

Energy cooperation is expected to play an increasing role in the European Energy policy. Since the launch of the Barcelona process back in 1995 and the introduction of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in 2004, energy has been at the core of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation. In 2009, a key driving force behind the RES Directive 2009/28/EC was the EU's long-term vision of an affordable, reliable and sustainable energy system by 2050. This vision was coupled with a concrete goal to reduce CO₂ emissions by 85-90 per cent by 2050 compared to the 1990 level and the intermediate goals in the period to 2050 include the 20/20/20 targets for 2020 and the 27/27/40 targets for RES/energy efficiency/CO₂ emission reductions by 2030.

In this context, an important role, not only for cost effectively meeting the 2020 RES target but also for the design of Europe's Energy system beyond 2020, may involve cooperation within the EU and between EU and its neighbouring regions incentivized by RES cooperation mechanisms as provided for by the RES Directive. In this sense, Article 9 of the RES Directive enables Member States to cooperate with neighbouring countries in joint renewable electricity projects as long as, among other pre-requisites, the electricity generated is physically imported to the European territory. The rationale for this instrument is that, compared to the EU, neighbouring countries have a relative advantage in terms of RES-E potential and/or costs.

Although European Commission estimates that great savings can arise from an international cooperative approach in reaching EU Renewable Energy targets by 2020 and beyond, implementing such cooperation scheme has not been an easy task. This is amply demonstrated by the fact that since the directive entered into force in 2009, not a single Article 9 project has seen the light and other regional cooperation initiatives have not delivered the desired outcomes. One possible explanation is the difficulty involved in considering and engaging a great number of actors with their concerns and often conflicting interests. Additionally, decision-makers should account for the impact of the proposed cooperation initiatives in a wide number of parameters, often cope with geopolitical instability and uncertainty, sometimes weak energy systems, manage short and long-term time frames, consider the various political agendas at play, account for the externalities in the energy market, protect the most vulnerable ones, etc.

Over more than 30 months, while acknowledging and adapting to a changing geopolitical environment, the BETTER project (Brining Europe and Third Countries closer together through renewable energies) has attempted to shed some light to the above mentioned challenges by addressing RES cooperation between EU and neighbouring regions in several dimensions. While the starting point of the project has been Article 9 of the RES directive 2009/28/EC, the project has assessed renewable energy cooperation opportunities and challenges in a broader way. In this context, the core objective of BETTER has been to assess, through case studies – in North Africa, Turkey and the Western Balkans – stakeholder involvement and integrated analysis, to what extent cooperation with neighbouring countries can help Europe achieve its RES targets in 2020 and beyond, trigger the deployment of RES electricity projects in third countries and create synergies and win-win circumstances for all involved parties.

This special issue presents some of the most relevant findings of the BETTER project. As BETTER coordinator, I hope that this Special Issue will increase the understanding about not only the multiple factors and challenges at play but also the multiple potential benefits associated to renewable energy cooperation.

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