

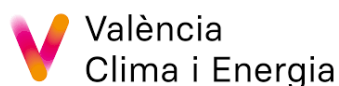


POWERUP

The catalyst for social innovation in the energy market

Communication as a gateway to trust

Digest of the Report on communication
campaigns by POWER UP pilots



Authors: Marine Cornelis, Felipe Barroco and Roberta Ranieri (AESS / UCSA), Arturo Zea (VCE), Victoria Pellicer (VCE), Tereza McLaughlin (SEMMO), Ben Caussyn (City of Eeklo) and Christina Vogt (Ecopower) with support from Miriam Eisermann (Energy Cities)

Date: June 2025

Related to Deliverable: D 5.1

Cover picture: Getty Images under Unsplash+ license

Disclaimer

The sole responsibility for the content of this document lies with the authors. It does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the European Union. Neither CINEA nor the European Commission are responsible for any use that may be made of the information contained therein.



This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under Grant agreement No. 101033940

Table of contents

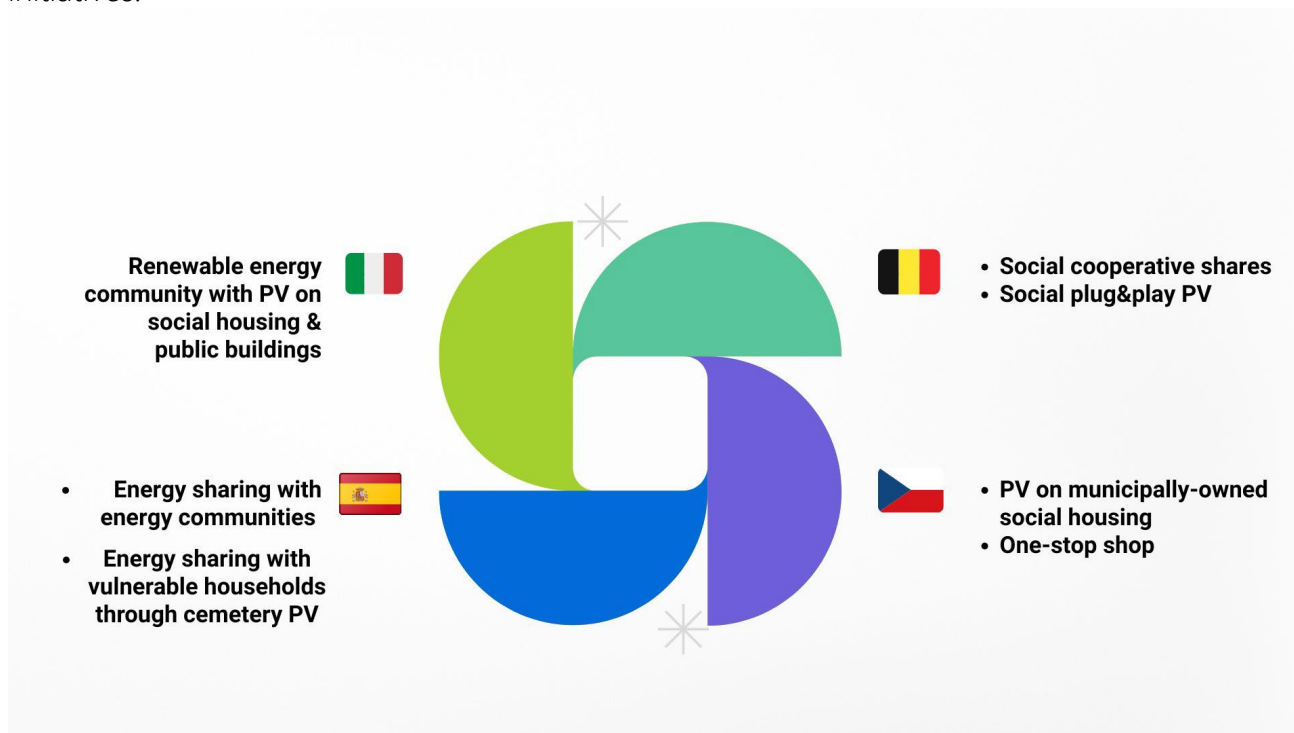
<i>Executive summary</i>	4
1.Approaches and success factors	6
2. 4 pilots, 4 realities	13
3. Conclusion	22

Table of figures

Figure 1 - What works in communicating renewable energy and energy efficiency to vulnerable households? <i>Insights from the POWER UP pilots in Eeklo, Rožnov, UCSA (Campania), and Valencia</i>	10
--	----

Executive summary

This is the short digest of the [exhaustive report D5.1 that analyses and details the communication strategies used in the four POWER UP pilot projects](#), in Eeklo (Belgium), Rožnov pod Radhoštěm (Czech Republic), UCSA (Italy, Campania region), and Valencia (Spain), to engage citizens, particularly vulnerable households, in renewable energy and energy efficiency initiatives.



While each pilot tailored its campaign to local circumstances, several shared principles and lessons emerged. Readers from local and regional authorities or agencies will be able to see various approaches and may use individual elements to compose their own communication strategy around energy services with social impact.

All four pilots confirmed that **direct, personal engagement is the most effective method** to reach and involve vulnerable groups. Approaches such as door-to-door visits or neighbourhood events proved far more successful than relying solely on websites or general media. However, this approach requires a significant investment of staff time and coordination, highlighting the importance of resourcing outreach work properly.

Each city used a **multi-channel communication strategy**, combining print, digital, in-person activities, and support from trusted intermediaries such as social workers and local associations. While posters and leaflets were widely used, their effectiveness varied: they worked well in Rožnov and Valencia but were less impactful in Eeklo. Digital channels were mainly useful for

background information. In addition, Valencia and UCSA successfully used WhatsApp for informal and very personal outreach.

Targeting strategies differed: Eeklo and UCSA directly contacted households known to be at risk of energy poverty, using local databases and social services. Valencia was legally required to work through municipal social services, while Rožnov chose not to target vulnerable groups directly to avoid stigmatisation. Each approach had trade-offs in terms of reach, effectiveness, and ethical considerations.

Across all pilots, **simple and practical messaging**, especially highlighting financial benefits, resonated most. Households responded more readily to clear information about saving money than to abstract messages about sustainability or social participation.

In summary, the POWER UP communication campaigns demonstrate that effective outreach requires a local, flexible, and people-centred approach. Strategic communication planning, adequate staffing, and strong partnerships with local actors are essential to engage vulnerable populations and ensure inclusive participation in the design and implementation of energy services.



01

Approaches and success factors

How does change happen when people feel seen, heard, and supported?

This report describes the communication campaigns developed as part of the POWER UP project in four pilot sites—UCSA/Campania region (Italy), Valencia (Spain), Eeklo (Belgium), and Rožnov pod Radhoštěm (Czechia). It asks a simple question with complex implications: what happens when communication becomes more than messaging? What if it becomes a tool for social transformation?

Throughout the POWER UP project, communication has been much more than raising awareness. It has acted as a gateway to trust, a bridge to participation, and a driver of behavioural change. This was especially crucial for engaging people experiencing energy poverty. These are citizens who are often excluded from decision-making processes yet disproportionately affected by the energy transition. Across all four cities, the campaigns showed that success is not just measured in reach or visibility, but in how effectively people show acceptance towards the new energy offer and feel empowered to take control of their energy choices.

The selection of activities across the pilots was shaped by context, constraints, and creativity.

The formats of the communications reflected the pilots' intent to combine visibility with intimacy: Across the board, posters, print articles, local TV, newsletters, websites, and social media posts were used to raise awareness. But more interactive formats, workshops, co-creation sessions, street outreach, and home visits, proved most impactful. Eeklo designed a door-to-door campaign that reached neighbourhoods with social housing, hosted local "Buurtsoepé" (Warm soup) gatherings which not only offered energy tips but also soup and a sense of belonging. Eeklo also launched a city-wide energy guide in simple language. Valencia certainly was the pilot using the largest panel of communication means: the local team activated people in public space with posters, bus-stop panels (MUPIs), and public transport advertising, while also going more personal by hosting energy breakfasts to engage local media and stakeholders or connecting with vulnerable households via Whatsapp. Their neighbourhood-based one-stop-shops were key places for communication. Victoria Pellicer from VCE summarised their communication approach in this way: *"it is key to diversify messages, to well choose the battles and arguments"* to disseminate with success. In UCSA, flyers were hand-delivered and WhatsApp broadcast lists kept conversations going and allowed for quick, informal follow-ups. Rožnov focused its efforts around the demonstration building residents, the creation of a One-Stop-Shop and seasonal campaigns that linked energy advice to public events like Earth Day. Face-to-face consultations facilitated by the one-stop-shop grounded abstract policies in practical advice.

The strategies evolved as pilots learned what worked, and what did not: Direct, face-to-face contact consistently emerged as the most effective engagement method. Eeklo which collaborated closely with the energy cooperative Ecopower stated plainly: *"The most effective*

way to reach and involve people in the pilot has been a direct in-person approach." In Campania, project partners called personalised outreach to social housing residents *"essential"* especially given a deep-rooted mistrust of institutions and socio-political instability. WhatsApp messages were *"especially effective for delivering informal reminders and invitations."* Valencia used the strong relationships built through the WELLBASED project to integrate energy campaigns into social services and introduce the innovative POWER UP offer. In Rožnov, personal contact with key decision-makers created the legitimacy for outreach (and interest) in the collective social housing consumption scheme. More permanent personal contact between residents and the municipality has become easier since the one-stop-shop has been launched in Spring 2025.

Each city also had to adapt its approach mid-course. In Eeklo, falling energy prices weakened the appeal of cooperative energy, and the campaign had to pivot towards promoting solar panels and budget monitoring tools. Rožnov learned from earlier projects that *"leaflets didn't work"* and focused instead on posters and personalised letters. UCSA faced delays in formalising its energy community but maintained momentum by anchoring communication in trusted local associations.

The target groups were primarily residents affected by energy poverty, but the definitions and access strategies varied: Eeklo targeted people without access to social tariffs or recovering from energy debt. In Valencia, the city relied on social services to identify eligible households due to legal constraints, while its energy community model aimed to include "a quota of vulnerable people" through open calls. UCSA worked in selected social housing areas, involving citizens already familiar with local support services. Rožnov deliberately avoided labelling citizens as "vulnerable," to avoid stigma, instead opting for public campaigns on topics like subsidies for renewables and home renovation.

The success factors all point in the same direction: trust, presence, and adaptability. Communication worked best when it came through familiar faces or settings, local associations in Campania, social workers in Valencia, community ambassadors in Eeklo. Several pilots stressed the value of co-design, where citizens helped shape not only communication materials but the energy offers themselves. *"You have the right to get more affordable energy,"* said one Eeklo message, making rights-based language accessible and actionable. The repeated lesson: people respond to opportunities when they are communicated clearly, locally, and with empathy.

The lessons of these campaigns extend well beyond energy or outreach. This was not just about communications: it was about social innovation. Municipalities and cooperatives learned to **speak with, not only towards, their communities.** They discovered that effective outreach to people in vulnerable situations takes time, consistency, and humility. As Eeklo noted, *"the most effective way to reach the target group is the most time-consuming one."* Rožnov added that success hinges on "trusted intermediaries" rather than distant institutions. And across the

board, pilots emphasised the importance of aligning internal teams early, and having back-up plans when key project milestones are delayed.

This document summarises the full-length report which is [available online](#). This is what you'll read in the extended report:

It starts with an overview of the different communication campaigns and specific take-aways in each of the four POWER UP pilot sites, UCSA/Campania region (Italy), Valencia (Spain), Eeklo (Belgium), and Rožnov pod Radhoštěm (Czechia). This overview is followed by a chapter per pilot describing each communication campaign in detail following the same structure for each pilot:

- Introduction about the pilot
- Taking stock of the communication activities and audience
 - Objectives
 - Main target groups
- Communication activities in detail
 - Key messages of the campaign
 - Approach and results
 - Factors that affected the results
- Lessons learnt

Each section describes not only what each pilot did, but how communication became a tool for empowerment, especially for those who have long been left out of the conversation about energy. These are stories of persistence, improvisation, and quiet transformation, proof that change begins with being heard.

POWER UP TAKEAWAYS AT A GLANCE

Effective Communication Strategies for renewable energy and energy efficiency services



Made with Napkin

Figure 1 - What works in communicating renewable energy and energy efficiency to vulnerable households? *Insights from the POWER UP pilots in Eeklo, Rožnov, UCSA (Campania), and Valencia*

Face-to-face works best: All pilots agreed: nothing beats direct contact. Door-to-door visits, OSS consultations, workshops, co-creation labs, and in-person info sessions consistently outperformed websites or leaflets:

*"The most effective way to reach and involve people... was a **direct in-person** approach."*
– Eeklo

"WhatsApp messages were especially effective for informal reminders." – UCSA

Keep messages simple and concrete: Leading with money-saving opportunities worked across the board. Broader messages about renewables and cooperation came second for vulnerable households but were still used for attracting a wider public.

"Financial benefits appeal most to vulnerable households." – Eeklo

Tailored but cautious targeting:

- **UCSA & Eeklo:** Directly targeted low-income groups using internal lists and personal invitations.
- **Valencia:** Relied on social services referrals due to legal restrictions, but went broader when it came to community energy only.
- **Rožnov:** Took an indirect approach to avoid stigmatisation—focusing instead on "relevant topics" and using trusted intermediaries like local action groups.

→ **Challenge:** Hard-to-reach groups often don't show up unless you go to them. Several pilots struggled to identify eligible households without support from DSOs or social services.

Layered communication: Successful strategies used a mix of formats (print, online, events) to reinforce key messages. Valencia combined bus ads, events, and digital media; Rožnov paired posters with OSS; UCSA layered WhatsApp and local flyers.

- **Posters and leaflets:** Mixed success. Rožnov found posters "very effective." Eeklo found them "less impactful." Context matters.
- **Social media:** Useful for general updates, but rarely triggered engagement from target households. Only UCSA reported WhatsApp working well, hinting at the power of informal, mobile-first outreach.
- **Websites:** Worked best as background info hubs—not frontline tools. Few citizens signed up via websites.
- **Events:** From 'Buurtsoepés' in Eeklo to "right to energy" events in Valencia or Earth Day in Rožnov, informal gatherings helped build trust. Pilots that created or joined existing events reached more people organically.

What made it work

- **Consistency and presence:** Repeated, visible, human-centred communication helped normalise the message and build trust.

- **Partnerships:** Social services, citizen cooperatives, and local NGOs played key roles as trusted messengers.
- **Flexibility:** Pilots that adapted quickly to legal, political, or market shifts (like Valencia and UCSA) maintained momentum.
- **A clear call for action:** Campaigns that said “call us and save €20/month” worked better than those pushing broad visions.

Lessons and blind spots:

- **Direct engagement is labour-intensive:** All pilots highlighted staffing as a bottleneck. Eeklo said that to keep up efforts in terms of staff deployment was “almost impossible.”.
- **Stigma is real:** Rožnov’s choice to avoid direct targeting was deliberate. Others found that over-identification with “vulnerability” can deter participation.
- **Internal communication matters too:** Internal city teams often felt left out or were operational only when dedicated persons were assigned to the POWER UP energy service (design and promotion). All pilots flagged this necessity.
- **Be ready for delays:** Legal hurdles, political shifts, or even falling electricity prices (as in Eeklo) can weaken your value proposition. Always have a plan B.

Seizing the opportunity

- **WhatsApp isn’t just for friends:** UCSA’s success with informal digital nudges shows this channel is underused.
- **Map your allies early:** From social workers to street ambassadors, campaigns should identify trusted intermediaries from the start. They are also relevant during energy poverty mitigation action.
- **Build from events, not just ads:** Passive formats (posters, leaflets) are best when paired with events or person-to-person contact.
- **Track, tweak, repeat:** Campaigns must stay agile, especially when the legal or energy market context shifts.



02

Four pilots, four realities



ITALY - UCSA POWER UP Communication Campaign (Campania area) – Takeaways

Approach & Strategy

The UCSA pilot in Campania targeted four municipalities—San Gennaro Vesuviano, San Giuseppe Vesuviano, Palma Campania, and Striano—home to around 61,000 residents, 13.5% of whom are affected by energy poverty. The communication campaign supported the rollout of two Renewable Energy Community (REC) models:

- **Model 1:** Co-owned rooftop and ground PV systems for vulnerable households.
- **Model 2:** Sharing surplus energy from public PV systems.

The strategy evolved in three phases:

- **Initial co-design workshops (2023)** to engage citizens and define the governance of the future REC.
- **Practical support workshops (Oct 2024)**, offering concrete advice on energy saving, bills, and market navigation.
- **Institutional capacity-building (May 2025)**, targeting technical audiences and policymakers.

Offline outreach (door-to-door, flyers, local media) and online engagement (municipal Facebook pages, WhatsApp) were tailored to low-trust contexts, with special effort to reach vulnerable groups.

A few results

- Reached over **28,000 residents via social media**, nearly doubling the original target.
- **490 posters** and **2150 flyers** distributed; **5 public meetings** and **1 capacity-building event** held.
- High engagement in Palma Campania: **64 participants** and **47 surveys** collected in one meeting alone.
- First REC ("Vesuvio Est") established with visible municipal support.

Factors Influencing Results

- **Institutional instability:** Changes in municipal leadership and UCSA's internal structure required repeated project repositioning.
- **Low trust in institutions:** Generic messaging failed; personalised, direct engagement became essential.
- **Delayed CER establishment:** Slowed communication, particularly in media coverage and formal engagement with vulnerable households.

Lessons Learnt

- **Practical relevance works:** Energy-saving advice and tools (like ARERA's portal) were highly valued by participants.
- **Local partnerships matter:** AESS's presence added credibility and helped build trust.
- **Segmented outreach is crucial:** Tailoring content to different groups (citizens, businesses, schools) increases impact.
- **WhatsApp makes the difference:** Informal, direct reminders proved highly effective.
- **Energy poverty needs more focus:** Lack of a fully operational REC limited deeper engagement with those most affected.

SPAIN - VALENCIA POWER UP Communication Campaign – Takeaways



The Approach and Strategy

Valencia's communication campaign was designed to support two distinct energy models:

Model 1: Renewable Energy Self-Consumption Public Service (RIP)

This model, municipally owned and managed, provides free or low-cost solar energy to vulnerable households via PV panels on cemetery rooftops.

Recruitment was exclusively through municipal Social Services, making them central to the strategy. Messaging focused on energy as a right and public service, distributed through printed materials, social workers, and targeted events.

Model 2: Local Renewable Energy Communities (RECs)

Citizens, supported by the Energy Office (OSS), were encouraged to form RECs to manage solar energy systems on public buildings or existing citizen groups to involve vulnerable households.

Outreach included place-based campaigns, events, and digital tools aimed at empowering residents to co-create their own energy solutions.

A third layer was a **general awareness campaign**, reinforcing the "Right to Energy" narrative and promoting the municipal OSS as a key access point for services.

The Results

- **190,000 citizens reached** (approx. 24% of city population)
- **18 articles** in press and websites, exceeding targets
- **85 posters, 2300 leaflets, a public transport campaign, and social media outreach**
- **Video spots, informative events, and local gatherings** anchored community engagement
- Vulnerable households were included through Social Services and previously established relationships were used
- OSS visits and campaign visibility contributed to recruitment and service uptake

Factors That Affected the Results

- **Legal constraints** limited direct outreach to vulnerable households—only Social Services could refer them.

- **Delays in RIP model development** meant recruitment of fee-paying citizens could not begin within project timeline.
- **Institutional** constraints slowed public tender processes, limiting REC momentum.
- **Municipal ownership** of comms infrastructure (e.g. MUPIs, bus ads) ensured visibility.
- **Synergies with other EU projects** (e.g. WELLBASED) provided trust and access to key audiences.

Lessons Learnt

- **Early availability of clear materials** (especially for social workers) is crucial to building trust and legitimacy.
- **Public space works:** posters and MUPIs remain powerful tools for mass awareness and are worth repeating.
- **Cross-departmental coordination is vital:** misalignment delayed REC mobilisation and confused messaging.
- **Co-hosted events (e.g. with local media)** generate new allies and amplify reach.
- **Flexibility pays off:** complementary funding and adaptive planning helped maintain momentum despite delays.

CZECH REPUBLIC - Rožnov pod Radhoštěm Pilot - Takeaways



Approach and Strategy

Rožnov's strategy under the POWER UP project revolved around inclusivity, trust, and local relevance. The municipality

- implemented a rooftop PV installation for electricity sharing in the common spaces of one demonstration residential building,
- created a local One-Stop-Shop (OSS) for energy advice. The communication campaign aimed to demystify energy topics and empower citizens, especially the energy vulnerable, to engage in energy-saving measures and benefit from renewables.

The city used a mix of formats:

- Trusted local channels like posters (256 produced) and municipal TV (9 video spots)
- Targeted and respectful outreach (e.g. personalised letters, avoiding direct labelling of vulnerable groups)
- Public-facing events like Earth Day and seasonal seminars
- Regular OSS consultations as of the beginning of this service (up to 100/month))

Some results

- High engagement with traditional media: posters and local TV reached thousands.
- Events attracted diverse audiences, from tenants and homeowners to schoolchildren and SMEs.
- Over 24 local media articles and 15 Facebook posts helped amplify messages.
- Informal co-creation workshops and public events facilitated knowledge-sharing across social strata.

Factors Affecting the Results

Success Factors:

- Posters and TV were deeply trusted locally, ensuring good visibility.
- Flexibility: the team adjusted tactics when digital channels underperformed.
- The indirect engagement of vulnerable groups (via trusted intermediaries) avoided stigma.

Challenges:

- Staff limitations: OSS dropped from two to one person, affecting outreach.
- Delays in PV installation disrupted the campaign timeline (e.g. radio spots postponed).
- Incomplete internal alignment: some city departments felt left out early on.

Lessons Learnt

What Worked:

- Direct, personal contact (letters, OSS calls, in-person events) built trust.
- Clear, relatable messaging and familiar channels led to sustained attention.
- Avoiding stigmatisation while still serving vulnerable groups proved effective and respectful.

What Could Be Improved:

- Earlier internal coordination would build ownership across departments.
- Backup communication plans are crucial in case of technical delays.
- More resources should be dedicated to personalised outreach, given its impact.

BELGIUM - Eeklo Pilot Communication Strategy – Takeaways



Approach and Strategy

The Eeklo pilot, led by the City of Eeklo and Ecopower, aimed to include vulnerable households in the local energy transition by offering them pre-financed shares in a citizen-owned wind turbine and access to affordable solar panels. The core strategy combined:

Social Energy Shares: Low-income residents received cooperative shares for free, giving them access to cheaper electricity.

Plug & Play Solar Panels: An easy-to-install solar panel offer further reduced energy bills.

Energy Monitoring Tools: A free app (EnergyID) helped participants control consumption.

Tailored Communication Campaigns included leaflets, posters, municipal newsletters, co-creation workshops, Buurtsoepés (neighbourhood soup meetings), and door-to-door outreach. The overarching goal was to shift the narrative: green energy is not a luxury—it is a path out of energy poverty.

Some results

Participation: 16 households participated in the cooperatives share scheme across all phases.

Reach: Approx. 90,000 people reached (22% from Eeklo); 80,000 via Ecopower's network and 10,000 through the city.

Visibility:

40 posters, 1,000+ leaflets, 20 media articles

2 video campaigns, 10 info events, 2 web platforms

Pilot recognised: Featured as a best practice by VVSG and winner of a European social innovation award.

Factors Affecting the Results

Economic shifts: Falling electricity prices weakened the cooperative's price advantage, reducing appeal.

Resource limitations: Personal outreach proved most effective—but was time-intensive and hard to scale without more staff.

Data challenges: Identifying eligible participants was difficult due to limited access to DSO data; only late in the pilot (May 2025) could the DSO help target outreach effectively.

Lessons Learnt

Personal contact is essential: Workshops, one-on-one appointments, and street-level outreach build trust and understanding far better than passive media.

Simplicity matters: Messages that clearly stated financial benefits were more effective than those focused on cooperative structure or long-term engagement.

Engagement takes time: Complex eligibility, shifting market conditions, and limited administrative capacity hindered faster adoption.

Local context counts: Approaching the most vulnerable required sensitivity and flexibility; some groups were too precarious to engage.



03

Conclusion

The communication campaigns of the POWER UP pilots **highlight how critical strategic, locally adapted outreach is** when aiming to involve vulnerable households in the energy transition. Across Eeklo, Rožnov, UCSA and Valencia, success depended less on the volume of materials produced and more on the method and context of engagement. What worked best were human-scale approaches: door-to-door visits, workshops, consultation hours, and community events. These created opportunities for two-way dialogue, enabled trust-building, and allowed the message to be adapted in real time to the needs and understanding of the recipient.

“During our gatherings with households, usually a person came with one problem and left with several solutions.” Felipe Barroco, AESS

However, these **direct methods require significant staff time and capacity**, often more than initially anticipated. Several pilots faced internal limitations, from reduced municipal resources to organisational turnover, affecting their ability to maintain consistent outreach. Others, like Valencia, dealt with legal constraints that shaped who could be contacted and how. These challenges underscore the need for future initiatives to allocate sufficient staff time, build strong partnerships with social services and trusted intermediaries, and design adaptable communication plans that can respond to changing legal, political, or market conditions.

The campaigns also revealed **varied effectiveness of tools depending on local context and duration of campaigning** (often shorter resp. later than planned due to delays in pilot scheme implementation). Print materials like posters and leaflets worked well in Rožnov and Valencia, but less so in Eeklo. Digital platforms provided useful background information but were rarely the main entry point for target households, except in cases like UCSA, where WhatsApp emerged as an unexpectedly effective tool for informal, personal contact.

Most importantly, the pilots have shown that vulnerable households respond best to clear, simple messages focused on practical benefits, especially financial ones. Messaging that foregrounded savings or energy security was more engaging than abstract appeals to sustainability or participation. But beyond message content, delivery through trusted channels, such as social workers, municipal services, local events, was essential.

In conclusion, POWER UP demonstrates that communication strategies for socially inclusive energy projects must be deliberately designed, well-resourced, and context aware. Future initiatives should invest in long-term engagement infrastructure, foster cross-departmental collaboration, and ensure that messaging is not only accessible but aligned with the real-life concerns of the people they aim to reach.



www.socialenergyplayers.eu



#EUPowerUp #socialenergyplayers



This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under Grant agreement No. 101033940