

*Discussion and Conclusions of the High-Level Forum
7 September 2023, Brussels*

Session 4: Working together: How can we ensure the best level of stakeholder engagement to accelerate project authorisation and deployment?

Key Themes as follows:

1. Authorization & Permits
2. Public engagement

Opening remarks

An overview was provided from a scientific, governmental, and institutional perspective. Legislation is already in place which allows for acceleration of permitting for both RES and grids so the focus should be on implementation at regional and local level, providing certainty for investments and removing remaining barriers. It was highlighted to continue sharing best practices, as well as enforcing stringent deadlines. The importance of acceleration of the grid investments was highlighted but also the importance of early, meaningful participatory dialogue with stakeholders on the overall system challenges in the energy transition and the role of grids. Furthermore, acceleration of permitting procedures does not necessarily result in a lowering of the quality of assessments and stakeholder involvement.

Discussion

The participants discussed the approach to public engagement to accelerate project approval and grid deployment. Both topics were discussed together, providing insights into best practice and a call to action. Cooperation between TSOs and DSOs should be extended to engagement of local stakeholders and citizens, as practice has shown that it increases the impact and outreach to the various stakeholders these operators are concerned with. There is a need to have a coherent narrative about the role of electricity grids and it is necessary to explain how individual projects and the grids facilitate and enable energy transition objectives. Stakeholder involvement can however be more difficult in the case of anticipatory investments, it was acknowledged.

The energy transition represents a significant change for those impacted therefore trust building efforts are essential. There are good experiences with regular and respectful dialogue and corresponding tools and guidelines. However, effective stakeholder engagement that can deliver support for grids is not just about rules and formal consultation procedures, it also includes the need to build trust in the public, processes, and technologies.

Combining or bundling permit applications of more investment projects, as an approach, could be helpful in providing a broader picture to stakeholders and communities of the scale of the grid expansion and the evident burden sharing across society.

Stakeholders are experts of their local environment; their early contribution is valuable to project developers, creating knowledge and are essential to finding acceptable local solutions which may provide benefits beyond those already created by the infrastructure itself.

A change in the cultural approach to public engagement is needed, this should be rooted in the objective of developing respectful long-term relationships based on trustful relationships. Financial compensation alone will not suffice to win support. Furthermore, compensation may increase overall costs and, in the end, may not help secure the trust from stakeholders.

*Discussion and Conclusions of the High-Level Forum
7 September 2023, Brussels*

A fair and just balance, given the perceived asymmetry of benefits and costs, needs to be addressed. Dialogue and an understanding of what is needed in a co-creation process from the start can support this. Communities (rural areas in particular) are often left with impacts, and this needs to be recognised and systematically addressed to avoid a sense of injustice.

Participants provided interesting examples of meaningful engagement which led to the acceleration of the permitting, reducing other costs, including legal costs, and which advanced the realisation of the benefits of the new infrastructure.

The approach to public engagement requires meaningful leadership and support from all the parties involved. Participants stated that political support is necessary giving full confidence to energy regulators for the flexible use of all regulatory tools at hand to support stakeholder engagement initiatives carried out by the operators. Corporate cultural change regarding terms of stakeholder engagement has also been highlighted as important. Stakeholders from the same area are not homogeneous, investing in understanding the background, the motivations of different stakeholders and focus on common local interests and benefits creation is vital.

From an energy system perspective, knowledge sharing helps to understand what is possible in terms of options. For example, providing capacity and demand maps would provide RES project developers valuable information whilst at the same time being useful in explaining to public why expansion projects are needed in specific locations.

Proposed solutions need to reflect an integrated system planning perspective, whether it's sector integration, smart grids, storage, or flexibility options which can increase capacity of existing assets.

Several participants mentioned the transition of the authorisation process between the end of the emergency regulation and the new RED III directive and requested an extension of the emergency regulation to ensure legal certainty.

Concluding remarks

Regulation is in place so now the focus should be on implementation, including when it comes to empowering and resourcing the permitting authorities. Building grids is not just about engineering but is also about the public and local communities. This requires meaningful dialogue which can overall reduce the project delivery time and the overall costs.

Benefits and impacts are not equally distributed. Many impacts are often in rural areas where few people live. It's about a just and fair transition and therefore we need a way to address these impacts.

Building trust is a long-term process, a robust strategic environmental assessment can contribute at building trust and to timely project delivery.

We need to engage and communicate together on the key role of grids for the energy transition; political leadership is needed, TSOs, DSOs, regulators, industry, and other stakeholders working together.

Stakeholder public engagement is paramount in all aspects of planning, deployment and during operation with the aim to keep a trusting long-term relationship with the communities, understanding and respecting their needs.