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Crash course | Community engagement in practice



During the process of exploring the cVPP possibilities, questions regarding community engagement will rise. This crash course offers support to participants in developing an approach to engage the broader community.

This crash course gives background information on community engagement.

The crash course is not a tool for developing a community engagement strategy.

Community engagement

Community engagement refers to an equitable co-creative process that enhances mutual relations, trust and wellbeing for the community. A community-based VPP aims to create (environmental, social and economical) value for and by the community, which can only be achieved if the community is involved.

A distinction can be made between:

- a community of place (e.g. neighborhood, village, region)
- a community of interest (e.g. shared interests in energy or sustainability).

Community engagement

Because of the large diversity of (energy) communities and the context they operate in, there is no one-size-fits all engagement approach. Rather, this crash course provides:

- Generic suggestions for a community engagement approach based on best practice cVPP examples.
- A framework based on environmental justice literature which contains questions that are helpful to consider when developing a community engagement approach.



General suggestions based on best practice cVPP examples

The high complexity of a cVPP makes it challenging to engage a broad range of community members. One way to go about this is to take the time to work towards a cVPP together with the community. Ideas for this can be developed during the **backcasting process**, for instance when developing the **timeline** and **story n°2**.

Several suggestions on how to deal with complexity:

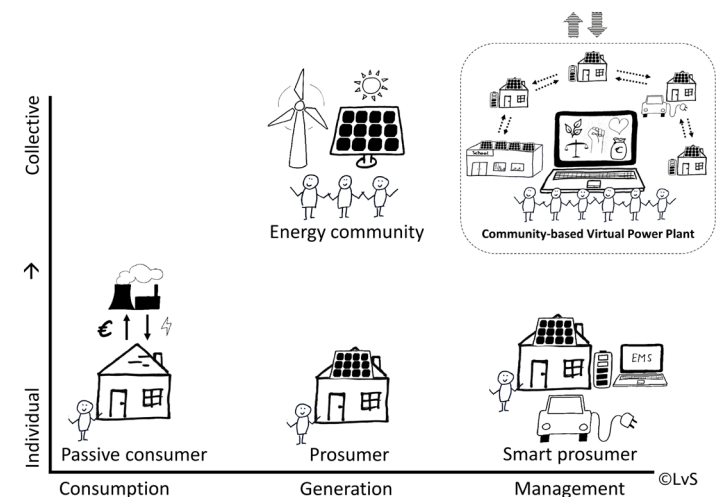
TIMING - allow community members the time to understand

- ❑ Start with installing RE generation and a monitoring system to monitor consumption and generation on both the household and the community level.
- ❑ These can be installed first in homes of 'ambassadors', who invite community members to share their experiences with these systems.
- ❑ These visits combined with energy monitoring systems allow for having conversations with community members about differences between generation and demand and the implications for the energy transition.
- ❑ These conversations form the basis of a collective learning process in which community members learn about challenges of the energy transition and opportunities for cVPP, while the initiators of the cVPP project learn about the needs, goals and motivations of community members.

General suggestions based on best practice cVPP examples

SIMPLIFY - use a good basic story line to explain the challenges of the energy transition and the changing role of citizens/communities

- The energy transition is not only about opportunities to save energy, to generate renewable energy and to use this ourselves. The energy transition increasingly is also about when we use energy, how we store energy, how we exchange energy with others and or feed it back into the grid (see also crash courses **History of the Energy System** and **Energy Flexibility** for backgrounds on why this is the case).
- When you generate your own energy, the question may rise: How can I use as much of this self-generated energy by myself?
- Energy monitoring is a first step towards gaining more insight in one's own patterns and volumes of energy generation and consumption, and provides a start in answering this question.
- When community members have a better idea on energy demand and supply within their community, the (c)VPP concept can be introduced as a potential way to change the way energy is used, produced and shared within the community.



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General suggestions based on best practice cVPP examples

This story line is very general and can be further fleshed out based on peoples' ideas and preferences. The [figure and animation](#) also help to clarify the story line.

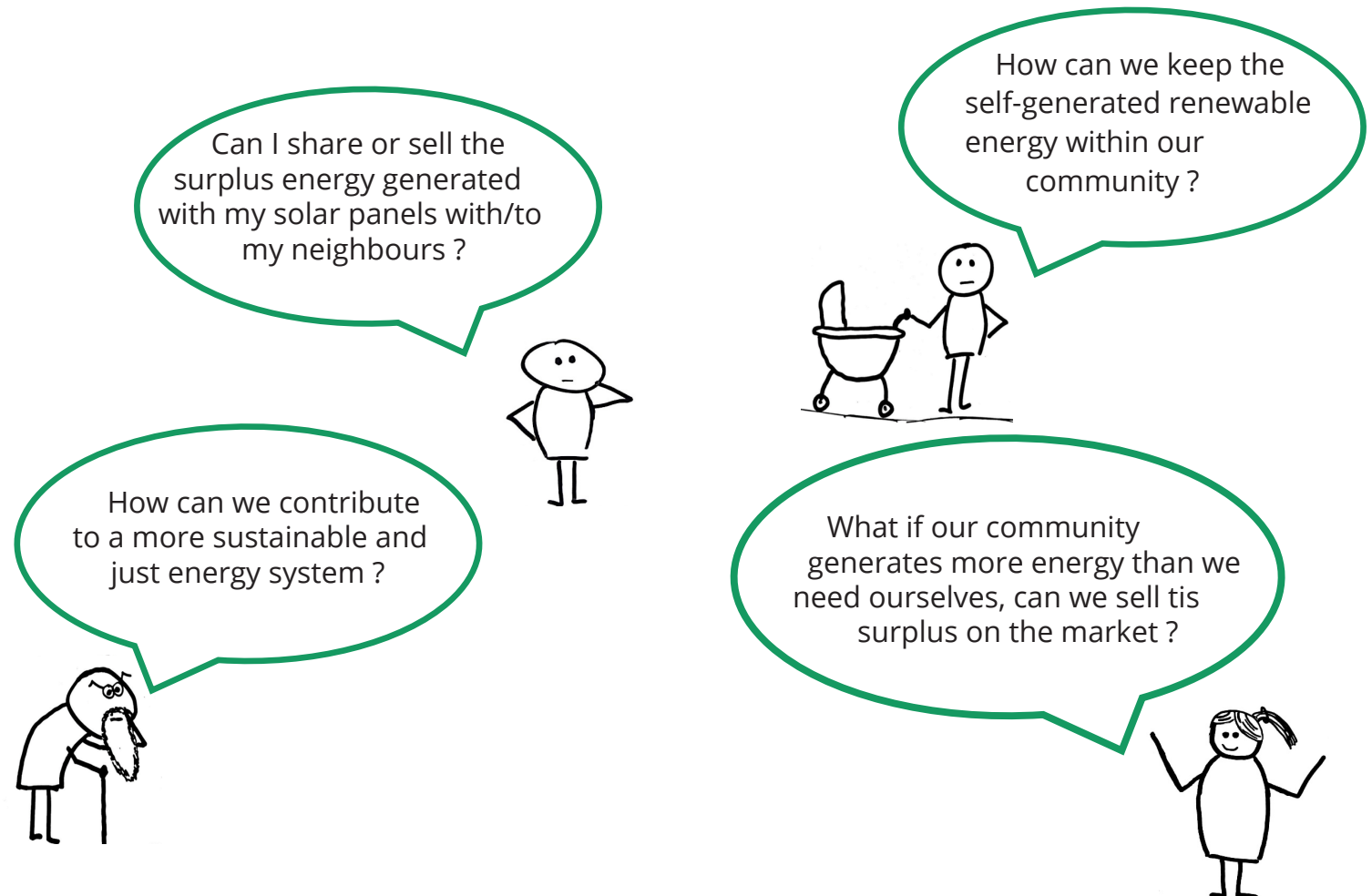
Inviting people from an existing cVPP project to share experiences can contribute to making the cVPP concept more tangible.

In case you develop a story line as part of **the back-casting** (see starter's guide H6), this can also be used as a tool to engage community members (e.g. inviting them to add to/change the story so that it better fits their needs and ambitions).



Why Virtual Power Plant?

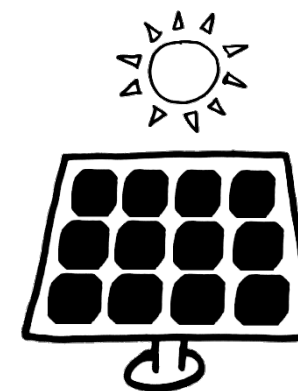
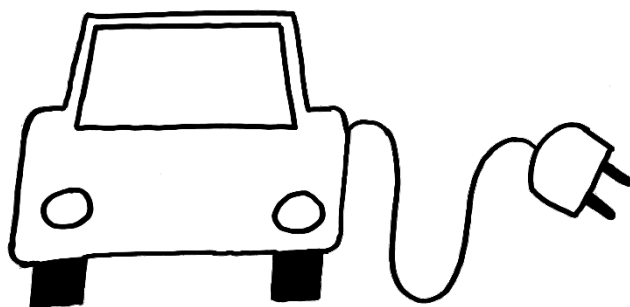
The goal of an engagement approach is not just to inform and make community members aware about the challenges of the energy transition. Rather the aim is to make a story about cVPP that relates to their own questions, needs, ambitions and envisaged role in the energy transition.



Why Virtual Power Plant?

Developing a cVPP is a long-term process in which choices made at the outset affect future possibilities. For example, to enable a cVPP in the future, today's choices regarding e.g. heat pumps, charging poles for electric vehicles and batteries must take into account that they need to be controllable by a future EMS.

It is important to engage community members at the outset so that they become aware of these issues to enable them to make choices of no-regret.



Environmental justice for community engagement

Community engagement can take several forms and we do not offer an overview of all the methods that you can use. What we do offer is a framework with questions that is helpful to consider and discuss how you want to engage the community. This framework is based on environmental justice literature and has been used (in different variations) in practice.

We first present the 5 dimensions of this framework. Next we explain how they have relevance in view of cVPP-related challenges.

A justice framework as strategic checklist



Recognition: who counts?

- Are all community members recognized? How are they recognized in their diversity of perspectives, needs, ambitions, expectations?



Participation: who gets heard?

- How are community members involved in defining needs, solutions, and priorities in various stages of the process?
- How do they have a say about the way in which co-creation process is organized?



Distribution : who gets what?

- What sort of problems are addressed/are to be solved by the cVPP? Whose problems?
- What vulnerabilities are important to reckon with in this community – how might these be affected as a result of steps towards a cVPP?



Capabilities: who does what?

- What are the capabilities of different community members to contribute to the process (e.g. participate in meetings, help organize, invest, help engage others, act as 'ambassadors')?
- What capabilities and competences are needed to be able to meaningfully participate in the cVPP process? How can community members be supported in acquiring these?



Responsibility: what matters (to whom)?

- Who is interested in taking what responsibilities?
- How are the community members supported in adopting responsibility?
- How much room is there for not actively taking responsibility?

Recognition



Most energy communities start with a small group of enthusiasts who pull the chart. Other community members can vary in their interest to participate and this interest can also change over time. To properly recognise the diversity of needs, backgrounds, interests and ambitions, the following questions are relevant to ask:

- How well do you know the community members?
- Who are the (energy) community members? What are their needs and interests? How to best find out?
- Are there community members who already have solar panels, electric vehicles, batteries, etc. and who could potentially play a role as ambassadors?
- Are there existing community (energy) initiatives, social networks or organisations that the cVPP project can align with?



Participation/procedural justice



There are multiple levels and ways to engage community members. A cVPP initiative can actively engage community members in each step. Or those who have initiated the project can offer their services to the community, taking into account community values and needs.

Different community members can play different roles in a community energy initiative, and this can of course also change over time. Not everyone is willing or able to invest the same amounts of time, effort and money. When the cVPP community is organised in a cooperative, then the cooperative structure can provide the rules of the process.

The [Internationale Coöperative Alliance \(ICA\)](#) has developed principles which put fairness, equality and social justice at the heart of a cooperative:

1. Voluntary and Open Membership
2. Democratic Control by its Members
3. Economic Participation by its Members
4. Autonomy and Independence
5. Education, Training, and Information for its Members
6. Cooperation among Cooperatives
7. Concern for the Community

Participatie en wettelijke procedures



An inclusive and appealing process, whereby it is clear for community members how they can participate (in the design, planning and implementation) is crucial for any community initiative. Organising such a process takes time and effort.

Municipalities or other (public) organisations may provide support in cases – e.g. financial support, professional/coaching support with tools on how to engage community members.

Examples of such organisations are:

- ❑ Europe: [REScoop.eu](https://rescoop.eu)
- ❑ The Netherlands: [EnergieSamen](#), [HIER](#), [Buurkracht](#)
- ❑ Belgium: [REScoop Vlaanderen](#), [KampC](#)
- ❑ Ireland: [SEAI](#), [Friends of the Earth](#)

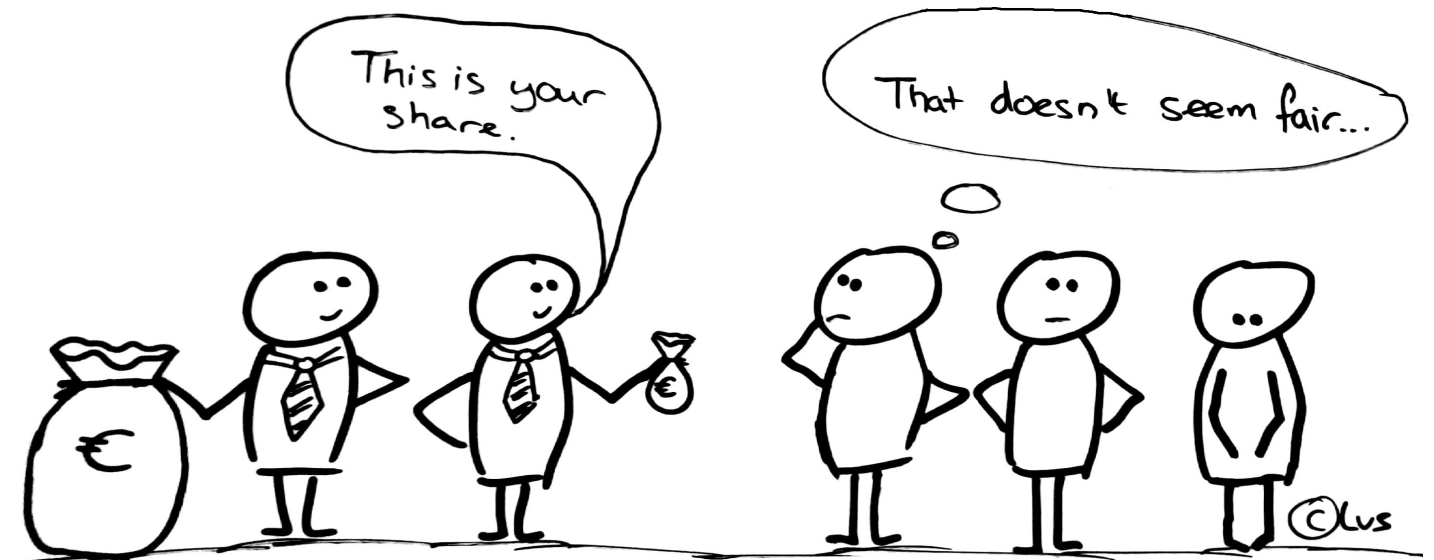


Rechtvaardige verdeling



The basic idea of a cVPP is **that it enables the creation of value for and by the community**. That means that the cVPP should enable activities that community members consider relevant and important. Community members can be invited to share their ideas on this. In order to arrive at an equitable distribution of benefits, costs and risks, it is important that community members without time, money, suitable roofs for PV, etc. are also invited to become part of the cVPP.

- What sort of problems are addressed/are to be solved by the cVPP? Whose problems? Who benefits from the solutions?
- What vulnerabilities are important to reckon with in this community – how might these be affected as a result of steps towards a cVPP?



Capabilities



The challenge is to engage community members in developing a project that is relatively complex – compared to e.g. an energy saving project.

- What are the capabilities of different community members to contribute to the process (e.g. participate in meetings, help organize, invest, help engage others, act as ‘ambassadors’)?
- What capabilities and competences are needed to be able to meaningfully participate in the cVPP process? How can community members be supported in acquiring these?

Earlier suggestions about timing and a clear story line can be helpful



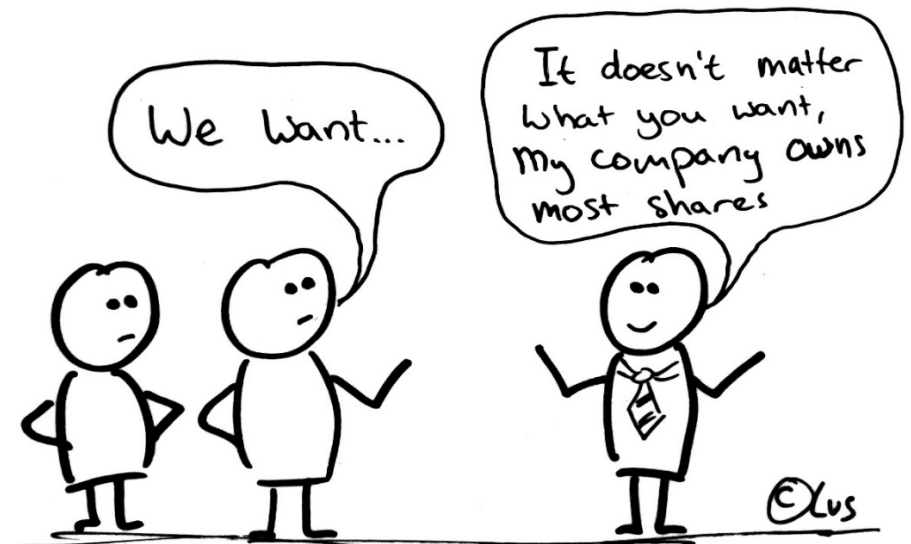
Responsibility



Not everyone wishes for the same level of active engagement and responsibility. You can discuss this with community member as part of the engagement process, so that they can make their own choice with regard to ownership and responsibility. This can be part of a discussion with community member on the role(s) that they would like to adopt.

In many initiatives, a small group takes the lead and others are happy with that. It can also be that members' ideas about how to contribute change over time.

- Who is interested in taking what responsibilities?
- How are the community members supported in adopting responsibility?
- How much room is there for (not) actively taking responsibility?



Environmental justice for community engagement



Recognition: who counts?

Participation: who gets heard?

Distribution : who gets what?

Capabilities: who does what?

Responsibility: what matters (to whom)?

