

TACKLING ENERGY POVERTY: THE POTENTIAL OF A MOBILE 'ONE-STOP SHOP'

TRANSITION POINT: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



CALOUSTE GULBENKIAN
FOUNDATION

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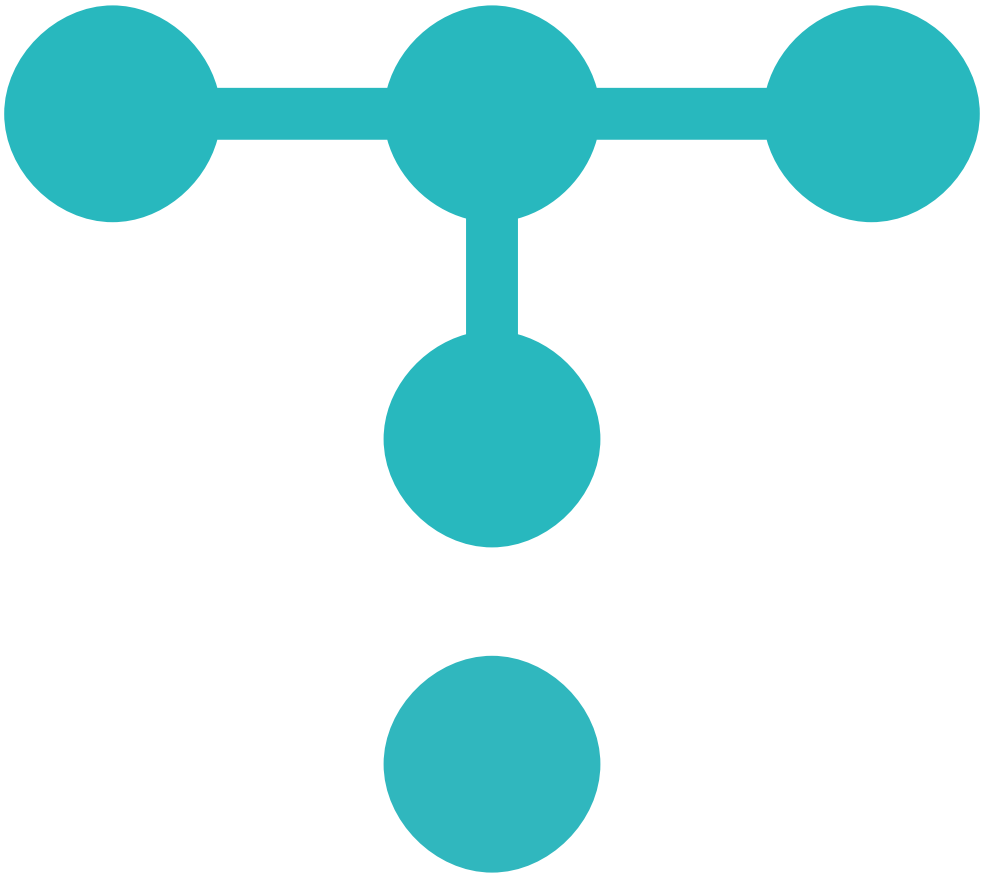
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The Transition Point one-stop shop in Palmela (Setúbal District), Portugal. November 2022 © Márcia Lessa



About Transition Point ('Ponto de Transição')

The Transition Point pilot project is an initiative of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in Portugal. It was implemented in the district of Setúbal, near Lisbon, between 2022 and 2023, in partnership with three other Portuguese entities: the Energy and Environment Agency of Arrábida (ENA), FCT-NOVA's Centre for Research in Environment and Sustainability (CENSE) and the Association of Energy and Environment Agencies (RNAE).

Operating from a reused shipping container, Transition Point is a 'one-stop shop' that offers services to local populations, including advice on electricity and gas, information and support for home energy efficiency, and free energy assessments.

At a glance

Mobile 'one-stop shops' – bringing advice to the heart of communities under one roof – can improve living conditions for vulnerable households, increase their resilience, and underpin a just energy transition which leaves no one behind as we all adapt to climate change. A pilot project, Transition Point, has modelled an innovative local response to alleviating energy poverty – from problem diagnosis and solution design to direct citizen support and community engagement. It shows that:

- Vulnerable households require tailor-made engagement and support; one-stop shops can frame this effectively through early multidisciplinary collaboration and continuing close partnership with local authorities and social support institutions.
- Robust and varied data collection allows projects to fine-tune support in real-time in response to what local people need.
- A well-aligned local action framework has impact, but vulnerable households may be unable to implement advice without considerable and stable financial support.
- One-stop shops can act as a bridge between (sometimes complex) financial support programmes and vulnerable individuals.

The pilot's experience provides valuable pointers for advice projects working with hard-to-reach or vulnerable communities on energy issues.

Introduction

The energy crisis and the climate emergency have seen the numbers living in energy poverty rise rapidly. ‘Energy poverty’ describes people’s inability to guarantee essential energy services within their home; it is a complex phenomenon affecting millions in Europe, seriously impacting their health and wellbeing as well as their finances. With temperature extremes forecast to become more frequent and more intense, households need information and support services that help them both become more energy-resilient and better understand the necessity for energy transition in response to climate change and the role they can play.

Mobile ‘one-stop shops’ offer a promising solution to these challenges. They provide tailored energy poverty advice, under one roof and from various sites within communities. This turns complex processes into a single-entry, consumer-friendly approach, promoting direct contact between consumers and experts to address ‘energy illiteracy’ (a lack of knowledge and technological capabilities around energy matters).

A year-long project, Transition Point, has piloted this approach in different locations in three municipalities in Portugal (via a single one-stop shop that switched sites). It models an innovative, local response to alleviating energy poverty – from problem diagnosis and solution design to direct citizen support and community engagement.

It aimed to inform consumers and improve their homes’ energy-efficiency and comfort. Energy-poor families were the target audience, although the shop was open to everyone.

Transition Point provided:

- advice on electricity and gas tariffs;
- information and support on public funding schemes for home renovation;
- free home energy audits.

The project trained local young people – Transition Agents – to perform the audits, empowering the community and fostering green jobs.

The extent of energy poverty

Visitors to the one-stop shop showed signs of significant vulnerability to energy poverty. They reported having difficulty both paying energy bills and reducing consumption, while being too hot in summer and too cold in winter.

The home energy audits collected detailed data, identified safety and sanitary problems, and allowed personalised advice on energy-efficiency and renewable energy measures. These audits confirmed the low energy-efficiency of local homes. There was considerable scope for energy and water savings and reductions in CO₂ emissions, although these could require considerable financial investment beyond the means of individual households.

Nevertheless, reviews of energy bills for those visiting the one-shop stop identified potential annual savings of €290 on average.

What worked in delivering the service

Working in partnership and building trust

The first step was bringing together a multidisciplinary team, including energy experts from energy agencies and academic institutions, while partnering with local government and associations with in-depth local knowledge. Local organisations – such as social support institutions – engage diverse vulnerable populations through solid, trusted relationships and can provide well-established and direct communication channels. To build trust, the one-stop shop remained independent of energy market suppliers.

Collecting information

The project combined a variety of data, indicators and local experience to understand the multiple dimensions of energy poverty and what local people needed from a one-stop shop. The shop developed proper data collection and information management, including household characterisation surveys, data processing software, template energy audit reports, and measurement equipment for energy audits. This helped standardise services and ensured data protection: data confidentiality requirements needed particular consideration. Regular impact monitoring meant the team could continuously fine-tune the approach.

Location

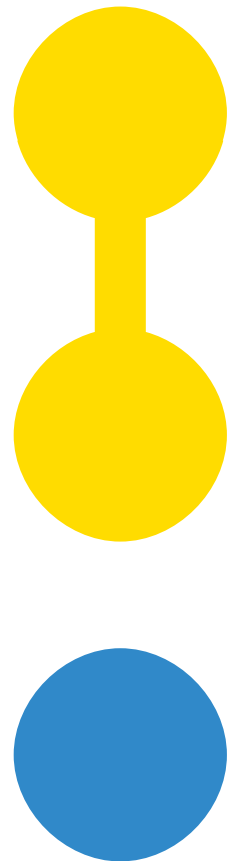
Choosing the right locations was critical. Highly frequented public areas, with considerable visibility and accessible to all, attracted more people. As a pilot, the mobile one-stop shop ran for a limited period in each place; this made it harder to attract as many people. Three months felt the minimum time needed to foster continued support through multiple interactions at each site. Extended opening hours were crucial in reaching people with different work schedules.

Premises

A refurbished shipping container offered an innovative, flexible and mobile way of delivering face-to-face support within communities. The container's visually appealing design sparked curiosity, encouraging people to approach and ask questions.

Staffing

The one-stop shop was supported by a full-time dedicated technician with communication skills and a pool of Transition Agents recruited directly from the communities. All those involved received special training beforehand. The technician supported people in applying for energy-efficiency funding and helped untangle confusing or problematic application processes. The Transition Agents were a key component: they visited people's homes and delivered personalised support; this helped people trust the project. However, training for Transition Agents had to balance content depth and delivery speed; this trade-off may impact services' quality, replicability, and comprehensiveness.





Communication

‘Energy poverty’ is a complex concept and a sensitive issue. Clear and positive messaging – focusing on improving energy-efficiency and comfort, and on lowering energy costs – helped to reach the target population. To spread the word, the project used a diverse range of platforms, including social networks, national and local media, conferences, events, and databases.

What held delivery back

The project revealed distrust around official funding programmes. People said excessive bureaucracy made application processes difficult and time-consuming, and led to unsuccessful and unfinished applications. Eligibility restrictions for national energy-efficiency public funding at the time also prevented the most vulnerable from applying.

Energy-poor and vulnerable households are often hard-to-reach. Feelings of shyness, stigma, mistrust – even not recognising a problem existed – could keep people away from Transition Point. Initiating conversations, often alongside other social support initiatives, was key to increasing engagement. Small gifts (like LED light bulbs) helped to build trust and encouraged visitors. Different contact methods, such as door-to-door, telephone or internet, reached those unable to visit the shop. Thus, there is considerable potential for one-stop shops to act as a bridge between national programmes and communities.

Most people don’t carry their energy bills around, so had to return with them for advice. The high percentage who did not return for a second visit shows a need for a proactive follow-up strategy (for instance, through telephone or online support).

To ensure a comprehensive support framework, the project was open to the whole local community, accounting for various needs within it. While this is inclusive and reaches more people, it may also leave fewer resources available to vulnerable households that most need support.

Local and regional energy agencies surveyed within the project evidenced limited practical knowledge of one-stop shops. Most were open to hosting or replicating the project. Nevertheless, there was concern about barriers such as financing constraints and a lack of necessary human resources.

Insights for change

Expanding community-level impacts

A strong, early strategy to involve local stakeholders in the entire one-stop shop process, from design to implementation, is critical to build a solid network of partners.

Effective collaboration requires adequate funding, resources and time to map, engage, and work with local partners. Similar approaches should work with existing social support services to better engage hard-to-reach groups. The role of Transition Agents has untapped potential here.

Deepening support to vulnerable households

Vulnerable households often have limited means to change their situation. Future initiatives could directly support tangible measures, such as laying insulation, replacing energy-inefficient equipment, integrating renewable energy systems, and repairing safety and sanitary hazards. Funding and implementing these measures would more effectively reduce vulnerability to energy poverty and improve household resilience.

Fostering replication and policy integration

Replication could be based on partnerships with the private sector (the model has attracted attention from businesses interested in social responsibility), participation in national and international projects in collaboration with other bodies, and integration into local government energy and climate policies. This could bring energy-poor and hard-to-reach households to the forefront of local energy strategies and measures.

Bridging the funding gap

A vast funding gap exists for energy-poor households, where recommendations from the technical experts require extensive financial, technical and social support to implement. Support and funding schemes should be more stable and continuous. A focus should be placed on vulnerable and hard-to-reach groups, via a strategy of mainly tailored support aimed at structurally improving the energy performance of homes. If adequate funding is in place, one-stop shop models like Transition Point have the potential to act as living labs for testing strategies' effectiveness in real time (and informing decision-makers).

Recommendations for key agents

National governments:

- Embed the need to target energy-poor and hard-to-reach populations when designing and implementing policies, measures and funding schemes;
- Guarantee stable policy and funding for home energy-efficiency improvements as an essential component of broader energy, climate and social strategies that secure a just energy transition;
- Promote a national energy poverty network, involving multiple stakeholders.

Local authorities:

- Establish local one-stop shops, using their resources to engage local organisations and to identify and support the energy-poor with tailored action;
- Open funding programmes (complementary to national funding) to support households to adopt energy-efficiency measures;
- Integrate efforts around local energy, energy-poverty and climate goals to tackle energy poverty.

Regional and local energy and environment agencies:

- Offer technical knowledge on energy-efficiency to local communities;
- Develop local-scale diagnoses and tailor appropriate support measures prior to taking up leadership roles in one-stop shops.

Non-governmental and community-based organisations:

- Promote one-stop shop services and identify and support vulnerable households through their extensive experience in local engagement, well-established communication channels, and trusted relationships with hard-to-reach audiences.

Academic institutions:

- Provide scientific evidence and model interventions;
- Support diagnosis, planning and impact assessment phases.

Private sector bodies:

- Help sustain, replicate and leverage one-stop shops towards new business models, provide direct funding, volunteer support or materials under social and environmental impact corporate strategies.

Conclusion

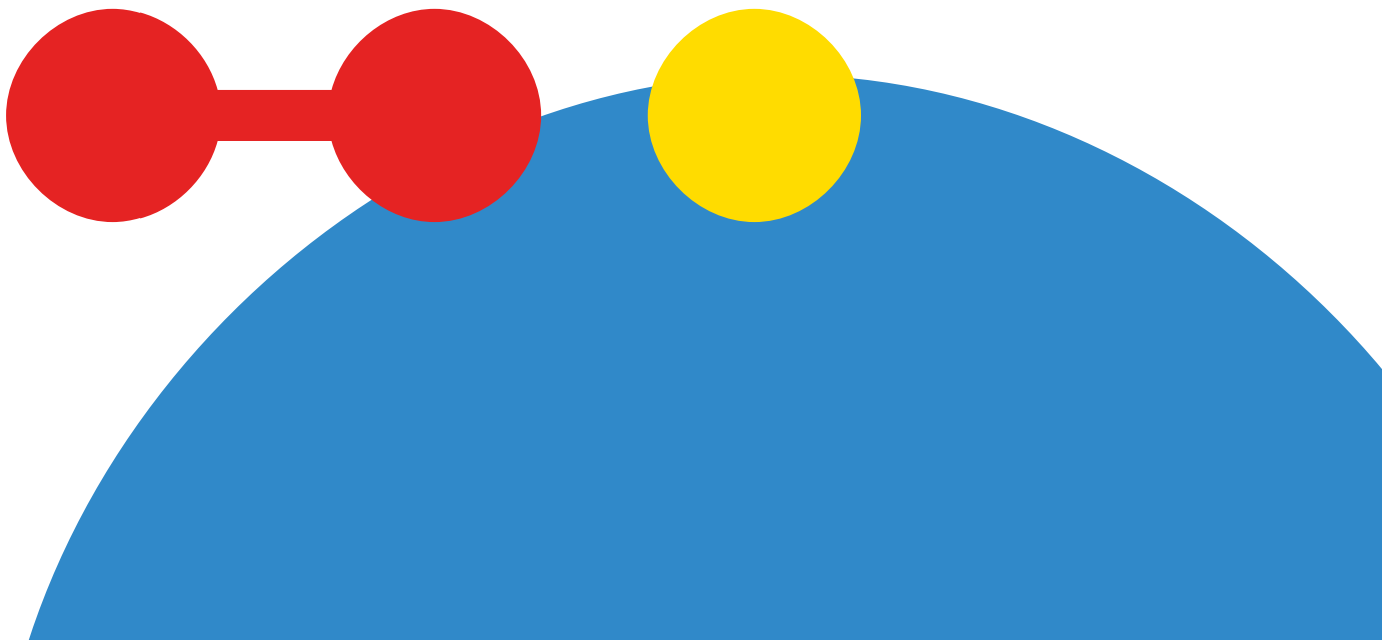
The Transition Point pilot resulted in tangible and intangible outcomes, supporting households in need and empowering individuals and communities to embrace energy-efficiency and contribute to a sustainable future. It offers a highly replicable model for advising vulnerable communities.

To boost positive impacts, the researchers recommend that future initiatives focus on deploying participatory, proactive, and flexible approaches to deliver multidimensional targeted support. These should be fine-tuned in real-time according to the evolving contextual background and the distinct needs of the target population. Projects should engage local stakeholders as meaningful partners from the start, employing a varied dissemination strategy and empowering local citizens as agents of change in their communities. Hard-to-reach and vulnerable families require specific tailor-made engagement and support actions that can be framed in close collaboration with local authorities and social support institutions. A well-aligned action framework, including home renovation measures and continuous and stable dedicated funding, can result in more impactful outcomes, particularly for vulnerable households. National partnerships and international outreach are important steps to open avenues for expanding and replicating these initiatives.

Find out more

Transition Point webpage

gulbenkian.pt/en/initiatives/sustainable-development-programme/climate-action/transition-point/



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