



**SUMMARY GUIDE OF  
BENEFITS FOR  
ORGANIZATIONS JOINING  
THE NATIONAL NETWORKS  
IN EACH STEP PROJECT  
COUNTRY**

# ABOUT THE PROJECT

Solutions to Tackle Energy Poverty (STEP) is a project to develop a simple, innovative and replicable model of measures to address energy poverty.

The project covers some of the countries with the highest rates of energy poverty in Europe. These are Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia and the United Kingdom.



## There are three specific objectives:

- To get consumer groups and frontline organisations, who advise people on a range of issues such as financial or health-related ones, to partner and deliver advice to energy poor consumers.
- To help energy poor consumers across the 9 countries save energy and improve their living standard. We will advise consumers on more efficient energy consumption and how this can help them save money and improve their health and well-being. We will carry out information campaigns, provide tips on how to save energy, demonstrate cost savings and help put in place low-cost energy efficiency measures.
- To disseminate best practices and policy choices that can alleviate energy poverty and promote their replication in other EU countries.

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# Summary guide of benefits for organizations joining the national networks in each STEP project country

## 1. Why do Consumer Organizations Address Energy Poverty?

The vulnerable consumers are frequent customers of consumer organizations. They need information and professional help in specific consumer matters. They have recurrent problems not only with paying bills and maintaining the proper temperature in the house, but also with understanding the market offers or the energy bills' summaries. If there is a group particularly vulnerable to unfair market practices, it is the consumers at poverty risk.

The risk of energy poverty is triggered by a set of dimensions among which insufficient financial resources is only one of them and not always the key factor. Social and economic exclusion is also associated with a low level of education and consequently, deficiencies of perception. This makes it often difficult for consumers to assess the market and their own capabilities.

Assessment of financial possibilities, genuine and proper assessment of own needs, finding a balance between “I want, I need and I can” are the basic elements of a consumer decision. The evaluation and selection of an offer is another key point. These elements cause problems for many people and more often for the vulnerable ones.

Inappropriate purchase of an electricity supply service, wrong use of a new refrigerator or washing machine, the replacement of windows with a faulty model and finally entering a contract with an associated service (e.g. electricity and mobile telephony), which looked good during the presentation by the seller but turned out to be too expensive overall can direct consumers to ask the help of consumer organizations.

Providing only legal advice, writing a complaint letter or negotiating with the seller a debt repayment is not enough. Vulnerable consumers will return to the organization because they will still have unsealed windows in the house, technically obsolete household equipment that consumes electricity and money, or because they do not use simple energy saving methods.

Thus, they will again face the problem of high bills and the power cuts. For a consumer organization, the most effective way to help people at risk of energy poverty is to provide



comprehensive support, including legal counseling as well as information and educational activities.

It should also advise on a broad thematic scope:

- law, regulations, rights and obligations of the consumers,
- energy efficiency of equipment and house, including low-cost energy saving methods,
- indication of institutions that provide financial support or co-finance investments.

## 2. How do consumer organizations address energy poverty?

Basic methods of working with consumers at risk of energy poverty are:

- assistance in the decision-making process of rational choices of services and products,
- legal advice,
- education,
- information,
- assistance in implementing energy saving methods and increasing energy efficiency in the house.

As any non-governmental organization, consumer organizations have limited financial resources, which has a direct impact, for example, on the number of employed specialists. And as you can see above, full advice on counteracting energy poverty should cover several specialized areas.

The principle of subsidiarity with the government and local government activities requires that the activities carried out by NGOs should be effective, including cost-effectiveness, complementing the activities of other entities, using the synergy effect where possible.

For this reason, as well as taking into account the durability of the project and the developed model, in the STEP project we try to locate the counseling system as cascade delivery and interest other institutions that in each country, in various forms, provide counseling addressed to people at risk of energy poverty.

We have a lot to offer as well as use the knowledge and experience of other institutions.

We aspire to implement the principle of subsidiarity as well as synergy with the activities of other organizations. It is one of the purposes for the project's training and outreach:

- The training takes into account the different levels of students' input knowledge. The training is suitable for both social workers and a lawyer specializing in consumer law.



According to students' skills and knowledge the appropriate training modules are being selected.

- Cascade delivery. The project facilitates the inclusion of various institutions active in the field of energy consulting into the network.

## 3. Market actors active in advising targeted vulnerable consumers

### 3.1 Welfare institutions

As we mentioned energy vulnerable consumers are at risk of economic poverty and social exclusion. Some of them can benefit from welfare institutions, however not every institution is employed or cooperates with the energy efficiency and consumers law experts.

We, as STEP partners, can offer to welfare institution participation in on-line or off-line courses as well as additional meetings or webinars for employees, on-line or offline meetings in the form of: lectures, workshops, direct counselling. Experts from consumer organizations can offer a dedicated advising and as a result we can achieve an effect of multiplication of our knowledge and know-how.

Consumer organization are able to offer direct assistance in solving consumer problems. This can should be useful for institutions as consumers in poverty have more consumers problems than the other groups and those issues often need an advanced lawyer assistance.

Consumer organizations can also deliver information on market threats and frauds, including those important for people at risk of poverty (e.g. unfair seller practices). As a results institutions such as the welfare ones can fast react to such practices and direct this information to the aid beneficiaries.

#### Examples of the good practices in project countries:

Federacja Konsumentów, Poland: The welfare centers can participate in our dedicated training. We also launched cooperation in the energy efficiency issue as a quick access to the help of a consumer organization advisers. This is valid for all consumers problems which are important for the beneficiaries of such institutions.

ALCO, the Lithuanian consumer organization: ALCO reached and presented the STEP project and goals to the National Association of Social workers during their Annual conferences. All interested participants then subscribed to the STEP training and model.



## 3.2 Municipalities and local authorities

Municipalities have a direct contact with families and are one of entities that can easily identify energy poor consumers. They give advice directly or they can refer consumers to consumer organizations.

As in the case of the cooperation with welfare institution consumer organizations can offer additional support for the people at risk of poverty. This is a way of reaching consumers who need a support and who, due to social exclusion and lack of the knowledge, find it difficult to identify the appropriate institution or organization to address to.

### Examples of the good practices in project countries:

DECO - The Portuguese consumer organization has agreements with 61 municipalities which include training and support to local centers. Legal advisers come every week to the municipality and offer consumer support to consumers who request advice to the municipality.

Cyprus Consumers Association (CCA) have agreements with 4 municipalities for training their community leaders. They are planning to extend the number of municipalities to as many as possible.

## 3.3 The minority communities

As a consumer organization we can target local minority communities. We can thus become a part of the aid plan. For the vulnerable consumers living in very unsatisfying conditions, with lack of sufficient access to the information and access to state support schemes the consumer support could be crucial in everyday problems.

### Examples of the good practices in project countries:

Spoločnosť ochrany spotrebiteľov (S.O.S.), Slovakia - There is "famous" area, called Lunik 9 in Slovakia where thousands of Roma people live in blocks of flats. They consume electricity illegally, so municipality decided to equip their households with pre-paid meters. Once they spend the credit they paid for, electricity is stopped. As a consumer organization we are able to teach them how to plan their finances to cover their needs better. As a result, they understand and control their electricity consumption more efficiently.



### 3.4 The aid organizations - NGOs

Hundreds of aid organizations operate in each European country. Some of them are nationwide, others very local. They focus on various aspects of the poverty risk: e.g. access to food, household finance management, access to housing, legal support etc. Organizations meet the specific needs of the recipient.

When conducting counselling in the field of energy poverty, it is necessary, where possible and justified:

- to include aid organizations in the advising network or
- to offer trainings and advising by consumer organizations to the beneficiaries at the risk of energy poverty.

Participation in an on-line or off-line course, additional meetings or webinars for organizations or for consumers, scenarios enabling the inclusion of energy saving topics and aid programs in meetings organized by aid organizations are good examples of cooperation.

In most countries aid organizations are networking or establishing an umbrella organization. This is the best solution for cooperation and an opportunity to offer easier access to all members services developed by consumer organizations. Information about the STEP project is as a result passed to all the voluntary organisations and results in identifying front-line workers which are ready for cooperation.

#### Examples of the good practices in project countries:

Federacja Konsumentów – The Polish consumer organization proposed to include the issue of energy saving and efficiency in trainings conducted by advisers from Food Banks to achieve a multiplication effect.

Cyprus Consumers Association (CCA) started training sessions with The Pancyprian Volunteerism Coordinative Council (PVCC) network to promote STEP's energy advice training. CCA trained so far 50 front line workers and it hopes to continue this training as soon as the pandemic situation allows such activities.

### 3.5 The associations of people with health disabilities

Associations and foundations helping people with health problems are characterized by high specialization and specificity. However, it shouldn't be missed that people struggling with a serious health problem are also particularly exposed to general consumer problems, including those related to the energy market.





We also should take in consideration the families that care of them and include them in the activities carried out. What is extremely important, the correct house thermal level is crucial for maintaining a proper health.

Examples of the good practices in project countries:

SOS – The Slovak consumer organization prepared a publication on “How to save energy at home” and “How to understand energy contracts” and translated them into Brail version. This was distributed to 120 subscribers of the magazine “New life for people with sight disabilities”. SOS prepared also three mp3 audio podcasts, which have been added to the audio library/archive of the Slovak library for blind people. Workshops for people with hearing disabilities will be translated into their sign language by a special translator.

### 3.6 The Energy Regulator

The Energy Regulator and Regional Branches of this institution provides advice to energy consumers, so together we can identify more easily the energy poor consumers. This is the right place to check customers contracts, suitable tariffs, recommend state schemes and if available refer complicated cases to consumer organisations.

Examples of the good practices in project countries:

SOS – The Slovak consumer organization analysed 10 most relevant electricity and gas providers and their contracts and terms and conditions for the presence of any unfair or illegal clauses. The SOS shared these results with the energy regulator who decided to publish a model contract and contract terms for gas and electricity providers. This practice helps the vulnerable and energy poor consumers, as they can rely now on their energy contract to be fair. SOS is also working with the Energy regulator to include energy poverty in their national priorities.

### 3.7 The Energy Agencies

Energy agencies are important agents to disseminate information amongst consumers, municipalities and other local or regional authorities. In some cases, they develop projects with schools and consumers regarding energy efficiency, renewable energy and self-consumption amongst other topics.

As a consumer organization we can learn from energy agencies, who have specialized knowledge on energy topics. Energy agencies taking our energy advice training means that these relevant agents can disseminate and be capacitated to work on energy poverty issues.



### Examples of the good practices in project countries:

DECO –The Portuguese consumer organization just started a set of training sessions with the energy agencies network to promote STEP's energy advice training. This means that part of the frontline workers and referral networks in Portugal will be the staff of energy agencies.

Federacja Konsumentów, Poland is published for example several articles already about energy issue in cooperation with The Polish National Energy Conservation Agency (KAPE).

## 3.8 Customer Service from energy companies

For customer services the increasing knowledge about the risk of energy poverty, measures, home energy saving, solving consumer problems on the energy market and the emphasis of the problem of energy poverty should be valuable asset. This is because it would be extending the methods of communication with their consumers taking into account the needs and possibilities of groups at risk of poverty.

### Examples of the good practices in project countries:

Federacja Konsumentów offers to customer services employees the possibility of completing a personalized e-learning course and obtaining a certificate, as well as access to educational and information materials. We expect that customer services would give direct contact to consumers to our advisors and will be willing to take part in mediations lead by our organization.

ALCO, the Lithuanian consumer organisation is cooperating with energy companies by asking these to include the STEP phone number on their bills. These means that consumers facing energy poverty or having issues with payments can ask STEP advisors for help.

## 3.9. Senior clubs

In some countries seniors are one of the groups which is most at the risk of energy poverty. The programme of training, workshops implemented by NGOs, municipalities, welfare institutions and of course 3<sup>rd</sup> Age Universities are an information channel which could be used by consumer organization. Energy advisors can conduct meetings on energy poverty as well as on other consumer energy issues. These could then be included to the curriculum of training of senior clubs and 3<sup>rd</sup> Age University meetings.



Examples of the good practices in project countries:

Federacja Konsumentów in Poland includes the energy efficiency and energy market regulation to all workshops provided to the seniors group.

dTest, The consumer organization in Czech Republic has training programs that are directed to senior clubs. These have unfortunately been stopped for the moment due to the pandemic situation.

#### 4. Housing associations

Such associations group all the households under a multi-family housing or block of flats. The managers of these organisations know very well the status of each individual and the energy conditions they face. These ensure a personalised reach-out to consumers and a trust-worthy advice. Consumer organisations are in contact with these associations providing them training at the start and end of the heating season.

Examples of the good practices in project countries:

In Latvia, LPIAA, the consumer organisation is in contact with the housing associations related to the city of Jelgava. Several trainings and seminars have been organised already to train front-line workers in the are of energy poverty.



## ANNEX 1 – Summary of benefits factsheet

This factsheet was created by FK, the Polish consumer organisation in order to be used when meeting frontline organisations to sum up the benefits of them joining the STEP network.



### Cooperation with us is quite profitable. We offer:



### We aspire to create a network of organizations and institutions.

We desire a network of institutions and NGOs working together for the benefit of consumers at risk of energy poverty. When we get to know each other, our possibilities and limitations, we will be able to work better and more effectively.



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## Energy poverty

A problem that we can solve together



### Training for consumer advisers

E-learning conducted on the moodle platform

**The course includes 4 modules:**

- characteristics of the energy market - who is who,
- consumer rights on the energy market,
- how to save energy - practical tips,
- institutions and support funds available to vulnerable consumers.

The course begins with a **qualifications test** - the participant can concentrate on modules which complement his knowledge and not waste time on what they already know.

**The course is free.**

Students participate when it is convenient for them, presentations are available all the time.

**Profits:**

- the possibility of individual arrangement of additional meetings with our experts (on-line and off-line),
- the possibility of supporting employees of your institution in handling individual consumer affairs on the energy market. We are the best experts on the market, we are open to sharing knowledge and experience,
- we can complement each other's competences and work together to improve the situation of vulnerable consumers.

After completing the course (final test) students can obtain a **confirmation certificate**.



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## Consumer advising in the energy market

- solutions that help in savings (both low-cost and requiring effective investments),
- knowledge about support systems for the vulnerable consumers,
- helpful in choosing the right tariff and supplier,
- useful in effective resolution of a dispute with the seller,
- an assistance in negotiating repayments of a possible debt.

It is a wide subject area, but if we join forces and network it will be easier and more efficient work for all of us. Our organization has trained advisers and experts, we are open to cooperation. Let's try together to help people at risk of poverty.



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# Energy poverty

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## Information and education dedicated to vulnerable consumers

We all know that informational and educational activities are not an easy task, especially if we want to encourage the vulnerable to be active.

**In order for educational activities to be effective, we need to explain to the target group:**

- how save energy every day, calculate savings and period for return on investment,
- where and when to look for financial support for people at risk of energy poverty,
- how to choose a seller and the right tariff,
- how to sign a new energy contract, and which contract needs a prior consultation, e.g. with a lawyer from a consumer organization,
- how to read an electricity or gas bill,
- how to pursue consumers' claims in a dispute with a seller and where to seek support.

**Our organization has the capacity, trained experts and advisers with experience in working with consumers. We offer our participation in organizing trainings, meetings, and conducting workshops for consumer groups at risk of energy poverty.**



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