

### Opening and Welcome

- **Marina Varvesi**, ASSIST Project coordinator

### Round table: EU policy to tackle energy poverty and protect vulnerable consumers in Europe: proposal and recommendations

Moderator: **Mathias Maucher**, European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN)

- **Maria Jeliaskova**, EAPN, ASSIST partner presenting the *Vulnerable Consumers Protection Framework Paper*
- **Cornelia Ernst**, Member of the European Parliament, GUE/NGL group
- **Giustino Piccolo**, Covenant of Mayors
- **Julien Dijol**, Housing Europe
- **Anne Katherina Weidenbach**, Energy Efficiency: Policy & Financing , DG ENERGY, European Commission
- **Discussion with the audience**

## ABOUT SESSION III

The ASSIST project discussed energy poverty policies with stakeholders and key actors at National and European level over the last 3 years. The 3 Steering Committee meetings as well as the 3 MarketActors' Dialogue in each country, for a total of 39 meetings, were great opportunities to collect feedback on National and European policies to tackle energy poverty and recommendations on how to improve the framework. Thanks to the joint activities of the partnership and the numerous inputs collected, a "Vulnerable Consumer Protection Policy Framework Paper" has evolved.

The third and final session of the ASSIST final conference focused on the presentation of the policy framework paper which illustrates political pathways, policy recommendations and proposals in different areas to promote vulnerable consumers' protection in the energy market, and the discussion on some of the recommendations contained within. The paper consists of 3 parts: reviews, assessments and policy recommendations in the field of energy poverty and consumers' vulnerability and on the different participant countries review of already existing policy interventions.

The ASSIST cycle of webinars wants to represent also an answer to one of the evidences raised within the paper - the paper stresses that several positive outcomes are stemming from existing projects, but there is not a mechanism in place for incorporating these outcomes in policy interventions.

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The session was opened by the ASSIST coordinator, Marina Varvesi (Aisfor), with a brief introduction focusing on the ASSIST website inviting participants to check the website for deliverables, details of the project and also the whole set of presentations from the final conference. The session hosted a round table with different stakeholders, working at European level in the institutional, political and social sectors. The session was moderated by EAPN, partner in the ASSIST project, and consisted of

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two different rounds: opinions and reaction to the Assist policy paper recommendations; and what issues are still critical to the fight energy poverty at the European level.

**Maria Jeliaskova (EAPN)** presented the basic points of the ASSIST framework paper. Jeliaskova emphasized that the risk of energy poverty has been identified and recognized politically in most countries, but the important causes of energy poverty are still not identified and then adequately addressed. Across Member States, policy measures consist mostly in financial support, with the aim of mitigating the problem, but do not tackle the drivers of energy poverty and thus are not sufficient. Among the most important recommendations, there is the need to directly address the drivers of energy poverty: price, income, energy efficiency for energy poor/vulnerable houses. Jeliaskova stressed that the weakest point of the current measures is consistency: some policies do not take into account their impact (possibly negative) on energy poverty, other policies try to alleviate the problem. Moreover, the lack of representation in the decision-making process, especially of vulnerable consumers and their associations, thus the need to engage them. Another recommendation is to strengthen the knowledge base: there is plenty of knowledge available but it is not disseminated or used as a base for the policies. Finally, the paper is asking for better integration of policies at EU, national and local level. Sound public policies are much needed – so there should be a new policy mix to address the different areas. The paper proposes the new concept of energy welfare, incorporating good purchasing power, good quality of homes and affordability of clean energy. In the second round, Jeliaskova emphasized that this concept is not alternative to the ‘right to energy’ (as mentioned by Cornelia Ernst, below), but complementary: different Member States need different steps to embrace this ambitious concept.

**Cornelia Ernst (Member of the European Parliament, GUE/NGL group)** stressed the importance of the right to energy. The coronavirus pandemic has clearly shown the problem of energy poverty: energy consumption is by a large degree not a choice but a requirement to participate in modern society. Ernst stressed that “access to energy should become a right of every citizen: this means the right to energy and a ban on disconnections, as happened during the emergency, should be a standard in the EU”. Ernst agreed with the point to empower consumers to step out of energy poverty: in order to do so, she considered that minimum wages and other policies must be established. At the same time, the internal energy market should change: rules on internal markets for electricity should be more flexible to allow for different initiatives, and also more flexible for regulated prices. Social housing should have a crucial role in this view, but their role is declining everywhere. Ernst agrees with the ASSIST paper about the role of vulnerable consumers, that they should be more involved in the decision making, and also on the need of much more coordinated and coherent policies. Ernst stressed that after years of discussion, we still don’t have a common definition of energy poverty at the European Parliament. The lack of a definition means that we cannot measure the phenomenon and help vulnerable consumers. She underlined some important measures to fight energy poverty: the need of a better regulatory framework to support poor households, the right to energy, a ban on disconnections (to continue after the emergency), and the right to appeal for consumers.

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**Giustino Piccolo (Covenant of Mayors - CoM)** emphasized the commitment of the CoM in tackling energy poverty and the importance on policy integration, based on their experience. Over the years the need for getting energy poverty onto a mainstream agenda has become much clearer: it should be involved in every energy discussion and policy. Energy poverty must be integrated and not isolated: in particular, vulnerable consumers should be on board for energy efficiency measures. Piccolo stressed that “there is a need of guidelines and indicators: there is no unique solution, so it would be better to have guidelines, also on how to identify energy poor in the cities in order to design better policies”. He appreciated the role of training, which he considered a strong point of the ASSIST project: training the different people who are interfacing with vulnerable consumers is a key to fight energy poverty. Furthermore, Piccolo underlined the struggle of the CoM to ensure best practices and good examples are replicated in other regions, such as the one mentioned on the first day by the Municipality of Parma taking up the ASSIST model in a small municipality near Parma.

Piccolo stated the current policy framework is inspiring for the next few years but at local levels, cities need much more. Indeed, CoM is helping cities to implement tools on the ground, trying to develop guidance for cities: thus, the need for legislative and regulatory framework should be clear and stable. There is also a key role to be played for public funds: a lot of cities need support with designing policies to tackle Energy Poverty. Piccolo also underlined the importance of widening the perspective on the efficiency of domestic properties: a lot of poor consumers live in social housing but there are also home owners and private tenants that should be included in the discussion.

**Julien Dijol (Housing Europe)** agreed with other panelists that the policy recommendations of the ASSIST paper are well defined and interconnected. With regard to coordination, he said that policy makers should support the lower level. Dijol stressed that “when talking of social housing we talk about quality of homes. We need a good approach in energy efficiency, but it varies greatly”. There are already a lot of good examples of integrated renovation, with entire neighbourhood renovations helping vulnerable consumers get out of energy poverty. Dijol emphasized that energy efficiency and energy poverty are the most local issues. However, the EU has a key role, in supporting this variety of approaches. It can do this by providing the legal stability of the framework, identifying good tools and providing targeted support. This will result in a higher coherence between tools and what local levels can do with these tools. Social justice and fairness issues are connected with all of this, and obviously it is difficult to find a balance with market competition and social justice. Dijol also underlined that the EU level must reflect on the distributional effects on vulnerable consumers, even if it is not easy. When renovating homes, we must be sure of making it affordable without increasing price of rents – and for this you need a coordination from upper levels. One strategy is to empower the local level to do just that which was the recommendation of the Assist policy paper.

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Anne Katherina Weidenbach, (DG ENERGY, European Commission) stressed that all proposed recommendations are useful, but she focuses on improving consistency. The EU green deal and recovery plan could be appropriate measures for this purpose. Energy poverty is really highlighted in both documents: the transition must be just and fair to all. Effective programmes also help, and in this scenario it is also important to identify effective financial schemes. She stressed that the Commission is committed to providing guidelines to Member States and focused on the twin challenges of combining energy efficiency and affordability. How can we ensure to make renovation attractive but affordable at the same time? Weidenbach emphasized that “this will be addressed by the Renovation wave, a new initiative by the Commission and DG Energy, which will have a public consultation in order to share already existing good practices. Current legislative framework already addresses energy poverty mostly in the national energy and climate plans (NECPs): which highlight if they have a problem of energy poverty in their countries”. Almost all Member States will set up measures to check and tackle energy poverty. Moreover, the EPOV is an important tool that provides a lot of useful information and studies on energy poverty. She also stated that during the EUSEW there will be more information on guidance by the Commission on energy poverty.

Marina Varvesi closed the session and thus the 3-day conference by thanking the participants, the panel members and all parties involved and engaged in the ASSIST project for their contribution, stressing that the work for tackling energy poverty will continue.