



**EU INNOVATE**

**SUSTAINABLE INNOVATION IN ACTION:  
THE CASE STUDY “SNAPSHOT” SERIES**

**SOM ENERGIA**

A Renewable Energy Cooperative Changing The Spanish Market



This project has received funding from the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme for research, technological development and demonstration under grant agreement no 613194

[www.eu-innovate.com](http://www.eu-innovate.com)

July 2017

## About EU-InnovatE

Between 2014 and 2016, the EU-InnovatE project investigated the potential of citizen innovation and sustainable entrepreneurship to achieve sustainable lifestyles in Europe by 2050. The following is one of a series of case study “snapshots” illustrating how new enterprises are being created by passionate, visionary individuals to benefit society at large.

---

### **The Case of Som Energia: A New Cooperative Set to Transform Spain’s Energy Market?**

*Spanish renewable energy cooperative Som Energia sells electricity to its growing membership and aims to transform the country’s energy sector. It generates a proportion of its own renewable energy from installations financed by coop members and has an ultimate goal of generating sufficient for all its members’ consumption.*

In 2010, a group of students and professors at the University of Girona studied successful renewable energy cooperatives that are common elsewhere in Europe, and decided to set up a cooperative scheme of their own. They named the new enterprise “Som Energia”, with an explicit focus on buying ‘green’ energy as a collective. They also decided to look into generating their own electricity.

The principal instigator of the cooperative was Gijsbert Huijink, a native of Holland who was at the time following a Masters in Management degree course at the University and in parallel restoring a house in Catalonia. Faced with substantial costs for connecting the remote house to the grid, he installed solar panels to meet his anticipated energy needs. However, to ensure consistent supply he investigated other renewable energy options, including a wind turbine.

The complexity and expense of installing a sufficiently powerful wind turbine proved to be beyond Huijink’s capabilities and budget. As a consequence, he researched the local market to see if there was an energy cooperative that would be prepared to invest jointly in a turbine. He was surprised to find that there were such entities – and therefore decided to set one up.

A business plan for Som Energia was written and an agreed business model was outlined by the group at the University. As it transpired, installing a wind turbine proved to be too costly as an initial project and would have resulted in a delay of up to five years for local approval. However, the cooperative began bulk-buying renewable electricity from Spain’s main providers and then resold it to the founding members.

Although the cooperative’s original focus was on the University community, it grew rapidly with members joining from the city of Girona and elsewhere in Spain, attracted by affordable renewable energy and a user-friendly service. By 2015 it had over 18,000 members.

Members pay €100 to belong to Som Energia, which is a non-profit making organisation. It sells renewable energy to members at an affordable price which just cover the cooperative's costs. It has modest overheads, employs a small full-time team of people, communicates via email only, and does not advertise or receive any government funding.

### **Collaborative Innovation in Practice**

Som Energia's members all have a say in all of its operations. Its flat management structure is organised in autonomous membership groups that meet in towns and cities. Each group is volunteer-based and follow different agendas, but within an agreed framework and towards common objectives. Some groups may, for example, focus on promoting Som Energia to potential members, work on technical projects, or seek energy partnerships with local organisations. This innovative way of operating draws on the strengths of members, but necessitates a strong central management structure – without impeding local enthusiasm and creativity.

In addition to a membership fee, individuals can invest in Som Energia's energy projects. Up to 1,000 members of the cooperative have invested € 3,500,000 in renewable energy projects, such as solar, biogas and biomass installations. Rather than a dividend, members receive a return on their investment in the form of electricity.

Although the cooperative currently produces only six percent of its members' energy needs from its generating facilities, the intention is eventually to be 100 percent self-sufficient. A substantial investment in wind energy, funded by the membership, is currently underway and will take the cooperative a step closer to achieving its goals.

### **Summary of User-Driven Innovation**

All members have a say in how the cooperative is run. Members meet in groups in different areas of the country to discuss issues. Groups operate autonomously, but adhere to common principals. Members can invest in the cooperative's energy projects, in return for an electricity dividend.

### **Influence on Core Business**

Members of the cooperative influence the whole of Som Energia's core business. The organisation depends on volunteers and the enthusiasm of its members who view themselves as part of a wider movement to change the way in which Spain's energy market operates. Huijink's initial vision was to create a business model removed from the country's existing energy suppliers. His determination to set up something new has been vindicated by the number of consumers attracted to the cooperative's innovative approach in the provision of renewable energy and its high service standards.

### **Cross-Sector Relevance: Top Three Insights**

- The vision, determination and energy of an individual entrepreneur can culminate in a green initiative, which can have positive social consequences.

- A green enterprise with an innovative business approach that challenges an existing order can be an appealing proposition for consumers.
- An entrepreneur-founded green business can grow and be sustained by a cooperative of like-minded users and consumers who become part of a movement to bring about change.

### **To Learn More About the Case...**

Please contact the lead investigator from the EU-InnovatE research team:

*Solange Hai, ESADE Business School – [solange.hai@esade.edu](mailto:solange.hai@esade.edu)*

### **Further Information**

Som Energia: [www.somenergia.coop](http://www.somenergia.coop)

[www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Som\\_Energia](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Som_Energia)

European Federation of  
Renewable Energy  
Cooperatives:

[www.rescoop.eu](http://www.rescoop.eu)

ESADE Business School: [www.esade.edu](http://www.esade.edu)