

International Conference *Sustainable Places* 2021

Citizen energy cooperatives in the Upper Rhine Region: *Commoning* issues in the transition towards a decarbonised and decentralised future

Philippe Hamman

Professor of sociology

Jean Monnet Chair 'Governance of Integrated Urban Sustainability in Europe'

Institute of urbanism and regional development

Faculty of Social sciences, University of Strasbourg

Research unit SAGE, UMR 7363



Institut d'urbanisme
et d'aménagement régional | IUAR
Faculté des sciences sociales
Université de Strasbourg



Sociétés,
Acteurs,
Gouvernement
en Europe
UMR
7363



Research context

- ❖ The EU Interreg V **RES-TMO project** = Concepts for an Integrated, Efficient and Sustainable Energy Supply and Storage in the Upper Rhine Region (France, Germany and Switzerland).
- ❖ Partners = Universities of Freiburg (lead), Strasbourg, Karlsruhe & Mulhouse (2019-2022): <https://res-tmo.com/en/>
- ❖ **WP4 = Sociological issues:** Analysis of sociocultural framework conditions and integration of stakeholder perspectives.



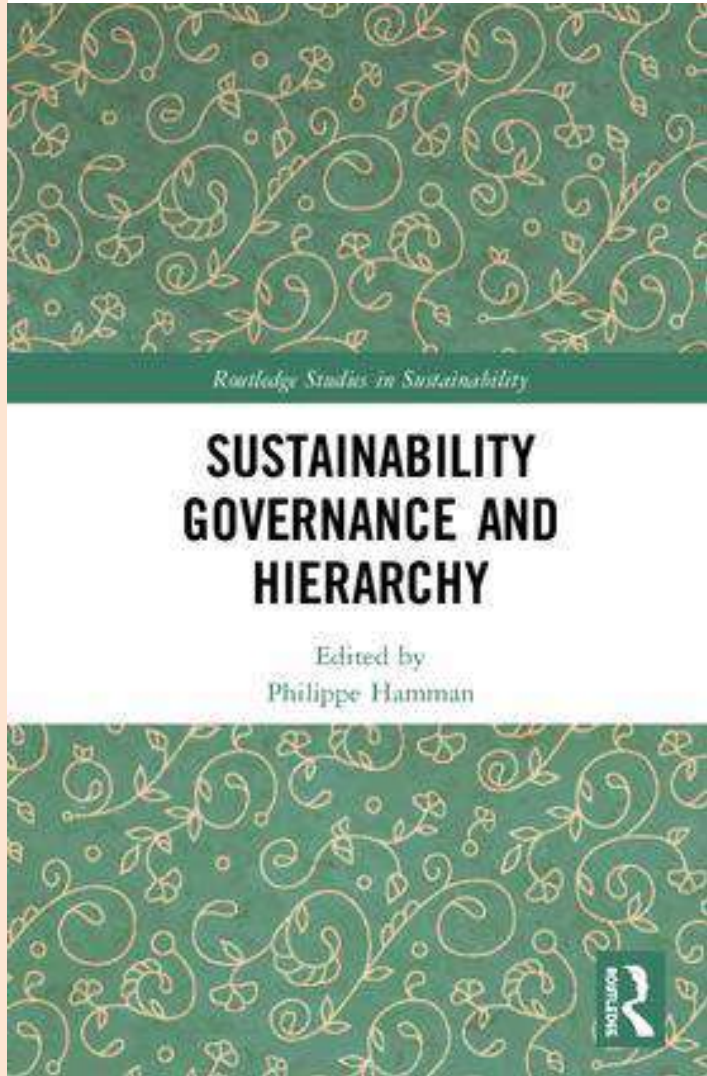
Key players in the Upper Rhine



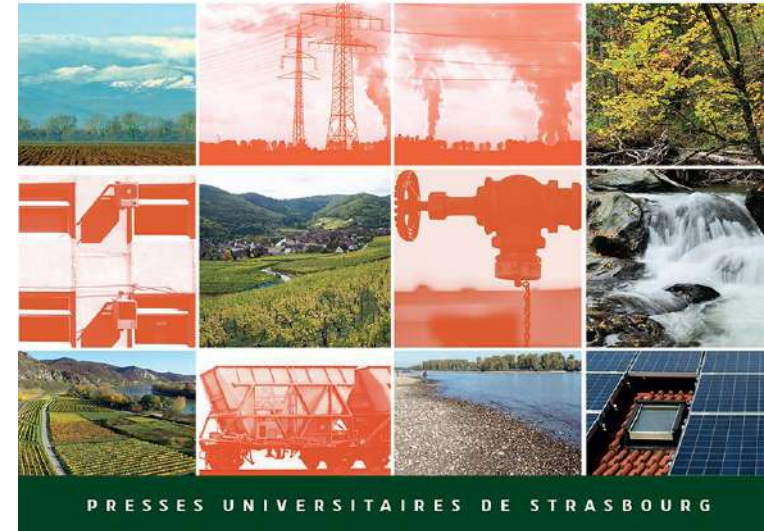
Empirical design of the study in the Upper Rhine:
 = 97 interviews with regional key players and with members of citizen energy cooperatives & 11 fieldwork observations

maps : OSM 2016 ; mapshaper - done by S. Henck - 04/2021

Ph. Hamman (ed.),
***Sustainability Governance
 and Hierarchy***, New York,
 Routledge, 2019.



EDITED BY PHILIPPE HAMMAN & STÉPHANE VUILLEUMIER
**SUSTAINABILITY RESEARCH
 IN THE UPPER RHINE REGION**
 CONCEPTS AND CASE STUDIES



PRESSES UNIVERSITAIRES DE STRASBOURG

Ph. Hamman, S. Vuilleumier (eds),
***Sustainability Research in the
 Upper Rhine Region***, Strasbourg,
 2019.

Previous publications



1. Territorial commons and citizen cooperatives: defining the subject

- The term “Commons” can draw more or less attention 1/ to available **resources**, 2/ to the distribution of **rights**, or 3/ to the belief in **collective action** (Hudson, Rosenbloom, Cole, 2019).

- Citizen energy cooperatives are often presented as the embodiment of common (goods) and as providing **an alternative model** based on the use of renewable energy sources.

- More precisely: 3 main levels of interpretation:
(1) *common goods*, i.e. a system of resources;
(2) *a common project*, i.e. the goals the members deem it legitimate to pursue;
(3) *common action*, i.e. collective action within a democratic context.



Fonds Européen de Développement Régional (FEDER)
Europäischer Fonds für Regionale Entwicklung (EFRE)
Dépasser les frontières : projet après projet
Der Oberrhein wächst zusammen, mit jedem Projekt



→ Relations to the community appear as a central element

= Not limited to the management of a resource, but also the production of a sense of belonging.

= **making energy circuits visible**: users may fail to grasp their materiality when they are used to considering only the “end of the pipe”.

Ex.: Copresident of BürgerEnergieGenossenschaft Kehl: ‘According to the statutes, only members from Kehl are accepted, and it has since extended to the neighbouring villages. [...] We want to keep it local for the citizens to become involved. [...] Many citizens think that energy flows from sockets and don’t know how it is produced: they need to change their thinking’ (RES-TMO Workshop, 23/09/2019).

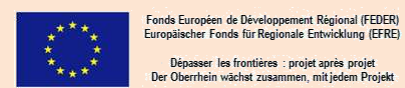


2. Energy cooperatives: common goods or common projects?

2.1. *The issue of property (does not disappear)*

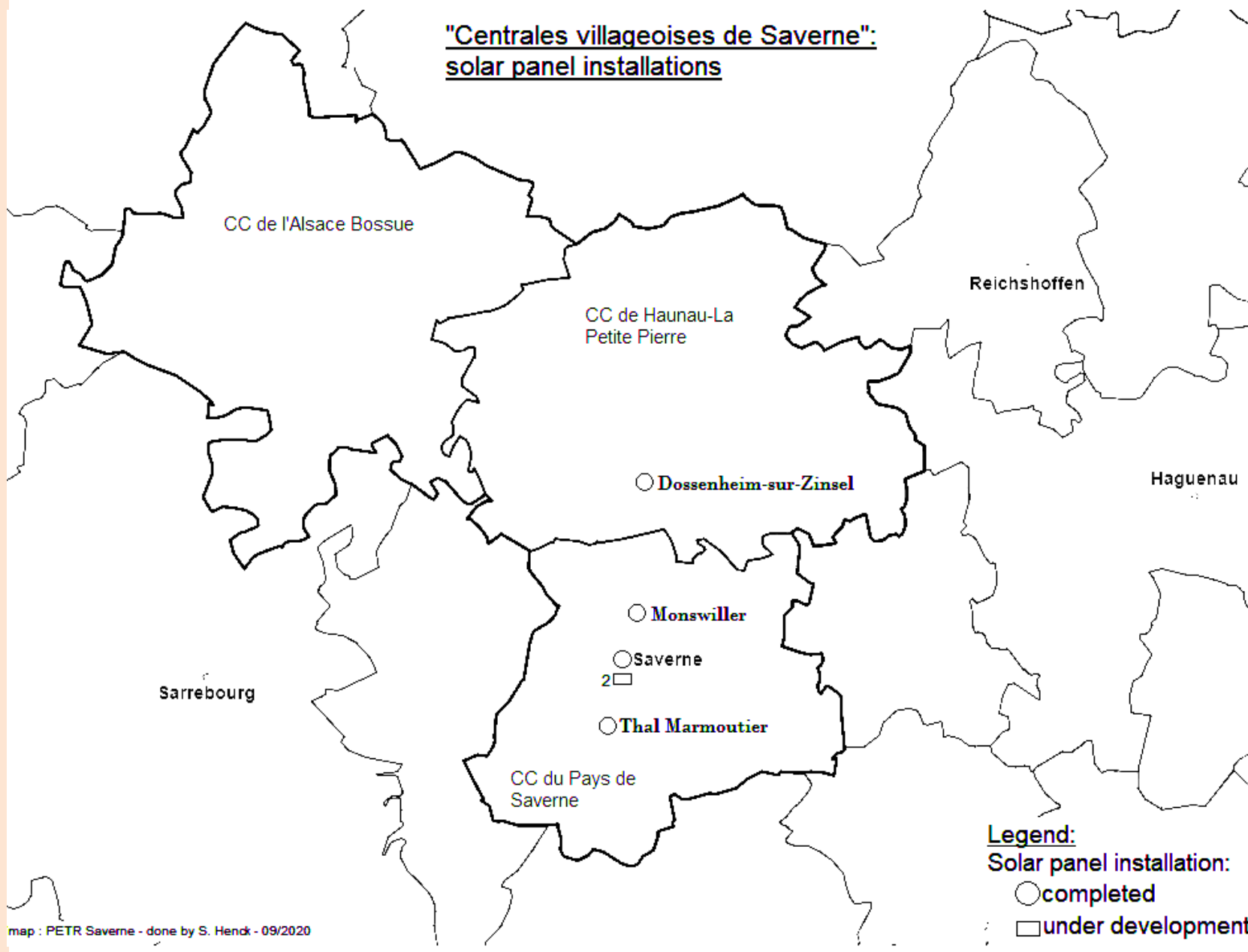
- **The different dimensions to the reality of property:**

1/ Any community must define the rules of **access to specific resources *and* use patterns**. The statutes of the cooperatives often mention their field of action or mandate local participation (ex.: Centrales villageoises de Saverne).





"Centrales villageoises de Saverne": solar panel installations



Legend:
 Solar panel installation:
 ○ completed
 □ under development

map : PETER Saverne - done by S. Henck - 09/2020



Fonds Européen de Développement Régional (FEDER)
 Europäischer Fonds für Regionale Entwicklung (EFRE)
 Dépasser les frontières : projet après projet
 Der Oberrhein wächst zusammen, mit jedem Projekt



2/ Property translates into ***bundles of rights*** (E.Ostrom).

- i) Members are entitled to access and use of the resource or to interests from the shares they hold in the cooperative.
- ii) A specific mode of governance = right to vote at the general assemblies is not tied to the amount of shares held, nor is decision-making.

3/ **Shareholders with diverse profiles:** active or retired engineers, teachers, endowed with technical, administrative, economic or educational capital. But also less qualified people.



Fonds Européen de Développement Régional (FEDER)
Europäischer Fonds für Regionale Entwicklung (EFRE)
Dépasser les frontières : projet après projet
Der Oberrhein wächst zusammen, mit jedem Projekt



• There are different motives for joining:

1/ an extension of their professional activities, for local energy transition officers or solar installers...

2/ a financial investment

3/ a desire to act in a concrete way, in reaction against the radical or intellectual postures of some environmental activists.

• ‘Common action’ depends on the national and regional legal and socio-economic contexts:

✓ The legislation is more favorable to prosumers in Germany than in France.

✓ Energy cooperatives’ questionable dependence from the local authorities: financial aid, material support (access to buildings for PV...).



Fonds Européen de Développement Régional (FEDER)
Europäischer Fonds für Regionale Entwicklung (EFRE)
Dépasser les frontières : projet après projet
Der Oberrhein wächst zusammen, mit jedem Projekt



2.2. What alternative to the market?

- Local economic development is an important aim, even as it is **reinterpreted in terms of sustainability**: ‘Instead of spending money that will go to Électricité de France [...], it’s better to finance a local installer, a panel assembler, which will be good for the local economy’ (CV de Saverne, 17/04/2019).
- **No unified definition** as to what is regarded as an alternative: it depends on the type of energy (fossil fuels-renewable sources), centralized-decentralized systems, the visibilization of the energy circuit, the linking together of production and consumption, and the hybrid functioning of cooperative selling their energy into the grid.



Fonds Européen de Développement Régional (FEDER)
Europäischer Fonds für Regionale Entwicklung (EFRE)



3. On social sustainability: democratic access or club goods?

→ Different approaches to the question of ‘profitability’ of the shares purchased.

- CV de Saverne is founded on **societal aims**: the price of a share, 100 €, is ‘affordable’ and only a limited number of shares has been purchased; ex.: “I put 200 € into it” (31/03/2020); “Oh, very modestly, I bought one share. We wanted to symbolically support the operation” (15/04/2020).
- **Indifference to profit** is emphasized: “It feels strange: legally speaking, it’s a company, but it feels more like it’s an association, you see. It’s not the same spirit as a big capitalist company” (CV Saverne, 15/04/2020).



→ This can be qualified in three main ways:

1/ Energy cooperatives do take **economic viability** into account.

- Ex: one of the heads of CV de Saverne fully includes the **feed-in tariff**: “We’ve changed because we focus on projects for which there are important financial aid” (interview, 27/03/2020).
- Same thing for the manager of the Swiss cooperative ADEV: the cost of electricity needs to be taken into account: “You always need to convince people. If it’s more expensive then [...] they’re not interested any more. It’s always a question of money!” (interview, 02/04/2019).



2/ The relation to profitability can be different depending on the national context. **Germany = more a financial investment** for the members.

- **BEG Endingen:** well aware that the fact that the rather high price of the share, amounting to 500 euros, might constitute a social barrier :

‘Sorry to say, but if you’re 50 € short every month and then 6 months later you ask the cooperative to give you the money back, it’s a lot of work for us for nothing!’(15/07/2019).

- More precise regulations may be necessary to ensure attractivity: coop. **ADEV Liestal** (CH) (115 production facilities):

‘We’ve now decided to set a limit at 30,000 CHF. Because they think it’s great, they see the rate is 2%. We didn’t want to have a lot of capital and few shareholders, we really wanted a lot of people to join.’ (head manager, 02/04/2019).



3/ A dividing line between project leaders and grass-roots members:

- ✓ Members are not necessarily encouraged to commit beyond the purchase of shares: “I didn’t ask, they didn’t ask either. [...] I think they’re self-sufficient, they don’t need anybody” (CV Saverne, 17/04/2020).
- ✓ Another member regrets the lack of communication: “We had one general assembly, two years ago, and that’s it. We were supposed to have information by email about consumption, we’ve had about two letters in two years. That’s not much” (CV Saverne, 14/04/2020).



Fonds Européen de Développement Régional (FEDER)
Europäischer Fonds für Regionale Entwicklung (EFRE)
Dépasser les frontières : projet après projet
Der Oberrhein wächst zusammen, mit jedem Projekt



4. The dilemma of scale: local rootedness vs. extended networking?

4.1. Local rootedness grants legitimacy

- **‘Resistance commons’**: identified by strong embeddedness in the local area and rules adapted to the local context (Dardot, Laval, 2010: 120). **Indictment of leading companies**: ‘Total, EDF Énergies nouvelles, or whatever. It’s the fight of David against Goliath. [...] Their choices are always determined by questions of business, opportunities’ (a member of EPA, 08/05/2020).



- **Taking part in a project in one's local area can be a trigger to further participation:**
Ex.: a resident of Dossenheim: “It was about installing panels on the school. [...] Since it took place in my commune, I thought it could be interesting to support it” (14/04/2020).
- **Local exclusiveness**, which creates the confidence needed to act, can also limit the **scope of the project** as a societal alternative (rather than a ‘niche’). Ex.: members of CV de Saverne: “In the green association I belong to in Marmoutier, I saw the same people [...] It's a pity, it would be good if other people got interested” (18/04/2019).

4.2. A double relationship of competition on the same scale and coordination between different levels

- Issues may arise concerning the **coexistence of several collective organisations in the same local area** and the means of establishing cooperation in order for them to have an impact on larger-scale energy systems.
- Some cooperatives have adopted **rules of territorial self-limitation** in their statutes in order not to encroach on the development area of others (ex.: CV Saverne).



- **Practical coordination at different scales** is another defining aspect. Ex.: a member of CV Saverne: ‘The advantage of CV projects [CV being a national network] is that the people who are going to become integrated into that type of projects, they’re also going to have feedback from other groups, and so it will save them the trouble of having to start from scratch with the paperwork, etc.’ (27/03/2020).

- **Because of technical questions, cooperatives organise as networks** to be effective on a larger scale: The President of Coopergy in Switzerland: ‘Sharing expertise: We’re not going to reinvent the wheel every time. Lobbying local governments and politicians concerning the price of energy: it helps do more than individually. Finally, it’s necessary to acquire professional skills and to recruit: voluntary work has limits ’ (RES-TMO

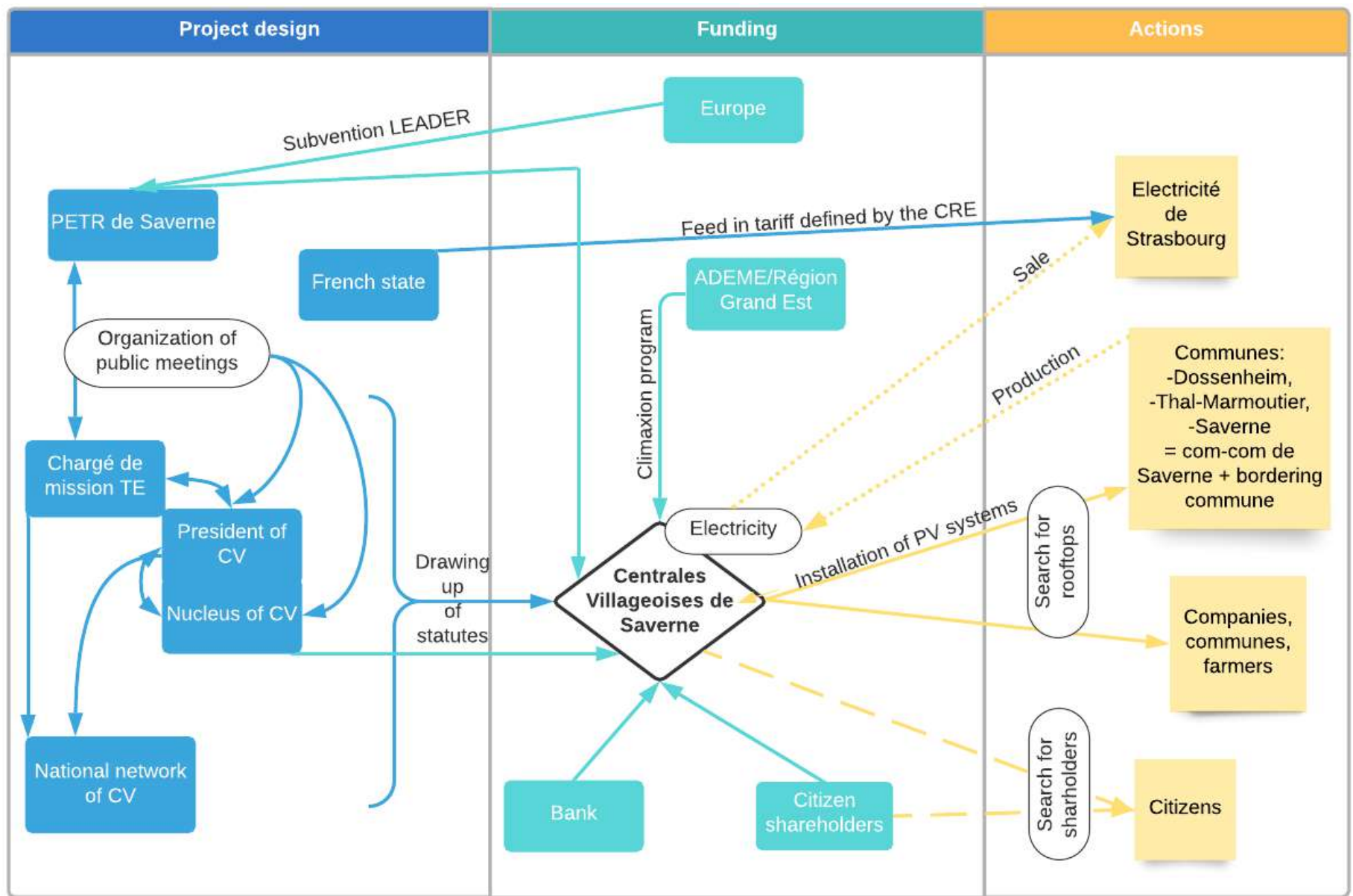
Workshop, 23/09/2010



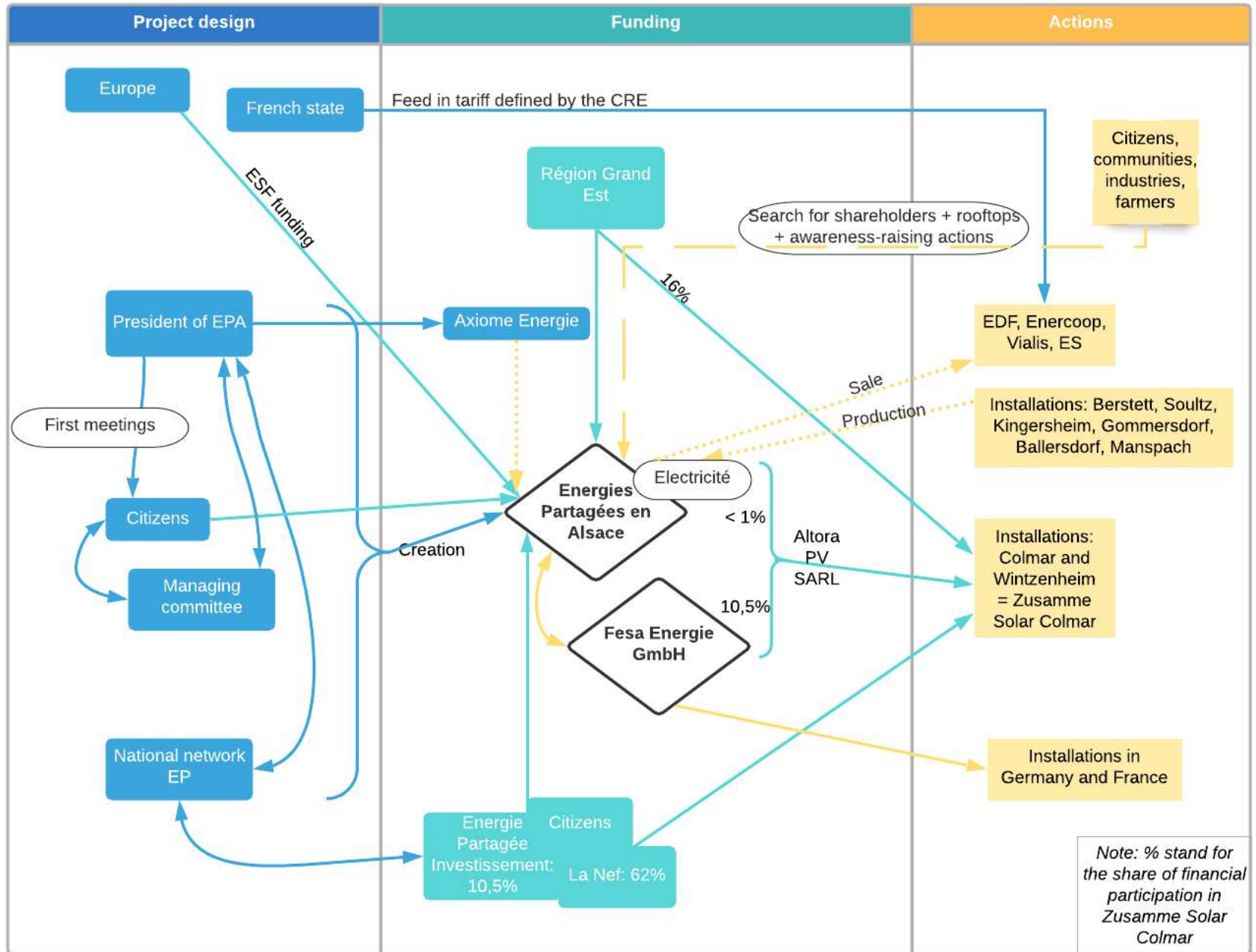
Fonds Européen de Développement Régional (FEDER)
Europäischer Fonds für Regionale Entwicklung (EFRE)
Dépasser les frontières : projet après projet
Der Oberrhein wächst zusammen, mit jedem Projekt



Interactions between the key players involved in the operations of the citizen energy cooperative *Centrales Villageoises de Saverne* in Alsace (diagram by Sophie Henck, research unit SAGE, November 2020)



The case of the joint Franco-German citizen energy cooperative *Zusammen Solar Colmar* (diagram by Sophie Henck, research unit SAGE, November 2020)



Conclusion

- **Collective action is fully embedded within the social world.** One risk would be to bolster the position of an economic elite, or to produce new exclusive circles of ‘environmentalist’ actors, claiming sole legitimacy to act to achieve energy transition.

→ Although it is defined as a common good, the process of transition is embedded within what could at least partly be considered as **club-goods strategies**.

→ Hence a process of **ever-changing transactions**, in terms of territories and actors.



- **The transactions over renewable energies in the Upper Rhine region embrace regulatory, economic, technical and socio-political issues**

- Regulatory issues: making European/interregional regulatory frameworks match each other (urban planning documents, self-consumption regulations, feed-in tariffs...).
- Economic issues: incentives (cost of electricity+ financial help) and issues of scale: different scale/ profitability.
- Go-between actors: what expert support? ('Climate Energy' officers in local governments, national network of cooperatives, etc.).



→ Socio-political issues:

- Agreeing on the principles of the energy transition ('better/less');
- Enabling all the actors to take part;
- Using price as a lever to make renewable energies 'attractive';
- Local reappropriation of energy issues;
- Relation between general interest/local interest = solidarity between territories/interconnection;
- Encouraging individual action and the capacity to act within social structures (landlord-tenant, etc.).

To be published soon:

Philippe Hamman (ed.), Cross-border Renewable Energy Transitions: Lessons from Europe's Upper Rhine Region, Routledge, December 2021.

Thank you for your attention!

Contact:

phamman@unistra.fr

Zusamme Solar Colmar



Fonds Européen de Développement Régional (FEDER)
Europäischer Fonds für Regionale Entwicklung (EFRE)
Dépasser les frontières : projet après projet
Der Oberrhein wächst zusammen, mit jedem Projekt

