

Exploring Governance Approaches and Civic Engagement in Municipality-Led Renewable Energy Communities in Italy

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Abstract Renewable Energy Communities (RECs) are increasingly recognized as innovative tools for advancing the energy transition while delivering social and economic benefits at the local level. In Italy, since the approval of Legislative Decree 199/2021, which transposed the EU Renewable Energy Directive (RED II), the development of RECs has gained significant momentum. Notably, more than half of REC initiatives have been initiated or promoted by local governments, particularly in small towns. Despite the growing prevalence of this model, the specific characteristics of municipality-led RECs remain underexplored. Existing research has largely focused on grassroots initiatives, with limited attention to cases where municipalities take a leading role, often in collaboration with citizens, civic organizations, and private actors. This study addresses this gap by investigating how municipalities govern RECs and how citizen participation is integrated into these processes. Adopting a qualitative multiple-case study approach, it draws on REC statutes, project materials, and semi-structured interviews with public officials and staff involved in REC development across various Italian municipalities. The study has three objectives: (1) to classify governance approaches emerging in public-driven RECs; (2) to explore how municipalities perform governance roles through formal and informal practices; and (3) to identify contextual factors that shape civic engagement in municipal-led initiatives. This study contributes to academic debates on participatory and interactive governance in local energy transitions, with a particular focus on the strategic role of municipalities in enabling citizen participation. In addition, the findings are relevant to public managers and practitioners engaged in the REC sector and participatory local governance.