

### Opening and Welcome

- **Marina Varvesi**, ASSIST Project coordinator

### Round table: How local actions and social innovations are necessary to put vulnerable consumers at the heart of policies addressing energy poverty

*Moderator: **Marta Garcia**, ECOSERVEIS*

- Discussion with National Vulnerable Consumers Steering Committee members from Italy, Spain, Finland, UK, Poland and Belgium
- **Discussion with the audience**

## ABOUT SESSION I

The implementation of the ASSIST project on behalf of the partners was supported by the National and European Vulnerable Consumers Steering Committees (VCSCs). In each of the 6 countries and at European level the VCSCs have been created with the participation of at least 10 experts on energy poverty working in different sectors and with different roles to bring their perspective to the project implementation and support the partners with advice.

The combination of all expertise within the VCSC has added value to the project's development and has enabled the project to work in synergy with other initiatives as well as to trigger new initiatives and collaborations.

The 1st session aimed to bring at least one experience per country of how the work of ASSIST has contributed to the implementation of local initiatives and vice versa - how local initiatives have provided valuable experience to help shape and focus the work of ASSIST.

The 1st session has brought experts from different countries; Italy, Spain, United Kingdom, Poland, Belgium and Finland and different working contexts (energy regulators, municipalities, consumer associations, social and health operators) to share their perspectives of energy poverty and their work with ASSIST.

## SESSION I

The final conference of the H2020 funded project ASSIST kicked off today with more than 140 participants. Policy makers and highly experienced actors on energy poverty and energy vulnerability in Europe gathered online to debate barriers and solutions to tackle energy poverty, at local as well as European level. In light of the restrictions in place due to the coronavirus crisis, the conference is organised as a three-day, online event with complementary sessions that approach different perspectives of energy poverty.

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The first session of the ASSIST final conference hosted a round table with members of the national **Vulnerable Consumers Steering Committees from Italy, Spain, Finland, UK, Poland and Belgium**. The session was moderated by Marta García París, from Ecoserveis, partner in the ASSIST project, and focused on local actions and social innovations that are necessary to put vulnerable consumers at the heart of policies addressing energy poverty.

The session was opened by the coordinator of the ASSIST project, **Marina Varvesi of Aisfor**, with a brief introduction to the ASSIST project. The aim of the project was to test an innovative and holistic model of Home Energy Advisers (HEAs) that provide support to vulnerable consumers to reduce their energy consumption and increase the comfort of their homes. In addition, a national network of HEAs was established to promote collaboration and knowledge sharing on energy efficiency across different disciplines and sectors. Marina Varvesi emphasized that: “thanks to the holistic approach, the HEA model can be taken up by different actors, in different sectors, who are interested in delivering support to vulnerable consumers.” The project was supported by a national Vulnerable Consumer Steering Committee in each of the six countries and a European Steering Committee. The multi-actor dialogue platform with actors from different sectors (energy sector, social sector, housing sector, health sector, institutions, etc) contributed significantly to the project by bringing together different perspectives on energy poverty and providing feedback on the framework paper on energy poverty.

The participants of the round table represented each of the six partner countries that were involved in the ASSIST project and illustrated the multi-disciplinary and multi-sector approach that is at the heart of the ASSIST project. Each of the participants reported on energy poverty measures that support vulnerable and energy poor consumers within the specific context of the country and the sector that they represent.

**Johanna Kirkinen (energy regulator, Finland)** highlighted that although Finland has a small population and energy costs only represent a small share in total household costs, increased urbanisation has an impact on energy poverty. Older people especially, with a low income that live outside urban areas are at a high risk of vulnerability. Finland has several measures in place to support vulnerable consumers such as the comprehensive social support system, the free home repair services for older people and renovation subsidies for elderly and disabled people. As energy poverty is a multi-dimensional issue many different sectors, ministries and actors are involved. Johanna Kirkinen stated that: “the ASSIST project extended the understanding of energy poverty and offered a platform to discuss energy poverty. There is a need for more data to better define the problem of energy poverty and to target policy measures.”

**Mariusz Swora (energy expert, Poland)** explained that the situation is completely different in Poland as there is no formal definition of energy poverty and no specific policies or programs targeting energy poor consumers. There is a need for energy efficiency programs that are more accessible to vulnerable consumers and a professionalisation of the energy advice provided to vulnerable consumers. Mariusz Swora emphasizes that: “By visiting vulnerable consumers and

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providing effective solutions for their specific needs, initiatives like ASSIST contribute to tackling energy poverty in many ways.. Such initiatives bring together information and knowledge on energy poverty from different countries and share good practices.”

**Neil Penny (housing and social care commissioner, UK)** and **Stefan Goemaere (social worker, Belgium)** emphasized that in tackling energy poverty it is key to know what vulnerable consumers need and look for collaborations and measures that meet those needs. They both illustrated that social innovation can put vulnerable consumers at the heart of policies addressing energy poverty. In the UK for example, the NHS Gloucestershire Clinical Commissioning Group tackles energy poverty from a health perspective. They work closely together with district councils and voluntary community sector organisations who are in contact with vulnerable consumers and have the knowledge about their living conditions, well-being and needs. In addition, statistical data is used to target resources to deprived districts. Stefan Goemare stresses that: “the most effective measures to tackle energy poverty are those that can be easily understood and are readily accessible (e.g. through local community centers). You have to think outside of the box and make smart alliances.” In Belgium the DSO or distribution support operator is an important partner for the social sector to tackle energy poverty, as they know which consumers cannot pay their energy bills anymore. But also, less evident partnerships can result in better solutions for both the vulnerable consumer as well as for the planet. In the Papillon project, for example, Stefan Goemaere partnered with a manufacturer of electric home appliances to set up a rental model for energy efficient appliances for vulnerable consumers.

**Enzo Bertolotti (Municipality of Parma, Italy)** explains the role that local authorities play in tackling energy poverty. Municipalities know the challenges that their citizens are facing and connect national and local actors. They are important multipliers of innovative actions at the local level. The ASSIST project offered the opportunity for local administrators to follow the ASSIST training and to provide energy saving advice to vulnerable citizens. Enzo Bertolotti considers “the sustainable energy and climate plans (SECAPs) as an important instrument to put energy poverty on the agenda of local policy makers and to define strategies and actions to tackle energy poverty.”

**Carmen Redondo (consumer organization, Spain)** emphasizes that vulnerable consumers, and especially energy poor people, are a priority for her consumer organization in Spain. The organization provides information to vulnerable consumers to better understand the energy market and their rights. They communicate the problem of vulnerability and energy poverty to policy makers and stakeholders. They strive for a regulatory framework and measures to protect the rights of vulnerable consumers. Carmen Redondo stresses that: “The green deal offers a momentum to take action for a common policy on energy poverty and to target measures to those households that need support.”

Marina Varvesi closed the first session by thanking the participants, the panel members and all parties involved and engaged in the ASSIST project for their contribution.