**Chapter 45**

Networking Renewable Energy Cooperatives – the experience of the European Federation REScoop.eu

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# Introduction

The past few years, renewable energy source cooperatives (REScoops) have gained important attention from different audiences such as citizens, public authorities, civil society actors, utility companies, journalists and the academic world. This growing attention can be situated within a broader societal trend regarding the active involvement of citizens and communities in the exploitation of “common goods”, rather than passive consultation or advocacy. This is especially true for activities that relate to the overall transition towards a more sustainable society, because of the increasing importance of citizen engagement in the energy sector (prosumership; see e.g. Hellmann, in this volume) and the further expansion of renewables.

REScoops emerge when community groups formally organize through cooperatives or similar types of economic organizations that are not-for-profit, democratically governed, and managing the production, distribution and/or supply of renewable energy. What differentiates REScoops from community groups is the entrepreneurial and economic dimension that involves raising capital, creating and managing an enterprise (typically a cooperative), and competing in the market. The increasing focus on REScoops as a specific business model to drive stakeholder involvement in the production, distribution or supply of renewable energy cannot merely be attributed to the particular efforts of individual members and supporters. It is especially their networking efforts on the European level that have taken the REScoop movement to the point where it is today. In only a few years’ time and thanks to the support of a European project, individual REScoops from various countries have built upon a European federation – officially referred to as REScoop.eu – that has developed numerous actions to support REScoops and increase the overall recognition of the movement towards European policy makers. In doing so, the European federation has become the representative body for all the renewable energy cooperatives and community power initiatives across Europe. The federation has successfully put REScoops and other related community power initiatives on the radar of European policy makers. In parallel, individual REScoops took benefit from the international exchange of best practices and mutual support, while starting REScoops got support from an elaborated mentoring system and a toolbox to foster the engagement of citizens and local actors in renewable energy projects.

This chapter aims to put in the spotlight the role of the REScoop.eu federation in supporting the development of community-based energy initiatives and their recognition by different audiences. In the first part, we recall the emergence of REScoops and their networking process at the European level. Then, we outline a number of roles taken by the network both internally (towards the members) and externally (towards the broader renewable energy field). Finally, we conclude by discussing the achievements and challenges of REScoop.eu and the broader development and promotion of community-based renewable energy at the international level. Through this type of “storytelling”, we give insights into a European Union (EU)-funded action-oriented research project.

# Emergence and development of REScoop.eu

It is hard to trace back the exact origins of renewable energy cooperatives (REScoops). On the one hand, a number of pioneer initiatives were created during the 1980s and 1990s and emerged from the anti-nuclear movement. These REScoops tried to produce, distribute and/or supply energy from renewable sources to showcase a viable alternative. These pioneer initiatives include examples as Elektrizitätswerke Schönau (EWS) in Germany (established 1986), Ecopower in Belgium (1991), Baywind in the UK (1996), and Middelgrunden in Denmark (1997). Some REScoops on the other hand emerged from older energy cooperatives that switched to or increased their proportion of renewables over time. These so called “historic REScoops” go back to the 1900s and can mainly be found in remote and rural areas like South Tyrol (Magnani & Osti, 2016; for Germany see e.g. Holstenkamp, in this volume). Back in time grid operators refused investments in these areas because the projects were not profitable enough. In order to get electrified, local citizens got together and took matter into their own hands: they created a cooperative. The presence of mountains made them invest in hydro power installations. Today REScoops generate electricity or heat from renewable sources, typically solar panels, hydro power installations and wind turbines.

REScoops are unequally scattered across Europe: from very few initiatives in South and Central Eastern Europe to dozens in Belgium, the UK and the Netherlands and several hundreds in Germany and Denmark (Weismeier-Sammer & Reiner, 2011; see also the community energy part of this volume). The REScoop business model is also emerging outside Europe, like Canada (Lipp, Lapierre-Fortin, & McMurtry, 2012), the US (Bolinger, 2005), and Japan (Maruyama, Nishikido, & Iida, 2007). The power generated by REScoops is typically distributed to local communities or injected into the regional or national grid.

From the very beginning individual REScoops joined forces to support their mutual development. The Belgian initiative Ecopower supported the start-up of various Belgian REScoops either financially (investment or bank guarantees) or by providing them with expertise and know-how. Similar support was observed in Germany, where national REScoop or community energy networks were set up to support the start-up of new initiatives. In the UK, Energy4All was created to set-up local wind coops. In France, Energie Partagée was created as a financial fund to support community energy projects.

Cooperation among REScoops beyond simple bilateral exchanges only began in 2009 when a small international group of REScoop pioneers and stakeholders began to collaborate informally. Several meetings were organized to exchange practices and aims in relation to the European context, often with the collaboration of environmental Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) such as Greenpeace, energy transition networks and the cooperative movement. In April 2009 these pioneers had their first official meeting in the European Parliament in Brussels where they soon learned that an international collaboration could benefit their initiatives. The international meetings became more regular and concrete when some REScoop representatives decided to apply for a European grant in the context of the “Intelligent Energy Europe” call.

After an unsuccessful attempt in 2010, the consortium successfully obtained a 3-year grant for the project “REScoop 20-20-20”. The main idea was to foster social acceptance for renewable energy projects by means of engaging citizens and stakeholders in the projects. The project officially started in April 2012 with a kick-off meeting in the premises of Ecopower in Belgium. The project’s main objectives were (1) to make an inventory of the existing European REScoops, (2) to identify the European best practices, and (3) to develop a toolbox that could support the start-up of new initiatives. It was in the light of REScoop 20-20-20 that the partners decided to set up REScoop.eu as the “European Federation of groups and cooperatives of citizens for renewable energy and energy efficiency”. REScoop.eu was officially set up as a legal entity in August 2013. The project was a great chance for the federation to strengthen its foundations and accelerate its further development. The members developed a charter including the core values, best practices reports, a financial handbook, a business model report, a community engagement guide, etc. In particular, the creation of an interactive website and the penetration of social media (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube) enabled REScoop.eu to reinforce its visibility and attract support from various stakeholders.

REScoop.eu is registered as a Belgian non-profit organization. The aim of the federation is (1) to follow up on policy issues and represent the voice of citizens and energy cooperatives towards European policy makers, (2) to actively support the start-up of new REScoops by providing them with useful tools and by putting them in contact with our network of mentors, and (3) to develop a financial facilitation service for European REScoops. The federation is managed by a board of directors comprising representatives of Ecopower (Belgium), Enercoop (France), De Windvogel (Netherlands), and SOM Energia (Spain). In 2013, REScoop.eu and Cooperatives Europe (the European branch of the International Cooperative Alliance) hired an advocacy officer to represent the interest of the REScoops towards EU policy makers. Today the federation has two official staff members to lead the further development of the federation.

# Internal Roles of REScoop.eu

When examining the goals and activities of REScoop.eu, several roles can be identified at the internal (members) and/or external (stakeholders and field) levels.

A first set of roles relates to internal functions targeted to the member cooperatives: codifying the REScoop model, collecting and sharing statistics and best practices, and providing opportunities for mutual exchange and collaboration among REScoops.

## Codifying the REScoop model

A first internal role, especially in the beginning of the federation's activities, was to identify and share the common basis of REScoops. A first crucial thing was the cooperative model. Although not all community power initiatives are legally registered as cooperatives, the federation decided to acknowledge their common values and practices (translated into the principles of the International Cooperative Alliance) as way to identify them as renewable energy cooperatives. Rather than legal statutes, it is the way they do business that makes them a REScoop. An interesting fact is that some REScoops discovered the principles only after they had joined REScoop.eu, although they had been applying the principles intuitively for many years. REScoop.eu thus provided an ex-post rationalization of the common values and practices which helped the members to build upon a common identity.

REScoop.eu emphasizes the combination of the cooperative model with the challenges of renewable energy and more particularly the involvement of citizens and communities in this field. This echoes a broader movement to re-interpret the cooperative form for the present day by adopting stronger community orientation and multi-stakeholder relationships (Huybrechts & Mertens, 2014; Huybrechts, Mertens, & Rijpens, 2014; Münkner, 2004). The federation also helps new members to align with the language and practices of the field of renewable energy, particularly as used at the European level.

Indeed, before the diffusion of the REScoop term, the RES (renewable energy sources) acronym was not commonly used by practitioners who preferred to speak of, for instance, community wind energy groups.

To illustrate the role of the federation in creating a unifying identity frame, the name of the network has been shortened from the initial – and still official – ‘European Federation of Groups and Cooperatives of Citizens for Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency’ to REScoop.eu. The creation of the acronym has been a powerful symbolic step to create a common identity, linked to the cooperative organizational form. A charter of principles has also been written and signed by the members as a blueprint for the REScoop business model. This document defines the economic, environmental, community, and political challenges that REScoops seek to respond to, the specific features of REScoops, and their main objectives.

## Collecting and sharing statistics and best practices

Secondly, an important role of REScoop.eu is to collect information about REScoops across Europe and beyond. In the context of the REScoop 20-20-20 project, the Federation has gathered information about initiatives that were already involved in the federation, but also about less known initiatives in other countries. To build a database of European REScoops, the federation created the possibility for initiatives to register on the federation's website and to fill out an information form. National federations have helped to provide information and reached out for local small-scale initiatives.

Moreover, to assist the transmission of knowledge among REScoops, the federation also collects and shares information about best practices. Through case studies that explain how members have managed to overcome various challenges, starters can learn from these experiences and use these for their own development. Documents such as a best practice report, a guide for community engagement, or a report on financial strategies have been diffused to provide guidelines building on successes (and failures) of REScoops in different countries and in various stages of development.

## Providing opportunities for mutual exchange and collaboration among REScoops

Following the diffusion of best practices and guidelines, REScoop.eu has also created possibilities for bottom-up bilateral and multilateral exchanges among members. A mentoring system was created to link successful REScoop representatives to starters.

The federation has also set up seminars and workshops where citizens and REScoops could learn about particular processes and practices. The workshops addressed practical issues such as crowdfunding, stakeholder management, project financing, governance, etc. These workshops often started local dynamics and caught the attention of the media.

## Fostering the emergence of new REScoops

A final but crucial internal role of the federation is to support the start-up of new initiatives. In the context of REScoop 20-20-20, 12 pilot projects benefited from ongoing action support. Beyond this specific project, a number of tools and workshops have particularly targeted new initiatives. Local environmental groups often contact REScoop.eu to organize workshops on how to set up new cooperatives.

# External roles of REScoop.eu

Besides providing specific services to current and potential members, the federation also acts as an interface between individual REScoops and the broader environment at the European level, more particularly the field of renewable energy, public authorities, and cooperative and environmental movements.

## Advocating for community power at the EU level

When setting up REScoop.eu, the founding members jointly discussed the role of the federation. They agreed that the federation should at least represent their interest towards European policy makers. Advocacy has thus become an important activity of REScoop.eu. The federation wants an energy transition that leads to energy democracy, an energy system with citizens rather than big utility companies at its core.

A common concern among REScoops is that EU legislation is often adapted to the needs of the big utility companies, making it hard for small players and REScoops to compete on equal grounds. In addition, the European legislation often neglects important issues such as citizen participation, energy democracy, stakeholder engagement, or the right to self-consumption. Even the market dimension is not consistent, as smaller players often face barriers for entry and the big players get a substantial part of the European subsidies. European as well as national governments have been criticized for not recognizing renewables as “common goods” that, in the eyes of REScoops and their supporters, should not be privatized but, instead, benefit the community as a whole. A recent short video produced by the federation has illustrated this point with the example of the island of Sifnos in Greece (see www.REScoop.eu).

This advocacy function has thus been developed collectively by REScoops through the federation, and enabled the network to pool material and intellectual resources to advance the REScoop model far beyond what individual members are capable of doing.

## Building alliances with related movements

In advocating for REScoops at the EU level, REScoop.eu has also built major alliances with stakeholders such as the cooperative and environmental movements. First, the cooperative movement is a powerful ally to support the development of REScoops. Through networks such as Cooperatives Europe, REScoops can find resources and expertise and frame their actions within the tradition of a stable and experienced organizational form. For cooperative networks the establishment of the federation is also an opportunity to showcase the resurgence of interest in cooperatives that extends beyond “traditional” cooperative sectors (e.g. agriculture and banking). By getting involved in renewable energy and more broadly by engaging in environmental issues, cooperatives proof that they act beyond the sole interests of their members and that they aim for a more general interest objective, in this case climate action and community development. The development of REScoops thus showcases the “cooperative renewal” heralded by cooperative supporters (Birchall, 2013) and celebrated for example during the United Nations Year on Cooperatives (2012).

Secondly, the collaboration with environmental NGOs and other related networks has been straightforward from the beginning. The environmental movement has been supportive of REScoops and generally perceives them as promising solutions to several problems (e.g. private appropriation of common goods, unfair competition, low involvement of local communities, etc.). Environmental NGOs such as Greenpeace have also endorsed the specific advantages of REScoops in terms of providing access to green and affordable energy and ensuring transparency. For the environmental movement, REScoops are an opportunity to show that we can set up successful business models in the field of renewable energy. REScoops are an opportunity to go beyond advocacy through concretely supporting businesses specifically geared towards both environmental aims and involving citizens in a democratic and participative way. REScoops were championed as efficient solutions in the context of climate action, and more broadly ecological transition, in events such as the COP21 in Paris in 2015.

Finally, other alliances have been built, for example with stakeholders related to communities and cities (e.g. the “Covenant of Mayors”, Eurocities, Climate Alliance) and to other initiatives of the social economy (e.g. social housing actors).

## Communicating about REScoops to various audiences

A final external role of the federation is to communicate about REScoops to external audiences. The federation’s website, documents, videos, etc. are targeted not only towards existing REScoops and community groups seeking to adopt the model, but also to the media, schools and universities, supporters in civil society, environmental businesses, and the public opinion in general. Besides advocacy to change public policies and corporate behaviour, the federation also aims to increase the visibility and general understanding of the REScoop business model. This is why REScoop.eu has been very active on social media (mainly Facebook and Twitter), in traditional media (press, television e.g. Euronews, radio, etc.) and through numerous seminars and conferences aiming to spread the “REScoop story”.

There has also been a growing attention to REScoops in academia. As a “hybrid” type of organization pursuing economic, environmental, and community aims, REScoops are by nature subject to interdisciplinary scrutiny involving, amongst others, environmental and technical sciences, geography, economics and management, sociology and political science. In particular, REScoop has enabled to build bridges between different researchers interested in new organizational forms involving citizens in the energy and more broadly economic and ecological transition (Huybrechts, Haugh, Rijpens, & Soetens, forthcoming; Huybrechts & Mertens, 2014; Lipp et al., 2012). For example, the EMES research network on social enterprise was involved as academic partner in the REScoop20-20-20 project, EMES brought inputs to map the landscape of REScoop organizational models and to communicate main findings to stakeholders, including the broader research community. In particular, several research interactions emerged between rresearch communities on social enterprise and cooperatives interested in the new fields of activity of these types of organizations, and researchers on renewable energy and community involvement, who have identified REScoops as forerunners of the broader sustainability transition (Seyfang, 2010; Seyfang, Park, & Smith, 2013; Walker, Devine-Wright, Hunter, High, & Evans, 2010).

Beyond individual contacts among researchers and between researchers and practitioners, there has been a more structured dialogue recently, which has translated into a number of seminars and conferences. In the context of the REScoop20-20-20 project, for example, different “Research meets Practice” seminars have been co-organized by EMES and REScoop.eu in different countries, as well as international seminars in Liège (2013) and Lille (2014). This very chapter and book are also evidence of both the growing resonance of REScoops in academic research and teaching, and the interactions between researchers and practitioners in this area.

# Achievements and future challenges

After reviewing the history and roles of REScoop.eu with regard to supporting REScoops, a final question of this chapter is to highlight the achievements of the federation and point out some future challenges.

A first way to evaluate the success of REScoop.eu is of course to examine the evolution of its membership. In only two years’ time the federation managed to attract 25 full members. These are either individual REScoops or national federations. Indeed, in several countries (e.g., Germany, the Netherlands, or Belgium) local REScoops have set up a national federation to represent their voice in REScoop.eu. In other countries, such networking processes are currently taking place (e.g., Denmark, Ireland, and Spain). As a result, many individual REScoops are only indirectly involved in REScoop.eu. Today the European federation represents over 1,250 individual REScoops and over 300,000 citizens in the energy transition. REScoops have invested 2 billion euros in renewable energy projects, have an annual turnover of 750 million euros, and employ over 1,100 employees. The common production capacity ranges up to 1 GW.

A second success measure is the successful set-up of new REScoops and the further development of existing ones. With regard to the former, in the EU project REScoop 20-20-20 the federation formally supported the start-up of 12 new initiatives. The latter is more difficult to quantify, but yet impossible to deny: several members have reported significant improvements in their development, processes, and structure thanks to the mutual support received through REScoop.eu.

Although it is too early to make a final evaluation, we can say that REScoop.eu is successfully entering the world of European advocacy. There is tangible evidence that the REScoop business model is getting known by European policy makers and institutions.

REScoop representatives have been invited to various political debates, seminars, and meetings hosted by the European Parliament and the European Commission. The federation has also actively contributed to public consultations. In 2015, the EU Commissioner for Energy and Climate Action, Miguel Arias Cañete, mentioned the example of Ecopower (Belgium) and the REScoop business model as a great way to shift towards a more sustainable future.

The interest of EU institutions is also reflected by the large amount of European projects where the federation is involved. To promote the REScoop organizational form and support the establishment of new REScoops by community groups, REScoop.eu has received funding for seven new community renewable energy projects starting in 2015, despite the highly competitive nature of the funding calls. These projects are (descriptions from the REScoop.eu website):

* RESCOOP MECISE

REScoop MECISE stands for Renewable Energy Cooperatives Mobilizing European Citizens In Sustainable Energy, and will last 4 years (2015-2019). Thanks to active support, the project partners will develop renewable energy projects and use part of the revenues to initiate energy efficiency investments in private homes and public buildings. This approach aims to enforce the relationship between REScoops and local authorities.

* Community Power

Community Power is an Intelligent Energy Europe project coordinated by Friends of the Earth Europe. The objective is to develop favourable legislation and financing to increase citizen participation in renewable energy projects across Europe.

* CITYINVEST

CITYnvest is a Horizon 2020 project that focuses on supporting and replicating successful innovative financing models for energy efficiency renovations in public buildings. The consortium features models, based on Energy Performance Contracting (EPC), Third Party Financing (TPF), revolving funds, cooperatives and others.

* CITIZENERGY

Citizenergy is an Intelligent Energy Europe project that aims to set up a European crowdfunding platform for renewable energy projects. At least 6 REScoop projects will receive financing through the platform.

* RESCOOP PLUS

The objective of REScoop Plus is to develop energy savings as a new activity for European REScoops. Together with a large number of successful cooperative energy suppliers, we will measure their overall energy savings and identify the European best practices.

* PV FINANCING

PV Financing is a Horizon 2020 project coordinated by German Solar Industry Associations (BSW Solar).  Since many European countries are phasing out feed-in-tariffs and other related support mechanisms, the solar industry is facing hard times. The objective of this project is to help and assist various stakeholders in successfully implementing solar projects based on new business models.

* WISE POWER

WISE Power is an Intelligent Energy Europe project coordinated by the European Wind Energy Association (EWEA). The project aims to accelerate and add certainty to the planning process of wind projects by decreasing the opposition of local citizens and communities.

* NOBEL GRID

Nobel Grid, a Horizon 2020 project that aims to develop, deploy and evaluate advanced tools and ICT services for distribution grid operators, production cooperatives and medium-sized retailers. The objective is to enable active consumers involvement (demand response schemes) and market flexibility or new business models for aggregators and energy service companies.

Finally, REScoop.eu has profiled itself as the main representative body for community energy initiatives at the European level and has been endorsed in this role by environmental NGOs, cooperatives, and industry associations such as the European Wind Energy Association (EWEA). REScoop.eu has also been instrumental in raising media attention as well as increasing interest from researchers.

This does not mean, however, that the “war” has been won. The development and diffusion of REScoops at the international level, indeed, still remain at an infancy stage. Several obstacles endure that constitute important challenges for REScoop.eu and its stakeholders. Much remains to be done to diffuse the REScoop business model to EU policy makers, local authorities, and citizens. Power imbalances are still in favour of large utility corporations and barriers to entry remain important for small-scale players such as REScoops. The REScoop model is even more difficult to develop in Central Eastern Europe, where the cooperative model is still associated with communism. Another challenge is to motivate REScoops to join the networking process even if the concrete benefits are collective and sometimes mostly visible in the long term thanks to persistent advocacy and education efforts. Getting REScoop managers and workers out of their day-to-day challenges to devote some time and efforts to building a movement and diffusing the model is not always an easy task. This is even more so that financial resources are scarce and, hence, human resources as well (two persons, 1.5 full-time equivalents). Investments would be necessary to design and deliver services to the members for which they are willing to pay a membership fee.

Nevertheless, the achievements of REScoops and their advocacy efforts thanks to the European federation have already yielded important results. REScoop.eu and other actors have managed to put community-based energy on the political and economic agenda and several stakeholders have recognized the potential of this model as a foretaste of the broader transition towards a more environmentally-friendly and citizen-based society.

Whilst remaining objective and rigorous, research can play a modest yet important role in this awareness process. For example, documenting the REScoop phenomenon and interpreting data in terms of emergence and diffusion factors, types, management challenges etc. is an important challenge for research. Researchers may also help to understand the impact of REScoops at different levels: impact on their members, on the local community and region, and more broadly through their environmental, economic and social performances. Also, exploring not only success stories but also failures and obstacles may help the practitioners to improve their practices. Overall, researchers and REScoops have much to learn from each other and, together with other supporters and stakeholders, have the potential to stimulate community involvement in renewable energy and more broadly the sustainability transition.

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