



EmpowerMed

# Collective Assemblies

## *Training module*





**Work package:** WP2 - Building capacity for practical measures implementation

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# Overview of Module: Collective Assemblies

## Learning objectives

The aim of this module is to share experiences of energy empowerment through the tools and knowledge generated by group advisory meetings of people affected by energy poverty

- Learning tools and tricks to identify needs and build engagement of the participants
- Learning the structure and methodology (facilitation, roles, etc.) of Collective Assemblies to better implement them.
- Learning the improvements that can be made in terms of empowerment of affected people and how to accompany this process.

## Contents

- Context and legal framework of Collective Assemblies creation
- Strategies to involve: how to better identify needs for a higher engagement
- Methodology and structure of Collective Assemblies
- Results, limitations/challenges and strengths/opportunities of Collective Assemblies
- Communication with people affected



# 1. Introduction: Context and legal framework of Collective Assemblies experience

*"Analysing the context is key to plan the structure of Collective Assemblies in advance. It allows us to foresee what kind of cases we are likely to receive, or situations we will probably face"*

Collective Assemblies of energy poverty affected people, the experience that is going to be shared in this document, began in 2014 in Barcelona, Spain. The context in which this initiative was created was that at least 1 in every 10 people in Spain is unable to keep their homes warm. Other factors and legal framework operating in Spain at that time, that complement this context, are the following

## EU Directives

DIRECTIVE 2009/72/EC OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL concerning common rules for the internal market in electricity was the UE legislation that, at that time, should have guided Spain's policy. Nevertheless, Spain did not comply with Directive 2009/72 / EC which states that an effective separation between producing, distributing and commercializing electricity companies must be ensured.

The deadline for transposing the Directive was March 3, 2011. On the 15th of October /10/2012 The Commission warned Spain that it was still not complying with the Directive.

## Law 24/2013 of the Spanish State

Describes energy as a "service in the general economic interest" and has serve to further deregulate the electricity market. It poses difficulties on energy poverty causes such as energy prices.

## Law 24/2015 of Catalonia Parliament

Law 24/2015 is the legal framework that protects, at Catalan level, vulnerable people from disconnections.

This law was proposed precisely from the work on Collective assemblies that the Alliance against Energy Poverty had been doing after a year (from 2014 to 2015). The protection of this law has changed the type of cases that arrive to the Collective assemblies but it is precisely this adaptation to the actual context what makes this tool/initiative useful.

## 2. Strategies to involve: how to better identify needs for a higher engagement.

*"Needs should be identified from the context but also from practice. During the implementation of Collective Assemblies we will identify new needs, also depending on our advocacy work"*

Before starting planning or programming a tool/initiative like Collective assemblies it is key to make a detailed assessment of needs through several law and context analysis. Also talking to key local actors that might be receiving cases of affected people searching for economic help or assessment.

### Needs identified

In Barcelona experience, the needs identified are:

- Unpaid bills and **disconnections**. Also lack of regulated supply in occupied flats.
- **Excessive collecting** (improper fees charging, changes of tariffs), **phone harassment**, denial of new contracts, etc.
- General **lack of information** about:
  - Human Rights
  - Meaning and understanding of bills
- Companies taking advantage of the **opacity** of the system and of **bureaucracy**

### Particularly affected groups

It is also essential to take into account certain collectives that are specially affected by energy poverty. That means there will be special needs and maybe specific actions/materials to consider for **particularly vulnerable groups**:

- Women
- Elderly
- Migrant population
- Single parent families
- People living in occupied flats

### Role of mass media, imaginaries and public opinion

The mass media, the public opinion and also some administrations often have certain imaginaries that we should also address. Otherwise we will be in danger of perpetuating the situation of vulnerability:

- **Assistentialism:** payment of bills without giving any further tools to affected people)
- **Blaming/victimisation:** people are being put in the role of a victim, being ostracized for spending too much; at the same time there is concentration of power (economic and political) in 5 big energy suppliers. Anger at energy companies that are not fulfilling with laws can be a driving force for people to attend the first assembly.
  - “families consume too much”
  - “they don’t know how to manage their spending”
  - “they don’t want to pay”, etc

All these imaginaries and opinions generated by the mass media, can be addressed and confronted in the following ways:

- Need for **advocacy** and **communication work:** media can help to explain to people how the energy suppliers are violating their rights, which can be used to empower them to have the courage to attend an assembly for the first time, feel they are not alone, that it is a common situation in our society, etc.
- Need for **mutual support, empowerment** and **collective construction of knowledge**

### 3. Methodology and structure

*"The structure of Collective Assemblies responds to the needs identified. It should maintain a minimum common denominator (the methodology), but some parts can be flexible, just as the context, laws and needs change."*

*"Collective Assemblies structure in Barcelona responds to the context, legal framework and most common cases experience in the field. It is created in the image and likeness of Platform Against Evictions success case."*

#### Collective Assemblies' structure

The main structure of the 2 hour session consists on:

- **[5min] Welcome:** Unblaming/empowering speech, preferably by someone affected that has consistently participated in previous assemblies.
  - Use of messages, such as: *"you are in the right place and time; we are here to help; we are not lawyers, but together we have knowledge and can support each other..., de-victimizing the participants, ridding the of guilt; recognizing that we all have some knowledge and experience that needs to be shared"*, etc. See Annex for a speech example.
- **[3min] Who are we?** A small explanation of the Alliance, collective or organisation leading the initiative
- **[2min] Offering of dissemination materials,** for those who can leave posters or leaflets in key locations of their neighbourhoods. Disseminating leaflets is a shared responsibility - people distribute them in their e.g. libraries, share with friends... The assembly autonomously decides if in the past sessions there has been "enough" participants and if there is a need to push a little bit further in finding new affected people. Then an active dissemination is planned: among the social services, on the doors of supply companies etc.; This is further explained in 5th section of these materials.

It is key to make it appealing for new people to join this active dissemination, so older participants often offer themselves but new participants are invited to join.



- **[10min] General steps to take**, in most common cases. In the context of Barcelona and Catalonia it is as follows:

It is short introduction to the institutions that can provide further help to people and how to reach them<sup>1</sup>:

- **Utility companies**: their offices are the place where the person can ask for all the information about their contract conditions, pending bills or other details of the service they are receiving. Most people might need to check their contract conditions (lower capacity, change from free market tariffs to the regulated tariff, etc). Also people should be able to apply for discounts and/or social tariffs in utility companies' offices.
- **Social services**: here the vulnerability situation will be proved and the person will receive a document called "Report on Risk of housing exclusion". Some social services might also help affected people in applying for discounts and social tariffs.
- **Consumer's office**: that is the place where a complaint can be turned in, in case of illegal disconnections or harassment of companies, etc.

In this regard there is a warning against signing documents that people do not understand, and that they can consult consumers' associations or the next collective assembly if needed. It is also explained that disconnections are illegal and people have to fight against them (it will also depend on the legal framework at every context). The recognition of the fear of powerlessness of people against big companies is key to follow the general steps, letting them know that they might not succeed in their first attempt of reclaiming their rights or presenting a complaint, but stimulating to fight anyway.

- **[5min] Taking part in the survey** (it is ongoing during the other parts of the Collective Assembly because it is handed to the new participants when they arrive, and not all of them are on time). See Annex for a survey example.

We briefly explain that the survey is anonymous and that data is collected to have an overview of what the situations of the people are and to be able to report to local authorities on what is going on in the field. Also to be able to provide better collective advice. The small survey<sup>2</sup> is handed to first comers, and there is always someone in charge to answer any doubt to fill it in.

While they fill in the survey, the process of the assembly goes on, and the person in charge is always available to solve doubts. The survey is not obligatory, and very randomly someone refuses to take it.

- **[1h 30min] Actual cases/testimonies**: participants explain their own case/experience, starting with those attending for the first time<sup>3</sup> and following with

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<sup>1</sup> This will be different in every country or even in every municipality.

<sup>2</sup> People that come often to the assemblies do a long survey, and bills are needed to fill it in. This longer survey is not filled in in the same room, since it requires more time and intimacy. Only 20% of the people take it, in opposition to the first small survey, that is filled in by the 99% of the cases.

<sup>3</sup> Fill in forms/small surveys, for those who attend for the first time (includes acceptance of data management regarding Data protection laws)

those who need monitoring on the steps taken since last assembly.

- Everyone participating is a member of the assembly and can give their opinion. The aim is to provide information and guidance to affected people, for them to know how they can help themselves (information is power!).
- The most common procedure would be the following:
  - Recall the **general steps to take and adapt them to the specific case**. Clearly appoint to institutions to be addressed and documents needed.
  - In case answers are not immediately clear, members of assembly often **consult among each other**, since it is an open debate.
  - It is useful to keep a **register of all the steps advised/taken in each type of case**, so that the assembly can get back to the experienced ones
- The idea is that with the advice given, people will **try to do the different steps by themselves and return to the next assembly in two weeks**.
- Despite all the collective advice given, some cases in collective assembly are more likely to receive extra support: urgent cases like disconnections, cases with language barriers or cases where mental health problems are present; also cases where people reappear and are unable to help themselves. Those will also be discussed at the end of the assembly, to decide who/when/how and accompaniment will be made.

● **[5min]** Collective agreement and organisation of those cases that require **accompaniment visits** to utilities or other institutions; also denunciation or virtual actions.

- Some people need support for a longer time, some people solve their problems soon, and the aim of the collective assembly is to encourage people to try by themselves at least the first time. But precisely when the case is difficult, the accompaniment makes better sense.
- Here it is time to recall the steps that this accompanied cases will follow, and the day/hour where they will meet.
- At least two members of the assembly might accompany the person to the utility to support in exercising their right. This helps to facilitate the relation with the company; and often the company changes attitude when they see several people in the office only for one case.
- Sometimes there can also be an accompaniment to a group of people with a similar problem in the same utility company offices.



- **[1 or 2 extra hours]** There is an extra **space for coordination** that is not mandatory, and that might take place when the assembly grows and stays in time. There is a permanent invitation to people for staying in the coordination session, but normally newcomers won't stay the first time.
  - In the coordination space further **advocacy strategy** is discussed, as long as the functioning of the group and possible improving strategies for dissemination and raising awareness.
  - Also the need for **internal training** is discussed in this space. Topics can differ (e.g. how to make direct action, how to negotiate with the company, how to use twitter, understanding bills...), but the needs and topics are collectively identified. The weeks that there is not collective assemblies (bimonthly) the space might be used for this training.
  - Direct actions on the companies that do not fulfill the laws on consumer protection are also planned and discussed in this coordination space. The strength is the contact with real cases, which helps to advocate with companies. Often they might agree to change their attitude in a particular case because of media presence, but that sets a precedent. Also direct actions at utilities create a feeling of empowerment and belonging to the Collective Assemblies, and the feeling that **from mutual support to advocacy there is only a -sometime small, sometimes not so small- step**.

Collective Assemblies' facilitation



Collective assemblies' methodology meets the following patterns:

- **Open sessions:** everybody is welcome to join
- **Biweekly sessions,** always in the same venue.
- **Continuity** between sessions: people is expected to come back
- **Breaks with unidirectionality and expert logic** (everybody has something to share about their experience and case)
  - Everybody can give advice or share their opinions
  - The previous study of the context should help to have prepared some answers/steps
  - With the time, more and more people will know what those steps are, though every case is different and has its particularities
- Finding solutions to cases, collectively, means **learning together from our own and others' experiences.**
- Accompaniment visits are recommended when collective advice is not sufficient, when a specific need is identified, or when the person has tried to fulfil a task or bureaucracy paperwork by him/herself and does not success.

### Collective Assemblies' roles

Collective assemblies' roles<sup>4</sup> are normally the following, though they can change depending on the needs identified. They can also change through time.

- 1 person to give the "Welcome" speech
- 1 person to explain "Who we are"
- 1 person to explain "Steps to take in most common cases"
- 1 person to explain the importance of dissemination materials
- 1 person to keep everyone's turn to speak.
  - Normally this person also takes notes for a later description on the website This post or report will not include personal data, but rather the steps advised in every case and the feelings of the assembly and participants).
- 1 person to ensure the forms are filled in properly
- Ensure at least 3 people that have been attending consistently and might be willing to share their case, views or opinions

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<sup>4</sup> At the beginning some people can assume more than one role but the ideal if for them to be as much shared as possible

- 1 or more people for accompaniment (preferably 2 or more)
- There is also an informal division of coverage of issues
  - Someone handles water issues, someone electricity/gas
  - Someone else is more familiarized with how to deal with disconnections and the precaution principle of law 24/2015 of the Catalan Parliament
  - Someone else knows about social tariffs and discounts, and the procedure to apply for them
  - Someone else knows how to address cases of occupation and/or irregular connections to be regularized.



## 4. What are the results? Limitations/challenges vs. Strengths/opportunities

The results observed on the Barcelona case were the following:

- Empowerment
- Transformation of roles
- Collective construction of knowledge
- Responsibility is shared
- Creation of a network of mutual support, that stays in time (continuity), that transforms at the same time than the changing context (breaks with a static view of the matter).

Nevertheless, the format of collective assemblies has some hindrances that need to be taken into account as to generate a better engagement and take advantage of the opportunities created:

### Limitations/challenges

- Changing and complex context
- Cases are infinite. Even if the assembly keeps a register of each type of case and has clear guidance for each one of them, there is always new casuistic.
- The assembly does not always have solutions for everything!
- Difficulty of arriving beyond most common cases and collectives (not everybody knows the initiative): leaflets, communication work, etc.
- Certain intermittence of participants: depending on personal situation, motivation, etc.

### Strengths/opportunities

- Affected people are now "experts"
- Immediacy, link with reality on real time, ability to react (telegram, twitter actions, direct actions, etc.)
- Thinking together solutions and strategies
  - "What works for me can work for somebody else"
  - "we tried this and didn't work, so we have to try something new", etc.
- Historical accumulation of knowledge, etc.
- Feeling of belonging to a network, to a "family": Emotional support and feeling of collective strength instead of isolated and assistential/paternalistic counselling.





## 5. Communication with people affected

One of the main challenges with Collective assemblies is to prepare a widespread communication work, so that these sessions are known and achieve a wide range of dissemination through key actors, locations and media:

### Videos, social networks and website

Some examples of communication and media work are the following:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VelpStJ8ueI>

[www.pobresaenergetica.es](http://www.pobresaenergetica.es)

[https://twitter.com/APE\\_Cat](https://twitter.com/APE_Cat)



### Dissemination in key locations and local actors

Leaflets/posters are disseminated in key locations:

- Markets
- Health centres
- Seniors' centres
- Social services offices
- Employment offices
- At the exits of utility offices

Apart from offering these materials in the Collective Assemblies, once every two weeks there is a meeting in a chosen neighbourhood, to hand in the materials in person, directly to people on the street, markets, outside key offices, etc., so that we can explain more details if needed)





## Useful documents

Communication work with people affected has proved to be better developed when materials are also targeted. In the case of Barcelona several “Useful documents” were created inspired on the needs identified. They are templates that help with the bureaucracy /technical terms barriers:















<https://pobresaenergetica.es/index.php/ca/passos-a-seguir/documents-utills>

Examples of “Useful documents” can be:

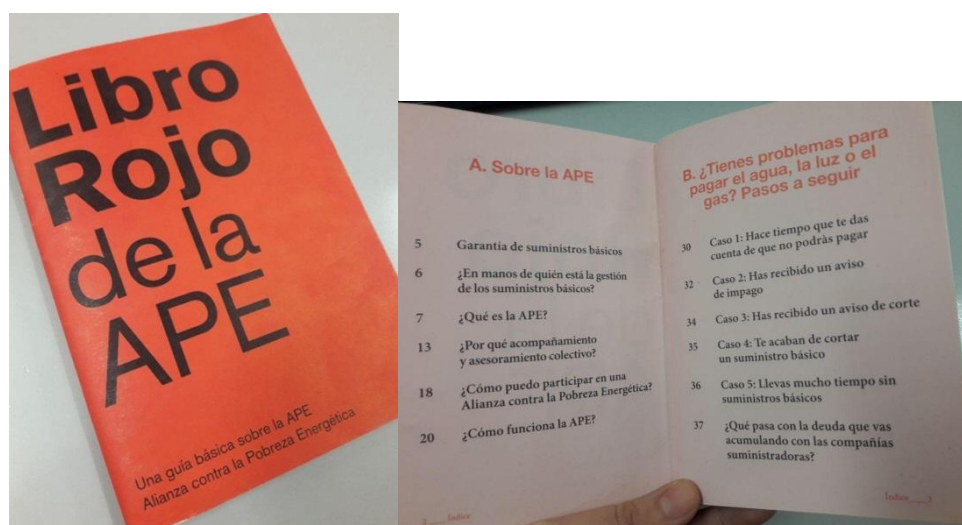
- Complaint for improper disconnections
- Complaint for improper telephone harassment or changes in the contract without permission
- Summary of requirements to access discounts or special tariffs

● Infographics of main instructions or actors to address

Tipo de consumidor	Límites de renta mensual (14 pagas) menor o igual a	Límites máximos de consumo (kWh / año / hogar)	Descuento	Plazo de corte del suministro en caso de impago	Quién paga
<b>Consumidor vulnerable</b>					
 Unidad familiar sin menores a cargo o no formar parte de ninguna unidad familiar.	805,67 € / mes	1.380	25%	4 meses	Comercializadoras en función de clientes
 Unidad familiar con un menor a cargo.	1.074,23 € / mes	1.932	25%	4 meses	Comercializadoras en función de clientes
 Unidad familiar con dos menores a cargo.	1.331,27 € / mes	2.346	25%	4 meses	Comercializadoras en función de clientes
 Categorías especiales (violencia de género, discapacidad 33% o +, víctimas del terrorismo, dependencia reconocida de grado II o III, o familias monoparentales).	 1.074,23 € / mes  1.342,78 € / mes  1.611,34 € / mes	 1.380  1.932  2.346	25%	4 meses	Comercializadoras en función de clientes
 Las familias numerosas.	Sin límite	4.140	25%	4 meses	Comercializadoras en función de clientes
 Unidades familiares en las que todos sus miembros que tengan ingresos sean pensionistas del Sistema de la Seguridad Social por jubilación o incapacidad permanente.	Quantía mínima (sin otros ingresos cuya cuantía agregada anual supere los 500€).	1.932	25%	4 meses	Comercializadoras en función de clientes


“The red book”

“The red book” is a guide for Collective assemblies that includes a summary of the different aspects exposed in this training materials, but targeted to affected people.



What is in the book?

- **Principles of the initiative:** to guarantee basic supplies like energy, human rights perspective, empowerment-lead
- **Context** of the energy model in the country/region: explained in a simplified way, through understandable examples or terms
- **Who are we?** Small explanation of who holds the initiative
- **Why a Collective Assembly?** The benefits of the methodology
- **How can I take part?** Ways of participating in the initiative

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- **Common cases:** a summary of 4 or 5 most common cases/situations and the steps to take in those cases

What does the book serve for?

- It is a **guide**, a written structure of what actually happens in situ. Especially for those who arrive to the Collective Assembly for the first time, it is very useful to take the book home (fits in a pocket) and bring it now and then
- It is a **reminder** of the basic steps to take in common cases. When someone has doubts, there it is a summary of actions to take.
- It is a “**manifesto**” of how the Collective assemblies work and how they are facilitated (rules of the game).

## Annex

### Welcoming speech

"Welcome everybody to the collective assembly of the Alliance against Energy Poverty (APE). You need to know that from now on you are not alone. You are in the best place possible. The first important thing to know is that APE and its collective assembly is a tool. A tool that might help you solve some problems that you currently have with basic supplies such as energy. We are not a consultancy office or company. We are not a lawyer office either. What you'll receive from the will always be an advice, not "what to do". Then, it is entirely up to you how to proceed. The final decision is always yours.

You need to know that you are about to expose your case or situation to people that currently are, or have been in the recent past, in a similar situation. so they know, we know, what you are going through, what you are experiencing when you are being disconnected from your energy or water supply, what you feel when companies harass you asking for an accumulated debt, when you feel you are being cheated or tricked by one of these companies. The nights with no sleep, the despair when you feel you are worth nothing, and the sensation when your world is sinking.

Therefore, it is important that when you expose your case you are as clear as possible. No one is going to judge you. It will be very useful to know the details of your situation, the steps you have already taken to try solving it, who you have talked to or what actors you have addressed.

We will try to accompany you in the several steps you might want to take from now on to improve your situation, socially, economically and also emotionally. APE will help you to empower yourself. If you get stuck in any of the moments of the process, don't worry, we will probably have to try several times and several strategies. We will accompany you to some of these steps if needed, but we will always encourage you to try by yourself first. And you are always welcome to come back to the assembly with more doubts. The idea is, even when your case improves or is solved, that you continue to come to this space, because the actors and companies we are facing have a strong power, and together we can better build the collective knowledge and strength to stop the violations of our basic rights. We are here to raise our voice and exercise our rights. The situations we face shouldn't be blamed on us.

Welcome everybody again, and now, let's start the assembly"

## File card / Small survey

### Name/Logo of the organisation

### USER FILE CARD

This small survey is a file card with the purpose of a follow up of the cases participating in the assembly and the adequate management of data. Filling it in won't take you more than 5 minutes.

#### PERSONAL DATA

**Name:** ..... **e-mail:** .....  
(Your name is only needed for internal organisation, you can use a nickname if preferred)

**City/Town:** ..... **PC:** ..... **Street and number:** .....  
(No need to specify floor or door number. This information allows us to know the year of the building)

**Gender:**            Man            Woman            Other/Non binary

**Mobile phone:** ..... **Do you have Telegram?**            Yes    No  
(We use this app to communicate and call for new collective assemblies, etc.)

#### FAMILY SITUATION

**TOTAL NUMBER OF PEOPLE LIVING IN THE HOUSEHOLD:** .....

Specify the number of people in the household depending on age and gender:

Age / Gender	Man	Woman	Other/Non binary
Minors (0 to 17)			
Adults (18 to 64)			
65 or older			

If any of them is a person with a disability specify how many? .....

**¿Are you registered in the census?:**            Yes    No

**¿Are you registered or are a user of Social Services (SS)?:**    No    No

**Do you have a SS report about your situation of vulnerability?:**

Yes            No            I don't know what that is            They won't give it to me

Reason for the denial of the report: .....

#### DWELLING BASIC DATA

**Your home is:**    Property            Rent            Occupied            Other (specify):.....

**What is the level of comfort (adequate temperature) at home?**

(very poor comfort: it's cold in winter and/or hot in summer)    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10    (high comfort: it's not cold in winter nor hot in summer)

## **ENERGY POVERTY DATA**

**You are affected of what supply/ies?:**                      Water                      Light                      Gas

Detail the situation of your supplies (you can cross more than a box in every row):

	Supply is contracted under my name	Supply is contracted under someone else's name	Irregular connection	Supply cut warning	Supply already disconnected	I have accumulated debt	Does not apply / I don't have this supply or service
Water							
Light							
Gas							

If any of the supplies has already been disconnected, specify how many months you have been without supply: .....

Detail the conditions of your contract (you can cross more than a box in every row):

	I have contracted the regulated tariff	I have contracted hour discrimination tariff	I have the social tariff applied to my bill	My application to social tariff has been refused/denied	Does not apply / I don't have this supply or service
Water					
Light					
Gas					

### **How did you met us?**

Friends                      Press/Media                      Web/Social networks                      Other (specify): .....

### **What tasks can you give a hand with?**

Accompaniments                      Actions                      Minutes                      Web /Social networks                      Other (specify): .....

## **EXPLICIT CONSENT FOR THE MANAGEMENT OF DATA**

[This text will depend on each particular organisation]

Date and place

Signature (or check if the form is virtual).

EU Disclaimer

