



# Culture of Sustainability

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# Is there an emerging organizational field of the Italian renewable energy communities? Some first theoretical reflections on the role of intermediary actors

Lorenzo De Vidovich<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Renewable Energy Communities (RECs) today represent local niches of socio-technical innovation in the energy system, sustained by a definition identified at EU level, and nurtured by a growing debate amongst policymakers, communities, and scholars. In Italy, the innovation they deliver are enacted by intermediary actors – identified with the notion of Community Energy Builders (CEBs) – that ensure technical and scientific support in the implementation of RECs. However, this emergent setting is disclosing organizational models that deserve to be put under the spotlight from social scientists to address the ways in which innovations lying with RECs are diffused and propagated by CEBs. On this basis, the article intends to provide some first theoretical reflection about the emerging organizational fields of RECs and the forms of institutional isomorphism that may affect the implementation and development of RECs, related to the intermediary functions carried out by CEBs. To develop the theoretical analysis, the paper relies on some indications from the emerging context of ‘community energy building’ in Italy. The paper makes the case for the adoption of perspectives from organizational studies to address the grey areas that may take shape in the organizational implications of RECs, with a particular reference to the pivotal role of intermediary actors.

**Keywords:** Renewable energy communities; socio-technical systems; intermediary actors; organizational field; organizational studies, isomorphism.

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## **Sta prendendo forma un campo organizzativo delle Comunità Energetiche Rinnovabili? Alcune prime riflessioni teoriche sul ruolo dei soggetti intermediari**

### **Riassunto**

Le Comunità Energetiche Rinnovabili (CER) ad oggi rappresentano ‘nicchie locali’ di innovazione socio-tecnica del sistema energetico, sostenute da una definizione individuata a livello comunitario e alimentate da un crescente dibattito in diverse comunità politiche e di esperti. In Italia, l’innovazione che esse apportano è promossa da attori intermediari – identificati con la nozione di *Community Energy Builders* (CEB) – che garantiscono uno supporto tecnico e scientifico nell’implementazione delle CER. Tuttavia, questo scenario emergente sta rivelando nuovi modelli organizzativi che meritano di essere messi sotto i riflettori dai ricercatori sociali per affrontare le modalità attraverso cui le innovazioni legate alle CER vengono diffuse e propagate dai CEB. Sulla base di questi assunti, l’articolo intende fornire una prima riflessione sugli aspetti organizzativi emergenti delle CER e sulle forme di isomorfismo istituzionale che possono influenzare lo sviluppo di queste sperimentazioni, indagando le funzioni intermediarie svolte dai CEB. Per sviluppare l’analisi teorica, l’articolo si basa su alcune indicazioni provenienti dal contesto emergente del *community energy building* in Italia. L’articolo sostiene la necessità di adottare prospettive radicate negli studi organizzativi per affrontare i coni d’ombra che possono prendere forma nello sviluppo delle CER, con particolare riferimento al ruolo dei soggetti intermediari nello sviluppo di queste iniziative, attraverso precisi modelli organizzativi.

**Parole chiave:** Comunità di energia rinnovabile; sistemi socio-tecnici; attori intermedi; campo organizzativo; studi organizzativi, isomorfismo.

### **■ Introduction**

This paper delves into the emergent setting of Renewable Energy Communities (RECs) with the aim of reflecting on some organizational aspects that lie behind the development of these collective initiatives. In doing so, the paper employs a theoretical attempt, which is that of addressing the role of intermediary actors in the diffusion of the organizational innovations related to RECs, by investigating the ‘operational networks’ that are characterizing the development of such initiatives. Although the notion of ‘operational network’ evokes the theory of neoinstitutionalism developed by Powell and DiMaggio (1991), the paper does not develop a proper analysis of the ‘organizational field’ of