

JOURNAL

PROJECT

Vilawatt - Innovative
local public-private-
citizen partnership for
energy governance

📍 Viladecans, Spain

TOPIC

Energy Transition

EDIT 01 FEBRUARY 2022
BY MARTA GARCIA

Final Journal UIA VILAWATT project

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The VILAWATT project was implemented to secure a stable energy transition process through the setting of an innovative governance structure (local public-private-citizen partnership-PPCP), providing four key services to improve energy management at local level: energy supply, energy culture, retrofitting of buildings and a local crypto currency linked to energy savings in Viladecans. Although the project ended some months ago, the essence of Vilawatt remains even beyond the limits of the municipality. On one side, some of the tools designed during the implementation phase such as the Public-Private-Citizen governance Partnership (PPCP), the Local Energy Operator or the energy currency linked to the savings remain active and used in the city. On the other side, the project is being transferred to other cities thanks to the UIA-URBACT Transfer Mechanism initiative which ensures the project remains alive. This journal offers a status of the project during the 4th year to evaluate how it has evolved after the official ending date.

1. Project's progress

a. What has happened with the project since its end date?

Vilawatt is more than a project. It has penetrated the municipality life and the community has not noticed that the project ended more than a year ago. It is already consolidated and seen as the energy strategy of the municipality. The project has been a seed of innovation in the City Council and has led to the development of a City Council Innovation Model (MIA), that would have not been possible to approach that fast without the previous existence of the Vilawatt. It can be said that Vilawatt prepared the City Council to address the challenges of the municipality with a new innovative perspective.

Since the end date, the essence of Vilawatt has permeated at different levels: on one side, Viladecans 2030 Strategy was approved in September 2021 and Vilawatt project is the main driver to accomplish one of these missions, specifically to "to make Viladecans a climate-neutral city by 2030" On the other side, Vilawatt is the core of the local policies for energy transition, where the creation of Local Energy Communities is contributing to make more participative and attractive the process of local energy transition, resulting in savings in the cost of energy,

promoting green energy and involving more the citizenship in the transition process.

Vilawatt is well established as a brand and as a city project in the municipality and beyond, as it is well known in the region too.

b. What is the project's plan for long-term sustainability?

The current political context is an opportunity to accelerate the energy transition. Since climate change and the energy transition is a crucial issue at the international, national, regional and local agendas, Vilawatt is a powerful tool to fight against climate change and accomplish the EU objectives of reducing greenhouse emissions. The project ended some months ago but, as said, the essence continues and Vilawatt is the core of other initiatives such as Viladecans 2030 strategy or the local energy transition plan. As explained above, to ensure the continuation of VILAWATT objectives, different strategies have been set up. On one side, Viladecans 2030 Strategy (approved September 2021) sets 5 main city missions. The Vilawatt project will be the main driver to accomplish the mission of reduction of greenhouse gases and make Viladecans a carbon neutral city by 2030. On the other side, Vilawatt is aimed to be the driver of the local policies for energy transition, where the creation of Local Energy Communities should help to make more participative and attractive the process of local energy transition. Furthermore, while Vilawatt started in a specific city district, Montserratina, it has been expanded throughout the city including more services such as the energy communities' programme partially funded by ERDF funds managed by the Spanish Ministry.

And last but not least, the participation of the urban authority in a UIA-URBACT Transfer Mechanism project that aims at transferring our Vilawatt experience and learnings into 3 European cities will reinforce the sustainability of the project.

Concerning the implementation challenges, while the project was active there were two intense challenges that Viladecans had to face: public procurement and participative approach for co-implementation. The complexity of the project implementation and the difficulty to deploy the energy tools conceived at the same time, led to delays and difficulties in the synchronization of all project dimensions. Besides, the creation of a community around a subject such as energy has required an effort in relation to citizen training that has required an additional effort with respect to the creation of another type of community. However, the intensity of the challenge during the implementation phase has been fruitful as, after the project, citizen engagement is still a reality and some of the public procurement, have been overcome.

Vilawatt has proved to have a sustainability plan well establish in order to keep the essence of the innovations implemented. At short-term, sustainability has already been proved with these months of activity beyond the end date. As measures and initiatives launched are framed under long term strategies, Vilawatt long-term sustainability seems to be ensured.

2. Generated Knowledge

Lessons learnt

A UIA project offers the possibility for urban authorities to test new risky and experimental ideas. The municipality is transformed into a lab and hypothesis are tested and if successful, prepared for the upscaling phase.

Vilawatt has been four years under laboratory conditions in relation with energy which has resulted in great successes as well as failures that are worth to share. Both monitoring and evaluation of the project have been key elements to identify these transferable lessons learnt.

In the case of Vilawatt and probably in most of the projects with innovative implications, the greatest challenges and complexities are related to the biggest successes too. To have success after a hard and complex process is even more successful. In the case of Vilawatt the participatory approach for co-implementation has brought the major list of satisfactions as well as headaches to the consortium.

The participative approach for co-implementation: a major challenge, a better impact

As one of the most innovative aspects of the project is its participative approach, to boost change, it is really important to foster the ownership & sense of belonging (schools, politicians, business sector, professionals, etc). In order to do so, Vilawatt designed a participatory strategy with more than 10 social actors in the city, that actively contributed to the project creation. This allowed Vilawatt to have a complete participative approach from early stages, to have all skills and talents from the different agents involved, to build and achieve a new city energy

vision, allowing the team to transit from a passive to a proactive role regarding energy management & consumption.

The implication with the stakeholders within Vilawatt has resulted very interesting and relevant for the innovative experience. However, although being a major achievement it also became a major challenge.

The project consisted in the creation of an innovative governance structure (local public-private-citizen partnership-PPCP), providing four key services to improve energy management at local level: energy supply, energy culture, retrofitting of buildings and a local crypto currency linked to energy savings. The activation of this kind of structures has arisen different complexities such as the bureaucratic complexity of the establishment of the PPCP that required a lot of benchmarking and analysis time, as well as the legal complexity of the energy currency (restriction of electronic Money laws, implementation of the blockchain Technology...).

Another major achievement was finding the 3 Demo Renovated Communities for the Vilawatt and promoting the energy retrofitting of 55 dwellings, including the agreement between neighbours that never co-worked before. It was a complex participatory process where plenty of efforts has been put by different project participants and other actors.

Furthermore, when involving citizens it is essential to evaluate impacts in advance, In the case of Vilawatt and before managing aids to rehabilitation works, it was necessary to think carefully about the fiscal barriers and the impact that they will represent on the tax returns of the beneficiaries (given the situation that they were low income beneficiaries and therefore they were not obliged to declare their incomes as they were below the limit). At the end, one of the lessons learned is that it is very difficult to replicate all the services as originally conceived so flexibility is needed to pivot the initial plans.

In this project, participation of citizens has been one of the most challenging issues. However, it has been one of the biggest successes too.

The importance of a narrative and branding within the municipality and beyond

One of the biggest successes of Vilawatt is that it has overcome the project scope. Vilawatt brand is consolidated beyond the municipality limits, and it is related with the energy transition. Vilawatt is well known at national level as the energy transition strategy for Viladecans and this seems to remain beyond the project.

The team has dedicated efforts through the years to establish Vilawatt as a brand and it has been a complete success. Some projects diluted after the end of the eligible period, but Vilawatt has remained in the municipality but also beyond the local limits.

Not to underestimate public procurement as a challenge

It seems that a local authority has experience enough in tendering out contracts to external service providers and/or purchase products through public procurement procedures. However, on an innovation context it becomes more complex. In this project, the complexity of the project implementation and the difficulty to deploy the energy tools conceived led to delays and difficulties in the synchronization of all project dimensions (PPCP creation, energy currency deployment, the Vilawatt Office..) that force the consortium to change some of the beneficiary budget to speed up the externalizations and avoid the legal complexity and administrative procedures of the public procurement contracts planned.

Working on the sustainability of the project from the beginning ensures the innovation remains after the end of the project

During a project flow, it seems normal to focus on the implementation and once it is established to give shape to the sustainability. However, working on the sustainability from the start is better to ensure the project essence will remain after the end of the pilot implementation. In the case of Vilawatt, the team always had the idea to make Viladecans a referent municipality on energy transition. From the beginning, Vilawatt was explained not as a project with a start and an end but as a way of understanding energy in the municipality. This narrative penetrated very well in the community and has helped Viladecans to continue with the energy transition strategy after the end of the project.

Besides, all energy transition actions in the City have been developed under the Vilawatt umbrella and, therefore, under its participatory philosophy based on co-creation. In addition, the methodology and pillars of the project have been used to build the strategic documents of the Viladecans 2030 Strategy.

Upscaling

At the beginning Vilawatt was focused in a concrete city district, Montserratina, however Vilawatt is nowadays a city project that reaches all city districts: PCPP, energy supply, consultancy service, local currency, etc. All services are open to all citizens and local enterprises.

Besides, the creation of energy communities is based on the start-up of 22 projects of photovoltaic installations, with financing from ERDF funds and a Municipal contribution, with a total investment of € 1,200,000. These facilities are for municipal self-consumption, reducing the need for carbon-based energy, but CELs are underway, taking advantage of energy surpluses and sharing them with neighbors and companies.

And beyond the urban limits, a new project: UIA-URBACT Transfer Mechanism that aims at transferring Vilawatt's experience and learnings into 3 European cities.

And last, but not least, Vilawatt has been a seed of innovation in the City Council, and has led to the development of a City Council Innovation Model (MIA), that wouldn't have been possible to approach that fast without the previous existence of the Vilawatt. It can be said that Vilawatt prepared the City Council to address the challenges with an innovative perspective.

Recommendations to other urban authorities who wish to implement similar innovative projects

It is always a challenge for an urban authority to implement innovative projects. From Vilawatt experience, the following learnings may be of interest for other urban authorities willing to implement similar projects:

- The need of **a strong political leadership and support**: Vilawatt has been a strategic and complex project affecting many municipal services, such as business development, energy, participative processes, education, skills development, etc. Political leadership and support during the whole timeframe of the project is essential for the success of the implementation and the effective gear.
 - On innovative projects many unexpected issues appear, even more than planned. This is why it is important to ensure **capacity and flexibility to manage the unexpected**.
 - An isolated project won't be as effective as **a project integrated into a broader and long-term vision and strategy on Energy Transition** in the municipality.
 - In order to minimize risks, it is recommended to analyze legal and strategic context in advanced.
 - Part of the project preparation must include a financial plan with risk analysis to take into consideration different scenarios.
 - To choose right project partners is a valid recommendation for all kind of projects but on innovation projects is even more important.
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3. Conclusion

This journal has presented an overview of Vilawatt progress and lessons learnt since the official end of the project, as well as upcoming challenges.

Vilawatt is one of these projects that overcomes the project scope. Even before the end of the project, Vilawatt had its own entity beyond the limits of the UIA programme and has impacted the local community, the local government itself and other municipalities.

Vilawatt is well-established in the municipality and well-known in the region so it has been constated that, the end of the UIA financed programme has not been noticed by the community. Vilawatt continues its operation in Viladecans, incorporating new initiatives such as the promotion of energy communities, completely aligned with the initial objectives of the project. Even if the participatory approach was one of the toughest challenges during the implementation part, it has resulted in one of the biggest successes too as community engagement in the municipality is higher than in other municipalities.

Vilawatt has also overcome energy objectives and represents a turning point in the way the municipality faces challenges. For Viladecans, Vilawatt has been a seed of innovation in the City Council, and has led to the development of a City Council Innovation Model (MIA), that wouldn't have been possible to approach that fast without the previous existence of the Vilawatt. It can be said that Vilawatt prepared the City Council to address the challenges with an innovative perspective.

Finally, the UIA-URBACT Transfer Mechanism is an opportunity too as it is transferring Vilawatt's experience and learnings into 3 European cities ensuring the project upscaling.

Creating a legacy is much more than the tangible results that are left behind a project and Vilawatt has left an

important and necessary legacy in the field of energy transition and citizen engagement at local level that will persist in time.

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