

TESS (Towards European Societal Sustainability) is a research project exploring the role of community-based initiatives in transitioning to a sustainable and low-carbon Europe. The project brings together natural and social sciences and develops methodologies and tools for monitoring and reporting the social, political, economic, technological and environmental impacts of community-based initiatives. Working with community-based groups, researchers asked how they function and what barriers and challenges they face. From this six 'stories of change' were crafted showing how community groups can include multiple objectives and activities, how they can create impact through working with others and how they can be used as a model to be replicated in other places. This leaflet describes examples from six European regions and links these examples to key findings from the TESS project.



## How the examples were collected

In spring 2015 as part of data collection in the TESS project, semi-structured interviews were conducted with members of 63 community-based initiatives in six regions across Europe. The objective of these interviews was to understand the factors leading to success in community-based initiatives, the challenges facing community groups, and the impacts they felt they were having on wider society. Our findings indicate that success means many things to community-based groups. We found that many community groups have diverse actives (Scotland and Rome), that community groups can create impact through partnerships (Finland and Romania) and can up-scale through replication (Berlin and Spain).

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## Developing enterprise through community-owned renewables in Scotland

Huntly and District Development Trust (HDDT) is working to transform their small rural town into “a resilient, enterprising community capable of dealing with ongoing change”. They do this through projects targeting sustainable and active transport, sport, tourism, culture and environment. Funding for their activities has so far been piecemeal, insecure and time-limited. Like many other Scottish community organisations, HDDT has pursued renewable energy generation as a source of core revenue that could decrease their dependency on external funding bodies.

A first step in this direction was their purchase of a share in an existing local windfarm which provided a small source of revenue. In 2014, new government funding made possible the purchase of a local 25 hectare farm, with a view to building their own wind turbine and solar panels on the site. But there are still many hurdles to overcome: getting planning permission to erect a wind turbine, arranging connection to the electricity grid and securing funding to carry out the work – all whilst maintaining existing projects and keeping local people involved – no easy task. At the end of 2015 HDDT was granted planning permission and a grid connection; the next challenge is to raise the funds needed for construction.

**Key Findings:** *Income from renewable energy can support community initiatives; Community initiatives can effectively manage local assets for the common good.*



## Creating space for community activism in Rome

When urban development threatened green space in a peripheral neighbourhood of Rome in the early 1990s, local residents came together to oppose it. This confrontational act paradoxically laid the groundwork for two decades of positive social and environmental activism and education. The Casale Podere Rosa – a refurbished ancient farmhouse – brings together an organic restaurant, a solidarity purchasing group, an environmental library and urban gardens. Together with the associated meetings, workshops, and events this constellation is one of the most comprehensive environmental initiatives in the region. The thread that runs through two decades of the initiatives’ members’ work is the desire to raise awareness about the value of the local territory and natural resources. They started with educational activities, setting up the first ecological library of the area, which still today offers space and useful materials to hundreds of students every month. They involved local producers in both a solidarity purchasing group and an organic restaurant, and a few years ago they started urban gardening in 100 plots available close to the library. Since workers’ rights are the second focus of the initiative, they have made a point of hiring and providing small salaries to people who regularly work for the initiative. Over time, this ecological culture has permeated the neighbourhood and has latterly inspired the creation of similar initiatives in close proximity.

**Key findings;** *Opposing unwanted change can foster changes that people do want; Allowing people to change the practical reality of their lives can lead to cultural change and innovation; Integrating professional and volunteer work is key to ongoing success.*

## Working together towards an oil-free energy region in Finland

Eno Energy co-operative is a community-based enterprise in eastern Finland established in 1999. The co-operative is owned by local forest owners and aims to produce inexpensive district heat for the local community with locally sourced energy from wood, a part of which comes from its members. The co-operative was founded as a joint effort of different actors with different aims. The municipality wanted to change heat production from oil to wood and advance rural livelihood and the local Forestry Centre had development projects related to advancing forest energy and related development in the region. From this starting point local forest owners stepped up and founded the energy co-operative bringing everything together. The municipality signed the initial investment in the heat plant and district heat distribution network but the co-operative later purchased these facilities and expanded its activities. Currently the co-operative owns three heat plants and the district heat distribution network in the local community. It has active and broad collaboration with actors at local, regional, national and international level, and has commercialized tours of its heat production facilities and field trips on energy wood production. The cooperative is a great example how different local actors with diverse interests and aims can team up and create change towards more sustainable, local energy production, creating a vision for an oil-free region in the future.

**Key Findings:** *Community-based initiatives can work with public authorities to reduce energy usage; Community initiatives can effectively manage local assets for the common good; Integrating professional and volunteer work can contribute to ongoing success.*



## Putting the spotlight on cycling in Romania

Suceava Pedaleaza (Suceava pedals) promotes cycling, and the rights of cyclists, in a region needs where this activity is unpopular due to the poor condition of cycling lanes. To draw attention to the rights of cyclists the initiative petitioned the local authority for better cycling infrastructure. They organize weekly events for cyclists to encourage more people to cycle and develop a sense of community between those who cycle every week. In turn, this furthers the aim of a creating a cycling culture, especially among the younger generations. The initiative also organizes cycling competitions throughout the year, using the sporting aspects to draw attention to cycling, and still with the aim of encouraging wider recognition and visibility of the activity of cycling. Being part of an active community of cyclists offers support to its members and to others who would like to cycle but are unsure where or how to start, or don't want to cycle on their own. In raising the profile and safety of cycling this initiative is providing an alternative to high-carbon, oil-based vehicle transport as a convenient way to get about.

**Key findings;** *Community-based initiatives can lobby political authorities for societal change; represent needs of local people to the local authority; Groups can support people in living active, healthy lifestyles; CBIs can function as important leisure communities.*

## German initiatives using the internet to replicate and reduce food waste

An initiative aiming to reduce food waste has come a long way thanks to their internet platform. The organization picks up food from local supermarkets and bakeries, and accepts donations from private citizens of food that would otherwise have been thrown out. When they first began, much of the management work was done via excel sheets which cost a lot of time and effort. Now an internet platform is making their work much easier and has enabled the initiative to spread to other cities and countries. Around 11,000 members are able to self-organize their daily tasks through an online platform. It not only connects the members with over 2000 partners, but also organizes food pick-ups and lets members know when food is available at local collection points so members can access and use it. The internet platform has allowed them to expand from a local initiative in Berlin, to other cities in Germany, and even to Austria and Switzerland. According to one member the internet makes it possible: “I think in earlier times it wouldn’t have been that easy to coordinate everything on such a large level”.

**Key Findings:** IT can be a powerful enabler for practical action; Developing a scalable model allows growth and replication in new locations.



## Promoting people power in Spanish renewable energy co-operative

The Spanish energy sector is highly centralized and controlled by a few large corporations. Som Energia, a renewable energy consumers’ co-operative is challenging this structure. Initially, it was a local initiative bringing together people who wanted to purchase renewable electricity, but it soon became publicly known and expanded throughout Spain. This growth was facilitated by efficient co-operation between a professional team of around 20 people, who manage the energy production and commercialization. They are supported by local volunteer groups who promote activities and establish relations with local authorities. Debates and strategic decisions are exchanged in the “Plataforma”, an online forum where local groups and individual members interact. This model allows citizens to replicate the cooperative in their own autonomous regions through the creation of new local groups. Today Som Energia is active in 63 locations in Spain and has around 24,000 members and over 32,000 clients.

But as well as fostering technological and social innovation, Som Energia is also changing the way people think. As one member put it: Som Energia show “that there are alternatives, that the alternative can be specific, material and that it can transform the reality of some people, and even the people themselves”. By providing a model of how energy can be distributed differently, Som Energia challenges entrenched systems and encourages a wider culture of innovation that is necessary for a transition to a sustainable future.

**Key findings;** Developing a scalable model allows growth and replication in new locations; Integrating professionals and volunteers is key to initiatives’ survival and character; Allowing people to change the practical reality of their lives can lead to cultural change and innovation.