



# Community Engagement and Participatory Approaches

Supporting Clean Energy and Innovation  
Businesses

[the80-20pathway.com](http://the80-20pathway.com)

## Introduction

Clean energy businesses operating in Latin America, Africa, Southeast Asia and other emerging markets often face a critical challenge: technological innovation alone does not guarantee adoption or long-term success.

Despite significant technological progress, major energy access gaps remain. Around 666 million people still lacked access to electricity in 2023, with the majority living in Sub-Saharan Africa, highlighting the complexity of delivering sustainable energy solutions in diverse social and economic contexts (World Bank et al., 2024).

Energy systems operate within complex social environments shaped by governance structures, economic realities, cultural norms and previous experiences with development projects. Technologies that do not take these conditions into account may struggle to gain acceptance or sustained use.

Experience from energy access programmes also shows that technologies can struggle to achieve sustained use if social, institutional and maintenance systems are not considered during project design (World Bank, 2021).

Community engagement provides a framework for bridging the gap between technological innovation and real-world adoption. By incorporating local knowledge and priorities into project design and implementation, businesses can develop solutions that are more relevant, practical and resilient, improving not only the commercial viability of projects, but also contributing to better quality of life for communities and more environmentally sustainable energy systems.

Engagement also plays an increasingly important role in attracting investment and partnerships. Many development finance institutions and impact investors now expect companies to demonstrate meaningful engagement with communities as part of responsible and sustainable innovation.

Innovation research also highlights the importance of collaboration. Businesses that cooperate with partners are significantly more likely to export and expand into new markets. (Department for Business and Trade (2024) *United Kingdom Innovation Survey 2023*.)

## Objectives of this Guide

This guide supports clean energy businesses to understand how community engagement can strengthen both commercial outcomes and social impact.

Businesses can use this guide to:

- increase the adoption and sustainability of energy technologies
- strengthen relationships with communities and local partners
- improve project design through local knowledge and feedback
- demonstrate responsible innovation to investors and partners

The guide introduces key concepts, practical tools and strategic entry points for integrating participatory approaches into business strategy and operations.

## Evidence Snapshot: Community Engagement and Energy Innovation

Community participation is becoming an important feature of energy transitions worldwide. Across Europe, more than 2,500 energy cooperatives involving around two million citizens are already participating in local energy production. The European Commission estimates that energy communities could account for 17% of wind capacity and 21% of solar capacity by 2030 (European Commission, 2020; REScoop.eu, 2023).

Evidence from environmental and development initiatives also shows that projects involving stronger community participation are more likely to achieve tangible environmental and policy outcomes (UNDP, 2022).

## Understanding Community Engagement

Community engagement refers to a collaborative process of working with groups of people who share geographic, social or economic connections to address issues affecting their lives.

Rather than treating communities as passive recipients of technologies or services, participatory approaches recognise local residents as partners who contribute knowledge, skills and decision-making capacity to projects. Innovators bring technical expertise, while communities bring deep knowledge of the social, economic and environmental contexts in which technologies must function.

*For example, a solar irrigation system may be technically efficient, but farmers understand local water use patterns, seasonal labour demands and irrigation practices that influence whether the technology will be adopted and maintained in practice.*

In effective energy access initiatives, engagement occurs throughout the lifecycle of a project, including early research, design, implementation, maintenance and evaluation.

### The Community Engagement Pathway

*Steps to successful adoption and sustainability of clean energy innovations.*

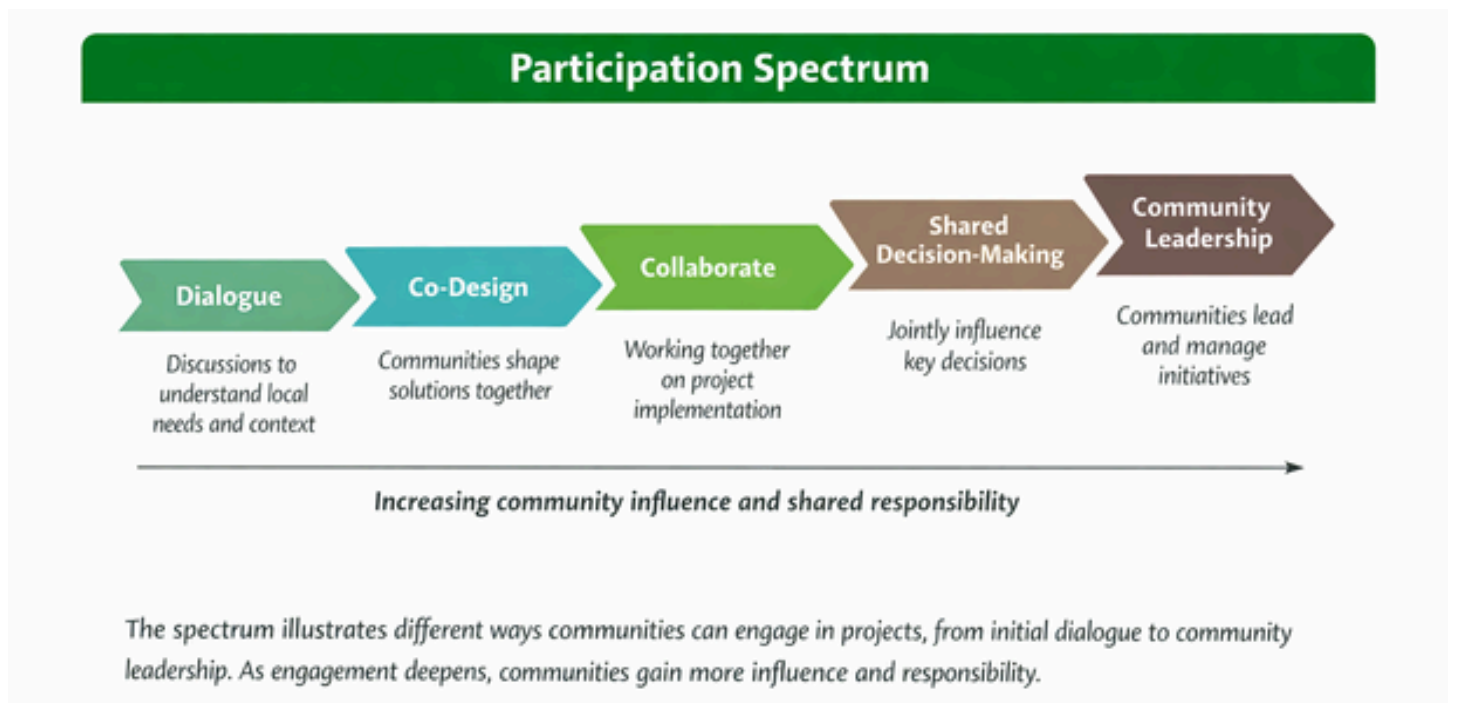


## The Participation Spectrum

Level	Description
Dialogue	Early conversations to understand community priorities, knowledge and context
Co-design	Communities contribute directly to shaping technologies, services and implementation approaches
Collaborat	Project teams and communities work together during implementation and problem-solving
Shared Decision-Making	Communities influence governance structures and key project decisions
Community Leadership	Communities lead aspects of project delivery, management or ownership

Community engagement can take different forms depending on how projects involve communities in decision-making and implementation. These approaches are often described as a spectrum reflecting increasing community influence over project design and delivery.

The framework below illustrates common ways that communities may be involved in projects.



# Why Community Engagement Matters for Clean Energy Businesses

## **Improving technology adoption**

Technologies that are designed without understanding local practices often fail to match everyday patterns of use.

Participatory approaches allow businesses to incorporate local knowledge into technical design. For example, research in Morocco involved thousands of residents recording water consumption patterns in order to design photovoltaic pumping systems aligned with real demand rather than theoretical estimates.

These approaches increase the likelihood that technologies will be adopted and maintained over time.

## **Securing a social licence to operate**

Projects that fail to engage communities early may encounter resistance, delays or reputational risks.

Engagement helps organisations build trust, address community concerns and demonstrate accountability to local stakeholders.

This form of acceptance is often described as a social licence to operate and is critical for smooth project implementation.

## **Strengthening commercial viability**

Participatory engagement provides valuable insights into user needs, affordability constraints and service expectations.

Understanding these factors allows businesses to design products and services that reflect real demand rather than assumptions, reducing the risk of costly project failures.

## **Attracting investment**

Investors and development partners increasingly prioritise projects that demonstrate social inclusion and community partnership.

Businesses that show evidence of participatory engagement, local collaboration and user adoption may therefore be better positioned to attract investment and support.

# Five Principles of Effective Community Engagement

The following principles provide a practical framework for integrating community engagement into innovation projects.

## 1. **Understand the context**

Effective engagement begins with understanding the social, economic and institutional environment where a project operates.

This includes examining local governance structures, livelihood patterns and previous experiences with development initiatives.

## 2. **Recognise communities as partners**

Participatory approaches treat communities not as beneficiaries but as contributors to innovation.

Local residents possess valuable knowledge about environmental conditions, infrastructure constraints and patterns of technology use.

## 3. **Build on local assets**

Communities possess existing networks, institutions and capabilities that can support project implementation.

Asset-based approaches identify these strengths and integrate them into project design.

## 4. **Share decision-making**

Meaningful participation requires that communities have genuine influence over project decisions.

Mechanisms such as advisory groups, governance structures and participatory monitoring processes can support shared decision-making.

## 5. **Commit to long-term relationships**

Community engagement is most effective when it continues throughout the lifecycle of a project.

Maintaining relationships helps businesses respond to emerging challenges and sustain technologies over time.

### ***In Practice: What Effective Community Engagement Looks Like***

*Effective community engagement goes beyond consultation. It involves working with communities as partners throughout the project lifecycle.*

*In practice, this means recognising that communities bring deep knowledge of local contexts and creating opportunities for them to influence how technologies are designed, introduced and used.*

*Strong engagement also creates an ongoing feedback loop. Communities provide input based on their experiences, and businesses respond by adapting technologies, services and implementation approaches. This continuous exchange helps ensure that innovations remain relevant, practical and sustainable over time.*

## **Key Concepts for Effective Engagement**

### **Communities are diverse**

Communities are rarely homogeneous groups. They include multiple social groups with different levels of influence, resources and priorities.

Ignoring these dynamics can lead to situations where more powerful actors dominate discussions and capture project benefits intended for others.

Effective engagement therefore requires identifying and including diverse stakeholders, rather than relying on a single representative voice (World Bank, 2021; OECD, 2020).



## Participation has costs

Participation requires time and effort from community members.

These costs often fall disproportionately on women and lower-income households whose time is already constrained by livelihood activities and caregiving responsibilities.

Projects should therefore design engagement activities that recognise these constraints.

## Participation should influence decisions

Inviting community members to meetings does not automatically result in meaningful participation.

Participation becomes meaningful when communities are able to shape decisions and influence outcomes.

## Entry Points for Community Engagement

Effective community engagement is integrated at multiple points across the project lifecycle, from early planning and design through to implementation, maintenance and evaluation.



## **Strategic engagement**

Strategic engagement takes place during the early stages of project development, when key decisions about project goals, design and governance are being made. Involving communities at this stage helps ensure that innovations respond to local priorities and realities.

Examples include involving community representatives in defining project objectives, establishing advisory groups with local stakeholders, or exploring cooperative or shared ownership models.

Early engagement can strengthen legitimacy, reduce the risk of conflict and help align projects with community priorities.

## **Operational engagement**

Operational engagement occurs during project implementation and delivery. At this stage, engagement focuses on applying local knowledge to improve how technologies are introduced, used and maintained.

Examples include participatory needs assessments, co-design workshops, training local technicians, or involving communities in monitoring and evaluation.

These activities help ensure that technologies function effectively in local contexts and support long-term adoption.

# Asset-Based Community Development

Traditional development approaches often focus on what communities lack.

Asset-based approaches instead identify existing strengths, networks and capabilities that projects can build upon.

Examples include:

- trusted local leaders
- women's savings groups
- local technicians and repair networks
- community organisations and cooperatives

Mapping these assets allows businesses to work with existing social infrastructure rather than creating new systems from scratch.

# Asset-Based Engagement Model

Identify and leverage local strengths, knowledge, and resources to support clean energy innovation



## Tools for Community Engagement

Businesses can use a variety of tools to facilitate community engagement.

### Communication tools

Communication tools help establish clear, accessible channels for sharing information and gathering feedback between project teams and communities. Examples include community meetings, printed materials, community radio and digital platforms such as messaging applications or social media.

### Participatory planning tools

Participatory planning tools enable communities to contribute directly to the design and development of projects. Examples include asset mapping workshops, participatory rural appraisal exercises, visioning workshops and collaborative design sessions.

## Governance tools

Governance tools create structures through which community members can participate in decision-making and oversight. Examples include community advisory boards, local energy committees and partnerships with community organisations.

## Monitoring and evaluation tools

Monitoring and evaluation tools help track project outcomes and ensure that community perspectives continue to inform project improvement. Examples include community scorecards, participatory evaluation workshops and citizen-led data collection initiatives.

# Developing Community Engagement Practices

The participation spectrum illustrates different ways communities may be involved in projects. In practice, effective engagement prioritises dialogue and collaboration from the outset rather than relying on one-way communication or consultation.

As engagement strengthens, projects often create more structured opportunities for communities to influence decisions and contribute to implementation. This may include co-design processes, shared decision-making mechanisms and governance structures that enable community leadership.

Strong engagement also depends on maintaining an ongoing feedback loop. Communities share their experiences and perspectives, and businesses respond by adapting technologies, services and implementation approaches. This continuous exchange helps ensure that innovations remain relevant, practical and sustainable over time.

While organisations increasingly recognise the importance of engagement, studies consistently identify barriers including limited funding, lack of technical capacity and insufficient training in participatory methods (World Bank, 2021; OECD, 2020).

# Addressing Business Challenges through Community Engagement

Businesses developing clean energy solutions often face practical challenges when introducing technologies in new contexts. Community engagement can help address many of these challenges by improving understanding of local needs, building trust and strengthening adoption.

The examples below illustrate how participatory approaches can help businesses respond to common operational challenges while improving project outcomes.

# Challenge-Action-Impact

A simple model for presenting innovation impact stories.












Business Challenge	Engagement Action	Business Impact
Low adoption of technologies	Involve communities in early design	Higher product adoption
Technologies misaligned with daily use	Conduct participatory research	Improved product design
Community mistrust	Engage early through trusted intermediaries	Reduced conflict
Difficulty reaching last-mile customers	Partner with local groups	Expanded market reach
Limited understanding of users	Establish feedback channels	Better market intelligence
Weak long-term maintenance	Train local technicians	Increased system reliability
Projects fail after implementation	Create shared governance structures	Stronger local ownership
Investor concerns about adoption	Document engagement evidence	Increased investment potential

# The Community Engagement Canvas

The Community Engagement Canvas provides a practical planning tool for integrating participatory approaches into project design and implementation. It helps project teams identify how communities will contribute to decision-making, technology design and project delivery across the lifecycle of an initiative.

By mapping stakeholders, engagement strategies and feedback mechanisms, the canvas supports ongoing collaboration between businesses and communities and helps ensure that innovations respond to local contexts over time.

Project Name: ..... Location: ..... Date: .....

<p> <b>Community Groups</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Which local groups will be affected by the project?</li> <li>• How diverse are these groups?</li> <li>• Are any groups at risk of exclusion?</li> </ul> <p><b>Key community groups:</b></p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>	<p> <b>Engagement Objectives</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What outcomes does the engagement aim to achieve?</li> </ul> <p><b>Key engagement objectives:</b></p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>	<p> <b>Engagement Activities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What activities will be used to engage communities?</li> <li>• At what stages of the project will engagement occur?</li> </ul> <p><b>Communication channels:</b></p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>
<p> <b>Engagement Activities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What activities will be used to engage communities?</li> </ul> <p><b>Planned activities:</b></p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>	<p> <b>Communication Channels</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How will you communicate with communities?</li> <li>• Which channels will reach underrepresented groups?</li> </ul> <p><b>Communication channels:</b></p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>	<p> <b>Feedback Mechanisms</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How will you gather feedback from the community?</li> <li>• Are special arrangements needed for feedback?</li> </ul> <p><b>Critical issues:</b></p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>
<p> <b>Resources and Partners</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What resources (time, budget, tools) will be needed?</li> </ul>	<p> <b>Feedback Mechanisms</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How will you gather feedback from the community?</li> </ul>	<p> <b>Key Considerations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What barriers, challenges or risks might emerge?</li> <li>• How will you address power dynamics?</li> </ul>

*The Community Engagement Canvas helps project teams design participatory projects by mapping actor engagement strategies and feedback mechanisms that support collaboration and continuous learning.*

## Illustrative Examples

Participatory approaches are increasingly being used in energy innovation projects to address common operational challenges such as technology adoption, distribution and long-term system maintenance. The examples below illustrate how community engagement can support more effective project design and delivery in different regional contexts.

### ***Participatory design of solar irrigation systems (Mexico)***

In rural Mexico, organisations working on solar irrigation technologies collaborated with farming communities to understand water use patterns, agricultural practices and seasonal labour cycles. This engagement helped shape system design and financing models that better matched local needs, improving both adoption and long-term use.

### ***Community-managed microgrids (Kenya)***

In Kenya, several rural electrification initiatives have established community-managed microgrids supported by local energy committees. These committees help manage tariff structures, oversee maintenance and mediate disputes. Involving communities in governance has strengthened system reliability and local ownership.

### ***Local energy entrepreneurs distributing solar technologies (Indonesia)***

In Indonesia, clean energy programmes have partnered with local entrepreneurs and community groups to distribute solar home systems and clean energy appliances. By training local sales agents and technicians, projects have expanded market access while building local capacity for installation, maintenance and customer support.

## **Conclusion**

Community participation is also expanding rapidly within the global energy transition. Millions of citizens are already involved in community energy initiatives across Europe and other regions, demonstrating the growing role of participatory approaches in clean energy systems (REScoop.eu, 2023).

Community engagement is not simply a communication activity. It is a strategic approach that helps businesses align technological innovation with the social and environmental realities in which projects operate.

By working with communities as partners and recognising their expertise in local contexts, innovators can design solutions that are more relevant, practical and sustainable. Approaches that prioritise dialogue, co-design and ongoing feedback are more likely to support long-term adoption while strengthening both community outcomes and business performance.

## Sources

Department for Business and Trade (2024). *United Kingdom Innovation Survey 2023: Report*. UK Government. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/uk-innovation-survey-2023-report>

European Commission (2020). *Clean Energy for All Europeans Package: Energy Communities and Citizen Participation*. European Commission, Brussels. [https://energy.ec.europa.eu/topics/markets-and-consumers/energy-communities\\_en](https://energy.ec.europa.eu/topics/markets-and-consumers/energy-communities_en)

OECD (2020). *Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions: Catching the Deliberative Wave*. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. <https://www.oecd.org/gov/innovative-citizen-participation-and-new-democratic-institutions-339306da-en.htm>

REScoop.eu (2023). *Energy Communities in Europe: State of Play and Development Opportunities*. European Federation of Citizen Energy Cooperatives. <https://www.rescoop.eu/news-and-events/news/the-state-of-energy-communities-in-europe>

UNDP (2022). *Community Engagement for Inclusive Energy Transitions*. United Nations Development Programme. <https://www.undp.org/publications/community-engagement-inclusive-energy-transitions>

World Bank, International Energy Agency, IRENA, United Nations Statistics Division and World Health Organization (2024). *Tracking SDG7: The Energy Progress Report 2024*. <https://trackingsdg7.esmqp.org>

World Bank (2021). *Engaging Citizens for Better Development Results: An Independent Evaluation*. World Bank Independent Evaluation Group. <https://ieg.worldbankgroup.org/evaluations/engaging-citizens-better-development-results>