

# **Community-based management and social impacts: The Role of Cooperatives in Overcoming Barriers to Energy Retrofitting for Vulnerable Households**

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At a time when the revised Energy Efficiency Directive (EU/2023/1791) aims to renovate houses with the lowest energy efficiency ratings, many questions are arising regarding the access of vulnerable people to energy retrofitting facing a combination of financial, procedural, and psychological barriers (Tozer et al. 2023). Indeed, energy retrofitting often requires significant initial investments in materials and labor, which many low-income households cannot afford, especially since these households often have limited access to financing options like credit (Middlemiss et al. 2019; Townsend et al. 2020). Furthermore, we observe also self-exclusion mechanisms in which individuals may choose not to pursue energy retrofitting options because they feel overwhelmed by the complexity of the process while they may have a low level of trust in these mechanisms. Finally, even when financial aids are available, their complexity and lack of alignment with individual situations can hinder poor people from accessing these resources (Middlemiss et al. 2024). Within this context, and regularly confronting such situations, Cabestan, a French cooperative consisting of skilled artisans, proposes an interesting way to address this issue, spearheaded the creation of a solidarity fund to support "travaux suspendus" initiatives. Inspired by the concept of suspended coffee, the organization encourages cooperative members to solicit donations from their clients by rounding up invoices and contributing their time to self-assisted renovation projects to help people in vulnerable situations to engage in energy retrofitting. After an initial trial period, this grassroots initiative is currently expanding, with over 300 artisans already involved. It is also being replicated by other organizations, with procedures and feedback provided to artisans willing to engage in such processes. However, this initiative raises numerous questions. Firstly, it signifies and acknowledges a notable shift for cooperatives, as they extend their focus beyond the private and mutual interests of their members to engage with broader societal challenges, assuming roles traditionally undertaken by the state (Defourny and Nyssens 2010). This shift prompts about how cooperative's members are shaping this new role and the hybrid nature of this economic exchange, which are embedded in a complex interplay between financial transactions and social relationships. To fill this gap and following the relational economy framework proposed by Zelizer (2012), I aim to investigate the symbolic and practical purposes of these donations, which remain relatively unexplored by asking: What are the values and ethical considerations underpinning donations in these initiatives, and how might the hybrid nature of economic exchanges involved in energy retrofitting lead to potentially conflicting logics? (Wittmayer et al. 2021) This is particularly relevant as self-led-renovation projects become more prevalent, offering significant opportunities for the most vulnerable members but will require professionals in the field to cultivate new types of relationships and approach social issues. Moreover, as solidarity funds are emerging in various domains like energy, it is crucial to understand how cooperatives navigate this evolving role, particularly in

addressing energy poverty. This understanding is essential for assessing the impact of grassroots innovations on broader societal issues and the need to support them (DellaValle and Czako 2022).