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**Output 2.1. - Engagement strategy
to increase interest in energy
communities**

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Introduction

This document presents Output 2.1 of the NRGCOM project: *Engagement Strategy to Increase Interest in Energy Communities* (hereinafter: Strategy). It represents a cornerstone of the project's Specific Objective 2 '*Raising awareness and encouraging society to create or join energy communities*', which is dedicated to testing, evaluating and consolidating methods for raising awareness and motivating citizens, municipalities, SMEs and other stakeholders to engage in renewable energy communities. The Strategy has been prepared as a synthesis of the knowledge, methods and lessons learned across several key activities linked to Specific Objective 2 of the project, including:

- A Motivational Programme (D.2.2.1) developed jointly by the consortium,
- The Awareness raising pilot action targeting the general public (A2.3),
- The Awareness raising pilot action targeting stakeholders via professional trainings (A2.4), and
- Output 2.2 – Synthesis of results of the awareness raising pilot activities.

The Engagement Strategy was developed in line with the NRGCOM work plan, which foresees testing motivational methods across partner regions and consolidating findings into practical guidance for future initiatives. In this sense, Output 2.1 is not only a technical document, but also a strategic roadmap for the future. It is both a reflection of pilot experiences and a forward-looking contribution to the Awareness Raising Toolkit (O.2.3), which will provide transferable methodologies to be replicated throughout the Danube Region and beyond.

The Interreg Danube Region Programme, under which NRGCOM is funded, explicitly calls for projects that strengthen community engagement, enhance renewable energy uptake and foster regional cooperation. In this wider framework, the Engagement Strategy is an instrument of capitalisation: it

transforms empirical evidence from diverse pilot actions into structured knowledge that can inform policy, support decisionmakers and inspire communities across twelve countries. It thereby ensures that the results of the project are not isolated but contribute to systemic change and to the achievement of the Programme's objectives of a greener, low-carbon Danube Region.

Empirical foundations of the Strategy

The activities implemented under the deliverables linked to Specific Objective 2 created a substantial evidence base for understanding how to motivate diverse actors. The Motivational Programme alone engaged participants through awareness-raising events and professional trainings. These activities were accompanied by a wide array of communication tools, including handbooks, educational videos, podcasts, infographics, brochure, television and radio features.

The subsequent pilot actions significantly scaled up these efforts. Between November 2024 and July 2025, more than 40 awareness events were organised across partner countries, complemented by 31 professional trainings and 9 fairs. In total, these activities gathered more than 2,600 participants from more than 380 organizations while 163 social media posts, 7 additional podcasts, 7 videos and 5 brochures extended outreach to tens of thousands of citizens across the Danube Region. Importantly, these activities were not isolated events but part of a coordinated strategy that ensured comparability of results, allowing the consortium to draw robust conclusions about what works best in different contexts.

One of the most significant achievements of this phase was the mobilisation of a network of over 250 Renewable Energy Community ambassadors. These individuals, drawn from a wide variety of backgrounds – including local governments, civil society organisations, academia and private companies – played a critical role in multiplying the effects of the programme. By acting as trusted intermediaries, they ensured that messages about RECs were delivered in authentic and credible ways, building bridges between technical concepts and the everyday realities of citizens.

From this broad range of activities, several success factors were consistently identified. Personal contact and trust-building through local workshops and peer-to-peer exchanges were repeatedly highlighted by participants as decisive. The credibility of REC ambassadors, who acted as multipliers and role models, was another crucial driver of motivation. Tangible examples, such as study visits to existing RECs, provided proof that community energy is not an abstract idea but a working reality. Interactive formats for youth, particularly in schools, created early awareness and instilled a sense of ownership among the younger generation. Finally, ensuring simple and accessible entry points – avoiding overly complex legal or technical requirements at the outset – proved essential for encouraging participation among citizens and small organisations.

Nevertheless, several barriers were also observed. Legal and administrative complexity continues to pose significant obstacles, discouraging many from moving from interest to action. Concerns about upfront costs also limit the willingness of households and SMEs to commit to membership or investment. Moreover, online content, when not accompanied by personal outreach or follow-up, proved insufficient to convert awareness into concrete participation. These findings underscore the importance of blended approaches, where digital tools are integrated with interactive, trust-based formats.

Framework of the Engagement Strategy

Renewable energy communities are increasingly recognised as a vital mechanism for enabling citizens, municipalities, SMEs and other stakeholders to participate directly in the energy transition. By pooling resources and sharing benefits, they can reduce energy costs, enhance energy security, foster social cohesion and accelerate the decarbonisation of local economies. Yet their successful development depends on overcoming motivational, legal and administrative barriers, while at the same time ensuring that clear and accessible entry pathways are available for a wide range of participants.

The conclusions of Specific Objective 1 (SO1) deliverables (D.1.1.1–D.1.5.2 and Output 1.1) confirmed these challenges. They highlighted, in particular, the widespread lack of information and awareness about RECs across the Danube Region. Many potential stakeholders remain unfamiliar with the concept, the advantages it offers or the practical steps required to establish or join a community. On this basis, the project defined Specific Objective 2 (SO2): to raise awareness and motivate diverse groups to engage with RECs. The Engagement Strategy (Output 2.1) has therefore been conceived as a direct response to the SO1 findings, translating analytical evidence into practical guidance designed to inform, inspire and empower target groups to participate in community-led energy initiatives.

In line with this logic, the NRGCOM project has already invested significant efforts in testing approaches to motivation. Through the Motivational Programme and pilot actions, partners have organised awareness-raising events, professional trainings, national conferences, study visits and communication campaigns, while also deploying innovative tools to measure changes in knowledge, attitudes and motivation. These activities involved a wide range of target groups: the general public, municipalities, SMEs, schools and potential REC founders. Output 2.1 capitalises on these experiences, identifying not only what has worked well but also what challenges persist and where further improvement is needed.

The purpose of this document is therefore twofold: first, to summarise the lessons learned from the pilot phase and the evidence provided by motivational indicators and second, to formulate clear recommendations for future motivational methods. In doing so, the Strategy provides partners and stakeholders with a practical guide for increasing interest in RECs across the Danube Region, thereby directly contributing to the achievement of Programme Specific Objective 2.

As highlighted in Output 2.2, the participating countries are at very different stages of REC development. This diversity makes it essential to adopt approaches tailored to national and regional contexts. For this reason, countries have been grouped into three categories:

Group 1 – Emerging contexts: Montenegro, Serbia, Croatia and Moldova

These countries demonstrate strong openness to the REC concept but have limited prior experience in establishing such initiatives. In these contexts, awareness-raising and capacity-building efforts are crucial to close knowledge gaps, reduce scepticism and build confidence among potential stakeholders. The key objectives are therefore to increase education and awareness, and to stimulate the active engagement of municipalities and SMEs. Progress can be assessed through indicators such as the number of awareness events organised, the extent of organisational participation in trainings and follow-up rates recorded from citizens and local stakeholders.

Group 2 – Established tradition: Hungary, Romania, Slovenia and Bulgaria

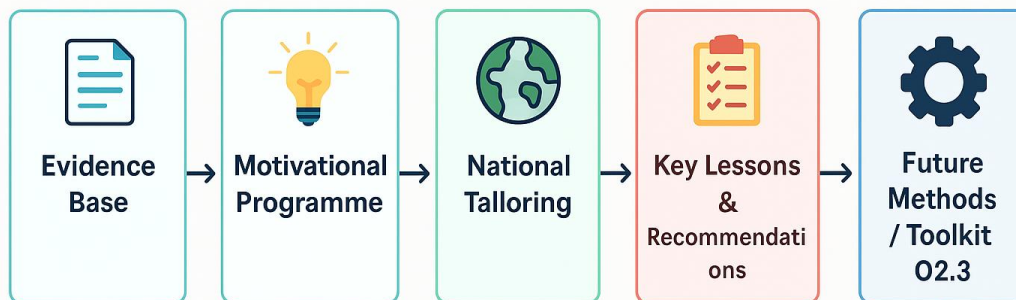
These countries already possess a tradition of community energy and demonstrate relatively high levels of stakeholder motivation. In this context, the priority is to remove persisting barriers, scale up existing initiatives and secure long-term sustainability through stable legal and financial frameworks. Objectives therefore focus on strengthening institutional capacity and embedding durable change. Progress can be tracked through indicators such as the uptake of model statutes and REC starter packs, the establishment of pilot RECs, and levels of stakeholder satisfaction captured through feedback surveys.

Group 3 – Advanced stage: Austria, Germany, Czech Republic and Slovakia

In these countries, renewable energy communities are already widespread and operate within relatively mature frameworks. The main challenge is therefore not establishing new initiatives, but rather refining existing systems, simplifying administrative procedures and ensuring that regulatory environments remain supportive. Objectives in this group focus on consolidating sustainability, enhancing the quality of REC services, and facilitating the transfer of knowledge and good practice to less experienced regions. Progress can be monitored through indicators such as the number of organisations with strengthened capacity, evidence of reduced administrative complexity, and the scope of cross-border exchanges contributing to replication across the Danube Region.

Recognising these differences is fundamental for the effectiveness of the Engagement Strategy. The recommendations presented in this document therefore build on the evidence from the pilot phase while acknowledging that no single motivational pathway can be applied uniformly across the Danube Region. Instead, tailored actions – adapted to the specific circumstances of each group of countries – are required to ensure that Renewable Energy Communities can take root, grow and flourish in all parts of the region.

Framework of the Engagement Strategy



Motivational Programme (D.2.2.1)

To operationalise SO2, the project implemented three interconnected activities. **Activity 2.2** focused on the joint development of the Motivational Programme itself, defining methods and tools to inform and inspire both the general public and institutional stakeholders. **Activity 2.3** launched pilot awareness-raising campaigns targeting citizens, households and communities with limited prior experience of RECs. These campaigns included public events, fairs, social media outreach, videos, podcasts and brochures, and were designed to test motivational methods in practice while measuring changes in knowledge and attitudes. **Activity 2.4** addressed municipalities, SMEs and other professional stakeholders through targeted training programmes. These sessions provided technical, legal and organisational knowledge, built confidence among key actors and involved REC ambassadors as multipliers to ensure credibility and peer-to-peer learning.

The Motivational Programme was structured around two main pillars: raising awareness among the general public of the benefits of renewable energy and

RECs, and providing professional training and knowledge to institutional actors. To implement these objectives, a comprehensive set of tools was deployed, including awareness-raising events, professional trainings, handbooks, educational videos, podcasts, brochures, infographics, social media campaigns, study visits, as well as television and radio features and publications. In this way, the Motivational Programme not only delivered concrete outputs but also tested the effectiveness of different formats in diverse national contexts. It provided the empirical basis for the Engagement Strategy (O2.1), confirmed the value of interactive, trust-based methods and laid the groundwork for the Awareness Raising Toolkit (O2.3), which will consolidate the most effective approaches into a transferable package for broader replication.

Awareness-raising activities and their impact

The Motivational Programme delivered under Specific Objective 2 of the NRGCOM project achieved tangible and verifiable outcomes by deploying a broad and carefully designed set of awareness-raising activities. These actions targeted both the general public and institutional stakeholders, ensuring that the concept of Renewable Energy Communities was promoted in a comprehensive and inclusive manner. Face-to-face activities proved particularly valuable, as they enabled interactive exchange, provided space for immediate clarification of questions, and contributed to building trust between participants and organisers – a precondition for genuine motivational impact.

To further strengthen outreach, the programme produced a wide array of communication materials designed to provide practical guidance and make complex issues understandable for diverse audiences, including younger generations. These products ensured that awareness raising extended beyond event participants and reached wider segments of society.

A particularly effective format was peer-to-peer exchange. Cross-border study visits enabled participants to observe operational RECs first-hand, offering tangible proof of benefits and feasibility. For host organisations, such visits created visibility, recognition and an opportunity to share achievements. For

visiting participants, they provided inspiration, confidence and transferable practical knowledge. Similarly, the testing of a pilot REC initiative functioned as a real-life laboratory where opportunities and challenges could be directly experienced, generating lessons of high relevance for replication in other regions.



National implementation and tailored approaches

The strength of the Motivational Programme lies in its concrete and diversified implementation across all partner countries. Each partner designed and carried out awareness-raising activities that were tailored to national circumstances, target groups and local needs. This diversity of approaches not only increased outreach but also ensured that the results reflect the socio-economic and institutional realities of the Danube Region. The following country examples illustrate how partners implemented pilot awareness-raising campaigns (A2.3) and professional trainings (A2.4). They provide a

concise overview of the activities reported in the respective deliverables, highlighting the different approaches tested across the Danube Region.

- **Montenegro (FORS Montenegro)** placed a strong emphasis on youth, recognising the role of younger generations in shaping long-term energy transition behaviour. Workshops were organised for secondary school students, going beyond theoretical knowledge by incorporating practical exercises on energy efficiency and renewable technologies, fostering early awareness and empowerment. Complementary television and radio features broadened the audience and helped to normalise the concept of RECs in public discourse, while brochures distributed to households ensured that information reached parents and communities at large. This multi-channel approach created intergenerational awareness and encouraged family-level discussions about sustainable energy practices.
- **Croatia (IRENA)** implemented a place-based approach by holding an awareness-raising workshop in Labin's Old Town, symbolically linking energy transition with cultural heritage. In parallel, IRENA engaged directly with local entrepreneurs, such as restaurants and small hotels, through individual meetings. This one-to-one dialogue allowed for tailored communication on the economic and reputational benefits of joining a REC. These activities provided the groundwork for more detailed feasibility studies on establishing a local energy community, thus linking awareness-raising directly with preparatory steps towards implementation.
- **Serbia (REDASP)** convened the national conference "*Synergy for a Renewable Future*" in Kragujevac, which brought together institutional representatives from ministries, municipalities, academia and civil society. This event created a platform for high-level dialogue and policy visibility. To complement the institutional focus, national fairs were organised, while a strong digital campaign amplified visibility nationwide. Through this multi-level engagement, Serbia succeeded in positioning RECs as a relevant policy tool while simultaneously increasing public awareness.

- **Moldova (AEER)** targeted both local authorities and grassroots communities through workshops in Stefan Voda and Sireti. These events presented the European and national REC context, thereby aligning local knowledge with broader policy developments. Importantly, they included practical good practice examples and testimonies from early adopters, ensuring that the sessions were not purely theoretical but directly motivational. By involving citizens, SMEs and municipal representatives in the same forum, Moldova fostered cross-sectoral dialogue that will be vital for the emergence of future RECs.
- **Hungary (STRIA and IMRO)** combined urban and regional outreach by organising events in Pécs, Miskolc and Budapest, complemented by webinars to reach audiences unable to attend in person. The focus was on demonstrating how citizens and municipalities can benefit from joint renewable energy use and energy sharing. STRIA and IMRO also highlighted Hungary's existing experience with energy efficiency initiatives, showing continuity between previous programmes and the new REC framework. This created credibility and helped participants to see RECs as a practical extension of already familiar sustainability measures.
- **Romania (OER)** underscored the value of transnational cooperation by delivering an event in Braşov in collaboration with the DECA project, another EU-funded initiative. This illustrated synergies between Interreg projects and enhanced the credibility of the messages. Two REC ambassadors provided hands-on testimonies of their own experiences, which gave authenticity to the discussions and inspired participants. The event demonstrated how international partnerships and local ambassadors can reinforce each other in spreading the REC concept.
- **Slovenia (KSENA)** organised a national event in Velenje that combined technical presentations with case studies of community models and interactive group discussions. This format allowed participants to learn not only about technologies and policies but also about governance and community dynamics. Importantly, the event showed how RECs can be integrated into regional development and transition strategies,

- particularly in regions facing structural changes in the energy sector, such as those dependent on coal.
- **Bulgaria (PRA)** employed a dual approach, combining an online seminar with a face-to-face event in Pazardzhik. This ensured inclusiveness and accessibility for both urban and rural participants. The involvement of experts from Greenpeace and representatives of the first Bulgarian REC in Gabrovo was crucial in providing both international perspectives and domestic good practice examples. This linking of global expertise with local realities made the sessions highly credible and motivational.
 - **Austria (Forschung Burgenland)** contributed by capitalising on its advanced stage of REC development. At the Climate Dialogue conference in Eisenstadt, Austria shared not only success stories but also challenges and barriers encountered in operating RECs nationwide. By openly discussing both achievements and obstacles, Austria provided valuable lessons for less experienced countries, reinforcing the principle of knowledge transfer and solidarity that underpins transnational cooperation.
 - **Czech Republic (JAIP)** delivered the workshop *“Community Energy: What, Why, and How”* in Borovany, engaging citizens, municipalities and legal experts. This format was particularly effective because it addressed both demand-side interest (from citizens) and supply-side expertise (from legal professionals). The interactive nature of the workshop enabled participants to ask specific questions about legal steps, governance and financing, ensuring that knowledge gaps were addressed in real time.
 - **Slovakia (NEK)** pursued a dual-track approach by combining local workshops with active participation in the SlovakiaTech Forum-Expo. This integration of professional and public-facing formats ensured that awareness was raised at both the grassroots and policy-making levels. NEK’s activities highlighted the importance of embedding RECs into innovation and technology debates, positioning them as part of a broader transformation towards a smart, green economy.

- **Germany (DIT)** linked the REC agenda with broader societal debates on ethics, finance and empowerment. Events such as *“Money Makes Power”* explored the intersection of ethical investment, community ownership and renewable energy, thereby situating RECs within a wider framework of democratic participation. Participation in regional trade fairs further demonstrated to citizens and SMEs the concrete opportunities available, bridging abstract concepts with practical business models.

Added value of national tailoring

A distinctive contribution of the NRGCOM project lies in the way partners adapted motivational methods to their national and regional realities. While the overall framework was jointly defined, implementation reflected cultural contexts, institutional maturity and public attitudes towards energy transition. This tailoring ensured that activities were not only consistent across the consortium but also meaningful within each local environment.

The value of this approach is twofold. First, it created genuine ownership at the national level, as partners could align REC promotion with their own policy priorities and social dynamics. Second, it produced a comparative body of evidence, allowing the consortium to assess how different contexts respond to similar motivational efforts. This comparative insight is particularly valuable for identifying transferable practices and for designing guidance that can be scaled without ignoring local specificities.

Rather than simply replicating activities, partners interpreted the common methodology through their own lens – whether by engaging schools, linking RECs with cultural heritage, mobilising entrepreneurs, or embedding REC debates into wider policy dialogues. This diversity illustrates that while the drivers of engagement are universal – trust, credibility and tangible examples – the pathways must remain flexible.

By documenting these variations, the project provides not only lessons on “what works” but also on “where and why it works”. This nuance strengthens the recommendations of the Engagement Strategy and lays the groundwork for Output 2.3, which will transform national experiences into a practical toolkit for replication across the Danube Region and beyond.

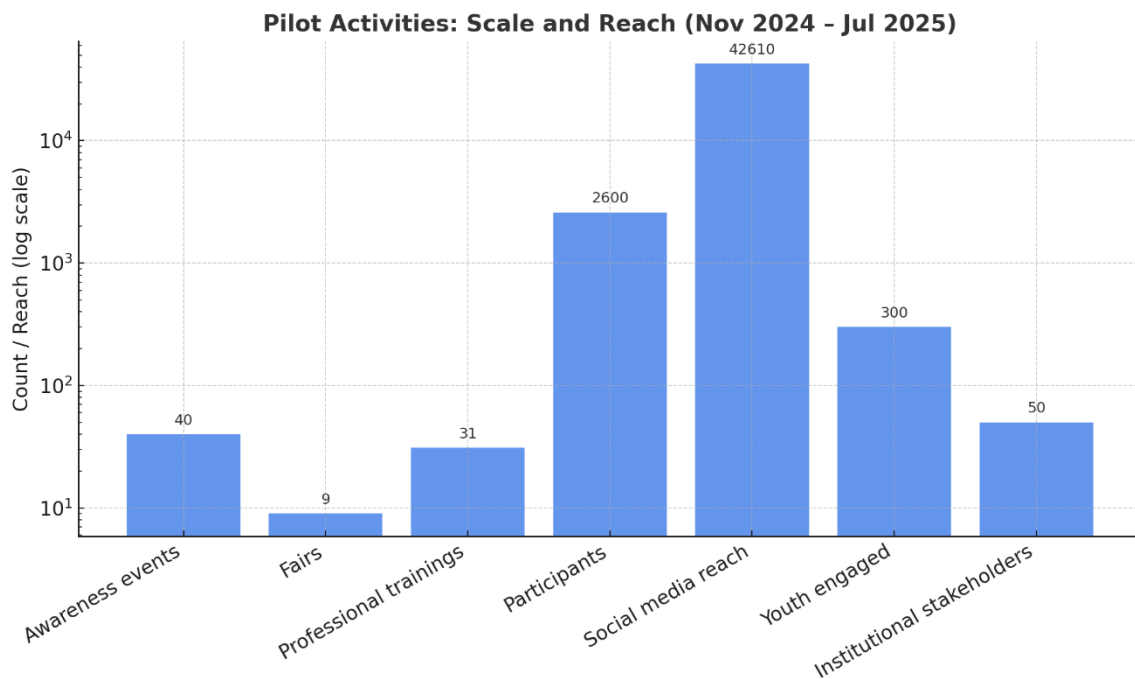
Lessons Learned from the Pilot Phase

The pilot implementation of the Motivational Programme provided a rare opportunity to observe how different engagement formats perform under diverse national conditions. Activities were implemented in twelve countries of the Danube Region, ranging from Member States with advanced REC traditions to contexts where the concept was largely unknown. This breadth generated a rich body of evidence on both effective approaches and persistent barriers.

Several clear success factors emerged. **Face-to-face events**, whether small workshops or larger national conferences, created trust and allowed participants to clarify questions directly. **Peer-to-peer exchanges and study visits** offered tangible examples of functioning RECs, giving stakeholders confidence that the model is feasible and adaptable. The mobilisation of **REC ambassadors** proved to be an essential innovation, adding credibility, authenticity and continuity to communication efforts. Ambassadors acted not only as messengers but also as trusted peers who could interpret technical or legal concepts in accessible terms. **Youth-focused formats**, tested particularly in school environments, demonstrated the value of early education in shaping long-term attitudes and creating intergenerational spillovers.

At the same time, the pilots highlighted structural challenges that consistently weakened motivation. **Legal and administrative complexity** remains a major barrier: unclear procedures, lengthy authorisations and fragmented regulations discouraged stakeholders from moving beyond initial interest. **Financial concerns**, particularly perceptions of high upfront costs, reduced willingness to commit among households and SMEs. **Digital tools**, although useful for visibility, proved insufficient on their own: without personal follow-up, social media campaigns or videos rarely translated into concrete participation. Finally, the expectation that newcomers should establish a REC as their first step was unrealistic in less experienced contexts. Evidence showed that “join-first” opportunities—allowing people to engage with existing communities—were more effective in building confidence and experience before initiating new initiatives.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that motivation is not a matter of information alone. It requires formats that combine credibility, tangible evidence and a supportive environment that lowers procedural and financial barriers.



Motivational Indicators

To ensure that the effectiveness of the Motivational Programme could be measured objectively, a set of motivational indicators was designed under Deliverable D.2.2.1 and tested during pilot actions (D.2.3.1 and D.2.4.1). These indicators combined quantitative and qualitative methods, allowing the consortium to capture not only changes in knowledge but also shifts in attitudes and motivation.

Knowledge gain was assessed through pre- and post-event surveys, which measured participants' understanding of legal, technical and social aspects of Renewable Energy Communities (RECs). The results confirmed that interactive formats consistently produced significant improvements in awareness and comprehension.

Likelihood to join was measured by asking participants about their willingness to support or become members of an REC before and after attending events. Evidence showed that motivation increased most strongly where engagement was based on direct interaction and peer-to-peer learning.

Follow-up rates tracked the extent to which participants requested additional information, registered for further training, or expressed interest in REC membership after the initial event. These follow-ups proved to be a reliable indicator of conversion potential, highlighting which activities were most effective in turning awareness into action.

Additional, more specific pathways were also monitored:

- *Click-to-membership conversion*, showing how many stakeholders who participated in “Ask-an-Expert” sessions subsequently joined or initiated an REC.
- *Ambassador referrals*, recording how many new participants were motivated through personal outreach by REC ambassadors.
- *Satisfaction levels*, collected through structured feedback surveys, which assessed the clarity, relevance and usefulness of activities.

The findings from this monitoring framework confirmed measurable improvements in both knowledge and motivation. Importantly, they also revealed that **interactive, trust-based formats consistently outperformed stand-alone digital tools**. Events led by ambassadors, workshops and study visits generated the highest conversion rates, while generic online materials were effective primarily when combined with follow-up opportunities.

Taken together, these indicators provided solid evidence that supports the lessons of the pilot phase and strengthens the validity of the recommendations set out in this Strategy.

Recommendations for Future Motivational Methods

As demonstrated through the Motivational Programme and pilot actions (D.2.2.1, D.2.3.1, D.2.4.1), several clear directions emerge for the design of future awareness-raising and motivational activities. These recommendations

should not be regarded as a single blueprint, but as guiding principles that can be adapted to the diverse contexts of the Danube Region.

Effective approaches to continue

Interactive formats such as workshops, peer-to-peer exchanges and study visits should remain at the heart of engagement strategies, as they consistently foster trust, credibility and practical learning. The mobilisation of REC ambassadors has also proven indispensable, offering authenticity and acting as a bridge between technical concepts and everyday realities. Targeted trainings for municipalities, SMEs and other institutional actors need to be further expanded, since they build confidence and reduce scepticism among key stakeholders. Equally important is the continued involvement of youth, whose participation generates early awareness and intergenerational spillovers, thereby strengthening the long-term social impact of Renewable Energy Communities.

Challenges to avoid

Future strategies should avoid relying on generic online content without follow-up, as stand-alone digital tools rarely translate into meaningful behavioural change. Such content must always be linked with personal contact and opportunities for action. Similarly, engagement should not begin with overly complex entry points; expecting newcomers to establish new RECs immediately often discourages participation. A stepwise model is more effective, beginning with opportunities to join existing initiatives. Excessive focus on legal and technical details should also be avoided, since it risks alienating potential participants. Instead, communication should emphasise benefits and simplicity. Finally, uniform approaches across countries are ineffective: motivational methods must always be tailored to national and regional realities.

Areas for improvement

Looking ahead, several areas for improvement stand out. Pathways to participation should be simplified by offering “join-first” opportunities that allow stakeholders to build confidence gradually before moving on to create

new communities. Legal and technical support needs to be expanded, for example through advisory services, starter packs and expert guidance adapted to national contexts. Digital outreach should be systematically reinforced by direct interaction and mentoring, creating blended models that combine visibility with depth and trust. Future initiatives should also prioritise youth and vulnerable households, ensuring that motivational activities are both inclusive and sustainable, and that the benefits of RECs are equitably shared across society.

Conclusion

The Engagement Strategy developed under Output 2.1 consolidates the knowledge and evidence generated across Specific Objective 2 of the NRGCOM project and translates it into a practical roadmap for action. It demonstrates that increasing interest in Renewable Energy Communities requires more than raising awareness: it depends on formats that build trust, provide tangible examples, and offer simple, realistic entry points for participation.

The Strategy also underlines that motivation alone is not sufficient. For awareness to become action, stakeholders need an enabling environment: clear procedures, transparent financial information, and supportive frameworks adapted to national circumstances. By embedding these conditions into future initiatives, the momentum created during the pilot phase can be sustained and expanded.

Crucially, Output 2.1 serves as the link between past experience and future replication. It connects the Motivational Programme and pilot activities with the forthcoming Awareness-Raising Toolkit (O2.3), ensuring that the lessons learned are not only preserved but transformed into transferable tools. In this way, the Strategy delivers value beyond the project itself, equipping partners and stakeholders with guidance that can be applied across the Danube Region and adapted by other European regions.

By following the principles set out in this document, Renewable Energy Communities can grow as inclusive, trusted and practical instruments of the green transition, contributing directly to the achievement of Programme Specific Objective 2 and to the wider goal of a low-carbon and resilient Danube Region.

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