monitoring:

- Monitor and evaluate greenhouse gas (GHG) reduction measures to ensure their effectiveness.
- Promote the use of renewable and sustainable energy sources based on comprehensive life cycle inventories, considering environmental impacts throughout the entire product lifecycle.



4 Circular Economy Promotion:

- Encourage circular activities such as the establishment of second-hand shops, repair centers, and material collection points within the community.
- Invest in urban regeneration initiatives that promote sustainable land use, green spaces, and eco-friendly infrastructure.



5 Waste Management and Recycling:

- Enhance recycling efforts within the urban waste management system.
- Develop and implement comprehensive environmental education initiatives targeting diverse groups within the community, fostering awareness and responsible waste disposal habits.



6 Food Sustainability Initiatives:

- Collaborate closely with local food shops, markets, and supermarkets to reduce food waste.
- Promote sustainable practices in food procurement, considering packaging, origin, and food preparation methods.
- Establish formal certification programs that provide consumers with information about sustainably sourced and produced food products.



7 Citizen Involvement and Participation:

- Create and foster participatory and deliberative practices that actively engage citizens in decision-making processes related to circular community development.
- Establish opportunities for open dialogue, encouraging residents to contribute their insights and ideas for sustainable community initiatives.



BEWARE OF THE GENDER GAP

Climate change impacts men and women **disparately**, while socially constructed gender roles also play distinct roles in exacerbating environmental challenges. An inclusive approach that advocates for greater gender equality in the decision-making processes related to climate change policies not only enhances environmental outcomes but also reduces inequalities.

For a democratic and participatory green transition

FURTHER RESEARCH AND BIBLIOGRAPHY AVAILABLE AT:

→ https://phoenix-horizon.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Circular-Communities_Research.pdf



AUTHORS:

Maurizio Pioletti
Sinara Sandri
Sheila Holz
Sofia Francescutto

CONTACT:

phoenix@ces.uc.pt



phoenix-horizon.eu



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