Just Transition Platform – Project fiche:

OPEN INNOVATION PLATFORM IN LADA AND VELILLA DEL RÍO CARRIÓN: PROVIDING COLLABORATION AND PROJECT OPPORTUNITIES BETWEEN CITIZENS, PUBLIC BODIES AND COMPANIES TO FOR A JUST TRANSITION IN A FORMER COAL REGION

Spain (Asturias, Palencia)

This document is part of a series presenting information and lessons learned on policy approaches at national, regional or local level supporting a just transition to a climate-neutral economy. The Just Transition Platform (JTP) assists EU Member States and regions to unlock the support in this transition. Visit the JTP website: https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/funding/just-transition-fund/just-transition-platform_en

Member State:
Spain

Region:
Asturias, Palencia

Sector:
Coal

Total project budget (€):
The budget for the operation of the Platform is limited (EUR 200 000) and was made available by Iberdrola. The key resources leveraged by the initiative, however, go far and beyond the mere financial ones, and regard in particular the competences and capabilities of the partners and people on the territory. Note that this figure also disregards eventual spin-off investments that Iberdrola ventured in thanks to the work of the Platform.

Financing conditions (co-financing rate in %):
n/a

Sources of funding:
Partners' budgets.

EU funding:
The initiative did not receive EU funding.

National funding:
n/a

Regional funding:
n/a

Project Duration:
September 2020 – July 2023

Responsible managing authority / agency / company:
The Lada-Velilla Open Innovation Platform is an initiative of the energy company Iberdrola, the Universidad Politécnica de Madrid, and the social innovation lab Agirre Lehendakaria Center.

Summary

The territories surrounding Lada (Asturias) and Velilla del Río Carrión (Palencia) were deeply intertwined with the operations of the homonymous coal-fired power plants. The decision to dismiss them led to uneasiness among the local populations concerning the economic and employment consequences. Therefore, in 2021, the energy company Iberdrola partnered with two research centres, the Agirre Lehendakaria Center for social and political studies (ALC) and Centre for Innovation in Technology for Human Development (itdUPM), to set up an Open Innovation Platform devoted to a fair and just transition. After a process of listening aimed at uncovering the needs, desires and concerns of the people in the regions, the Platform brought together different stakeholders to come up with possible solutions and strengthen existing initiatives. The Platform took a systemic approach to the issue at hand, not only by connecting specific projects with complementarity potential, but also by connecting solutions to the specific narratives highlighted by the people involved.

Type of activities:

The Platform fosters innovation and a just transition through the following of four main activities: (i) Mapping of actors and initiatives followed by a process of community listening and collective interpretations. This step leads to the identification of 'narratives' within the community, namely perspectives of workers, businesses, and citizens that are deeply interwoven with the culture, history and development of the region and should be kept in mind to design effective solutions. (ii) Co-creation. The Platform's members organise and moderate forums where stakeholders can collaborate on the design of solutions to specific problems; indeed, co-creation exploits the findings of stage (i) as inputs for discussion. (iii) Portfolio of interconnected projects. This is the direct result of stage (ii). The projects and initiatives identified during co-creation are interconnected based on territorial proximity or thematic area, which highlights possible synergies. (iv) Distributed governance. Strategic decisions – such as investments – are taken in a shared way, horizontally. This governance structure is the result of conscious efforts to create seamless information-sharing among participants and effective collaborative decision-making.

Goals and approach:

The Platform aims to facilitate the just transition of the socio-productive model of Lada and Velilla del Río Carrión and to act as a catalyst to boost the potential of these territories after the phase-out of the two homonymous coal-fired power plants (owned by Iberdrola) that started in 2020. The distinctive approach of the project is that of having set up an Open Innovation Platform. These are defined as sets of actions and practices to incorporate different stakeholders into the innovation process. Indeed, the partners responsible for the project created and managed a collaborative ecosystem where organisations, businesses and individuals could exchange views and perspectives and reach innovative solutions tailored to the territory. Importantly, a community listening process was performed, which lead to a mapping of actors and initiatives a deep understanding of the narratives and needs of the areas.

The greatest advantage of this approach is its systemic nature: actions and projects are considered and evaluated also with respect to complementary initiatives, which highlights possible synergies conducive to development.

Important outputs, results or achievements:

The Platform has provided a diagnosis of the narratives present in the territories affected by the plant closures. These narratives reflect local populations' thinking and are often pessimistic, as individuals who derived great economic well-being from the coal-fired power plants view the transition as a negative phenomenon for their livelihoods. However, the opportunities and development paths identified through the listening and co-creation process and inscribed in the portfolio of activities seem to have led to a slight change in narrative towards more positive outlooks. The portfolio also highlights the areas of opportunity that are likely to lead to the most benefit and thus act as a compass for possible investments; the initiatives collected therein should be taken as one of the main outputs of the project. Indeed, the Platform can be directly credited for the creation of some high-impact investment projects, such as the collaboration between Iberdrola and Exiom for the construction of the biggest solar farm of the country, with considerable employment gains in the sustainable energy sector. Also noteworthy is the call for challenges launched jointly by Perseo (Iberdrola venture capital arm) and SODECO.

Scalability[1] and transferability[2]:

The Agirre Lehendakaria Center operates various open platforms across the world, two of which are in Europe (one is the Platform subject to this fiche, the other one is a similar experiment in the Basque country). The wide geographical dispersion of these experiments suggests how the approach is highly transferable. Indeed, at the heart of these platforms lies the engagement of local populations with their specific needs, thus cultural and historical differences are no hindrance to the approach. Also note that the initial financial outlay for these types of projects is marginal at best, making them suitable for reproduction. At the same time, the need to interview and map a wide number of initiatives makes these types of platforms less suitable for scale-up. Given the resources it is possible to extend to wider areas (and here the interviewees highlighted a limitation of the project connected to the failure to engage the State in the initiative, as described in the 'Challenges' section), but the key advantage of the approach lies in its ties to the territory and the capacity to engage even segments of the population which are often excluded and unheard. For this reason, open innovation platforms should remain local initiatives, also not to overburden the distributed governance structures which may lose efficiency given too-numerous members.

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[1] Scalability entails that a policy approach can be adapted to a bigger scale than just the local context.
[2] Transferability entails that a policy approach can be applicable to a similar setting and replicated.

Key success factors and lessons learnt:

The key success factors that transpire from the experience of the Platform are the identification of narratives among the population and the systemic approach. The former allows for the identification of projects that not only answer to the needs of a transition towards a more sustainable economy, but also to the specific needs and expectations of local communities. The latter, through the exploitation of synergies, allows to leverage more resources than the ones that are generally involved in single, linearly defined projects. Indeed, a formal evaluation of the project highlighted the following four key success factors: (i) Strong engagement of local stakeholders. (ii) The availability of capabilities and competences in the workings of the Platform. While work was organised very organically and without vertical structures, the university partners to the project brought different sets of skills and expertise. The itdUPM made available its experience in facilitation and institution of open innovation platforms, while the ALC contributed its experience in conducting listening and co-creation sessions. (iii) Collaborative organisation, upheld by effective governance and information-sharing structures. (iv) Time and patience, to see results materialise.

Key challenges:

One key challenge to the project, was the inability to engage the public administration in the Platform in a more active role. The involvement of the State has been occasional and dependent on the interest of individual public officials. If the State had engaged more proactively with the initiative, the Platform could have become more institutionalised, and could have provided a higher degree of confidence in the actors involved and be conducive to more active engagement and collaboration.

Tools for supporting economic diversification and reskilling/upskilling via projects:

- supporting firms to become more innovative and adjust from 'traditional sectors' to new technologies;

- encouraging knowledge exchange and cooperation between larger and smaller firms;

- ensuring well targeted financing and investment;

- scaling business innovation networks and support clusters; strengthening entrepreneurial networks.

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Central framework conditions[3]:

In 2017, the energy company Iberdrola announced the complete closure of its coal-fired power plants. This mission statement involved the plants of Lada (Asturias) and Velilla (Palencia), two territories whose economy was highly reliant on these energy plants. Despite the fear of negative employment outlooks, the commitment of the company to positive environmental and social development – which is testified by its global leading position in the market for renewable energy – led to the creation of the Platform. Despite the existence of a Ministry for the Ecological Transition in Spain, the initiative is driven by the private sector.

The project is explicitly targeted at the achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (some visualisation tools, available here, allow to monitor the progress made towards each of the relevant objectives).

Outlook:

The initiative is now in a transfer process. The official workings of the Platform – in its current layout – are set to terminate in July 2023, but the partners are seeking out a local actor to inherit the Platform's methodology. After July, the third formal evaluation of the project (carried out through a Most Significant Change monitoring design) will be published. Those results will be used to organise a final session for stakeholders to meditate and reflect on what has been achieved and how to move forward.

[3] Framework conditions encompass the institutional, informational and socio-economic factors that determine a given environment (contextual information), e.g. market conditions, access to finance, tax regulation, infrastructure and support.

Partners & contacts:

- **Iberdrola** (Spanish energy company headquartered in Bilbao, Spain);
- **itdUPM** (Centro de Innovación en Tecnología para el Desarrollo Humano de la Universidad Politécnica de Madrid);
- **ALC** (Agirre Lehendakaria Center for Social and Political Studies).

Website / Social media:

https://plataformainnovacion.com/

Sources:

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