Assessment after the first year of Pro-Coast - Where are we now, where are we going?

In Pro-Coast we are trying to understand how transformative communities can be created. Partners are doing this by appointing Change Agents in local Case Studies. The Change Agents gather volunteer teams around them, often as local sustainable-use stakeholders, to perform a project that is (a) fairly ambitious environmentally and (b) will build community awareness of need and scope for transition to a more environmentally positive situation.

The transition of communities, whether for positive engagement with biodiversity or with energy use that helps reduce climate change, is a socio-environmental process. Case Study teams and Change Agents therefore collect socio-environmental data, both on each study community and ecosystems (meso-scale) and also on individual stakeholders, wild species and habitats (micro-scale). Guided by social scientists helping them to identify a theory of change for their community, they implement two processes: namely Extreme Citizen Science, which essentially builds awareness and activities top-down, and the Bristol Approach, which is more co-creative, hence bottom-up.

The work with Case Studies is challenging. Not only do we have to implement a project with measurable transition progress in the three years for which we have funding, but we also must use questionnaires with quite sensitive personal questions. These are needed to assess, at the micro (individual) scale, whether transition is affected by any differences in attitude and readiness to engage between stakeholder groups, genders, other demographic aspects, and culture within communities. This intensive science-based engagement can also only be applied in a limited number of case studies with experts available for assistance. There is thus poor statistical power for assessment of trends at the meso-scale across the) Case Studies included in Pro-Coast. However, there is scope to analyse at micro-scale within Case Studies. Across the project, the 20 partners and their teams that are needed for the varied aspects of Pro-Coast are a lot to coordinate, even with the watchful eyes of TERO - headed by Stratos Arampatzis (who many know).

If that were not enough, the project is obliged to plan, based on the results from analysis, for a massive scale-out of a replicable community transition process on an online Community Sustainability Platform. With the 120,000 local communities in Europe, some four orders of magnitude greater than the number of expert teams needed for the Pro-Coast Case Studies, such scale-out is only conceivable by attracting communities to suitable tools online. Such tools must be multilingual and fun to use. Fortunately, four of the Pro-Coast partners had already been building multi-lingual networks following a previous pan-European project, which had also conceived of a system to exchange local data for decision support modelled on the data. Collaboration of ecology, social science and software engineering has produced a prototype tool for Reciprocal Environmental Decision Support (REDS; concept document here; app here). This tool demonstrates how local communities and scientists can interact to co-create model-guided decision support while improving the models through citizen science, combining the Bristol Approach and Extreme Citizen Science. Testing in 2025, through ESUG membership and others, will let us know if the REDS process can also be fun. This should motivate volunteer transition teams for massive scale-out, for which European Commission has given ESUG responsibility through to 2033.

Julie Ewald, Robert Kenward, Julian Mühle & Ben Kenward for ESUG on 07.12.2024