



RESEARCH  
FOR LOW CARBON  
INITIATIVES

# Success Factors of Community-based Sustainability Initiatives - Results from TESS



## About the TESS project

TESS (Towards European Societal Sustainability) is a European research project exploring the role of community-based initiatives (CBIs) in creating a sustainable, low-carbon Europe. The project is grounded in a diversity of disciplines, analytical approaches and methods. It brings together natural and social scientists, employs qualitative and quantitative methodologies, and develops tools for understanding the environmental, social, political, economic and innovation impacts of CBIs in the field of sustainability.

In this project CBIs are defined as initiatives aiming to serve the environmental and social sustainability needs and interests of (mostly) place-based communities. They may operate for profit or not. The results presented in this brief draw from a survey of 63 such CBIs in Finland, Germany, Italy, Romania, Scotland, and Spain.

These initiatives work in a wide range of sectors: producing and distributing organic food, recuperating food waste, recycling and reusing materials, promoting sustainable transportation, generating and distributing renewable energy and establishing adequate administrative frameworks or infrastructure in their surroundings.

## Defining success for community-based initiatives

The diversity of organizational forms, aspirations and rationalities behind the initiatives surveyed within TESS require the use of a diverse set of assessment criteria. Rather than adopting a standard monolithic vision of success, the following success measures were used, partly drawing upon the CBIs' perceptions:

- **CBIs' contribution to reducing greenhouse gas emissions;**
- **CBIs' capacity to emerge, survive, grow and/or replicate;**
- **CBIs' contribution to environmental and social justice.**

Below, the latter two groups of success measures are presented, whereas the first is discussed in the TESS Policy Brief on climate change mitigation.

These measures of success reflect the various phases of the CBIs' trajectories and should not be considered exhaustive. They rather bring forward certain novel findings and observations which have not been profoundly researched so far.

## What drives the emergence and persistence of CBIs?

The factors favouring the **emergence** of a CBI can be both external and internal. External factors often are a socio-political vacuum, or when existing institutions no longer suit the socio-environmental needs, desires and empowerment of the local community. Internal factors are related to the presence of strong leadership, immanent desire for changing the status quo and the sense of a shared identity and values embodied in the participants of the CBIs.

Desires and aspirations for increased self-sufficiency in an economic and socio-political sense can be found as a building block in the initial stages of most surveyed CBIs along with the factor of a shared history of social organization and community mobilization.

Also strong evidence for new initiatives emerging was found when existing groups become too large to manage an increasing demand for their service and hence replicate elsewhere: About 49% of the initiatives surveyed emerged by replicating blueprints of existing groups.

A similar set of factors influences the **persistence** of CBIs beyond their emergence. In this regard, the

type of organizational structure that CBIs adopt has an impact on their future trajectories and evolution. Yet, the relation between organizational structures and success is ambiguous: For example, excessive reliance on volunteers can be both a strength (coping with a limited budget) and a risk (when members suddenly drop out).



Figure 1: Factors influencing the emergence, persistence and survival of CBIs

Moreover, if an initiative is partly volunteer-, partly professionals-based, conflicts can arise because decision-making patterns get more complex. Focusing on income generation is essential to surviving. Yet, by prioritising economic sustainability CBLs tend to become less responsive to the needs of the local community.

Economic success could thus counteract other goals. Evidence on how far state and donor funding contributes to success is also mixed. On the one side, overreliance on grants makes initiatives highly dependent and thus less resilient to changes or shocks. On the other hand, if success is tied to securing an asset, such as a wind turbine, ensuring governmental support in terms of financing and regulation is often fundamental.

Also, establishing strong governmental and institutional relations is ambiguous: In some cases, a targeted relationship plays a crucial role for CBLs' survival, while rigid long-term contractual obligations to official institutions may hinder their dynamic evolution.

Figure 1 summarizes the factors influencing the emergence, persistence and survival of CBLs.

## How do CBLs grow, replicate and innovate?

Once CBLs reach a mature phase of their development, the discussion on whether to stay small or to scale up their activities in order to increase their impact often appears on their agenda. Thus, the group can act as a model for other initiatives, opinion groups, and public actors and can innovate and create knowledge spill-overs in different manners: One is to **grow in size**, activities, members, employees, and funds.

Growth often implies structural and value changes, renovation of their membership base, as well as of the leaders. The decision to grow is also heavily intertwined with CBLs' income generation capacity and often with the desired political or institutional collaborations. While growth enables professionalisation, hiring (more) staff and the provision of more goods and services, it may corrupt CBLs' original vision of sustainability and make critical voices leave. Alternatively, some CBLs prefer to avoid expansion beyond a certain threshold, but expand their reach by inciting replications in other places and contexts.

This so-called "right-sizing" strategy, or keeping a small size that allows for horizontality and participation, is common among food cooperatives and non-profit initiatives working with volunteers. It is however less common when working in the field of renewable energy, where economies of scale help to lower the otherwise high costs.

With respect to **innovation**, many CBLs remain sceptical about the capacity of technological innovation to spark a sustainability transition on its own. Innovation in the CBLs is rather manifested in the form of diverse socio-economic organizational forms (exchanging goods and services with little or without monetary intermediation) or in terms of cooperative ownership. Renewing leadership and opening decision-making often appear to drive innovation and inclusivity of the CBLs, since a strong dependency on single individuals may restrict internal dynamics.

## How do CBLs contribute to environmental justice?

CBLs located in multicultural neighborhoods, which are able to create new work placements in a variety of contexts, and most importantly willing to contribute to the struggles of marginalized groups have higher chances of enhancing social and environmental justice. Serving a wide range of social or ethnic groups makes their contribution to a sustainability transition more widely applicable. Yet when resources are restricted, institutional and logistical support is lacking or discourses remain within established cultural barriers, the "less-privileged" individuals' access to CBLs is hindered. In addition, the use of technical language and the implicit requirement for high levels of participation may preclude the diversity of participants. →

Thus, even when CBIs emphasise environmental justice as a goal, they often do not account sufficiently for potential socio-economic and cultural inequalities that prevent certain more marginalized groups from accessing or participating in their activities and services. While initiatives in the domains of food and transport find it easier to reach out marginalised populations, those working in the energy sector tend to be less inclusive towards marginalised social groups.

## Policy Implications

Findings have shown the large diversity of CBIs across the assessed dimensions. Even when another group adopts a particular strategy or practice, the replication is never an exact copy of the original organisation, but always contains a new feature. Many of the CBIs have a common fear of being co-opted, or being taken over by the corporate sector or higher-level governance, and feel sceptical about the capacity of top-down policies to spark a real transition to a sustainable society on their own.

Based on the collected data and analysis it can be argued that community-based sustainability initiatives have the capacity to support the transition to the low-carbon future of Europe, even though their impact has still not been fully quantified in all aspects. Nevertheless, CBIs are unlikely to achieve this without favourable institutional frameworks and policy environments. Long-term and predictable policies that facilitate their work are helpful, e.g. supporting access to assets such as land and space. Affordable space – for offices, for food growing or for energy generation – is crucial for many initiatives. Even more important though, is enhancing the understanding of the newly emerging forms of socio-economic organization, their diverse logics and multiple strategies towards achieving a low-carbon Europe among policy-makers and public institutions. This also implies an increased need for openness towards non-quantifiable results and impacts, as well as multiple, non-monolithic ways of perceiving the contributions and success of community-based initiatives.



### Where do you find more information?

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