

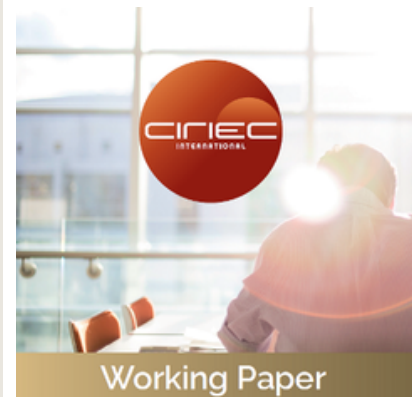
## "TRUST ME. WE CAN CO-CREATE (AND NOT CO-DESTROY)": ENERGY COMMUNITIES BUILDING SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

by **Luciana Militão & Josivania Farias**



### Highlights:

- Trust among stakeholders is a critical factor in the co-production of renewable energy within energy communities.
- Identification-based trust (close interpersonal relationships) is the primary driver of value co-creation.
- Knowledge-based trust also plays an important role, particularly in relationships with public institutions and businesses.
- The absence or loss of trust fosters value co-destruction, although co-destruction may also occur even when trust is present.
- Trust intermediaries (such as cooperatives and local leaders) act as catalysts in the energy transition.



### Context

The energy transition takes place within a global context characterized by declining citizens' trust in governments, which complicates the implementation of public policies and civic participation. In this setting, energy communities have emerged as collaborative arrangements that bring together citizens, public authorities, and organizations to produce and manage renewable energy while fostering social innovation, democratic governance, and access to clean energy. This transition goes beyond merely replacing fossil fuels; it involves a broader institutional and social transformation whose sustainability depends on how participants perceive value.

### Key Empirical Findings

The study adopts a qualitative and exploratory approach based on a single case study of an energy community in Brazil, initiated by the photovoltaic cooperative COPEF in the state of Minas Gerais. Data collection involved 19 semi-structured interviews with various stakeholders and a documentary analysis of 18 organizations. Participants were selected through snowball sampling and theoretical saturation.

The data were analyzed using content analysis to identify recurring patterns in stakeholder interactions. The study draws on the three stages of trust proposed by Lewicki and Bunker (1995, 1996) and on the concept of value co-creation practices derived from Service-Dominant Logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2017; Echeverri & Skålén, 2021). Three core practices were examined—informing, paying, and helping—through dyadic relationships among key actors, particularly between cooperative members and participating organizations.

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The findings highlight the following:

- **Identification-Based Trust as the Main Driver of Value Co-Creation**

Close interpersonal relationships, such as friendships and community ties, foster high levels of trust and strengthen collaboration in renewable energy production.

- **Value Co-Destruction Can Occur Even in the Presence of Trust**

Factors such as organizational changes, communication failures, and unmet expectations may generate negative outcomes, even in contexts characterized by strong trust.

- **Trust Intermediaries Are Essential in Energy Communities**

Cooperatives and local leaders act as mediators by facilitating interactions, reducing conflicts, and supporting both value co-creation and value recovery.

## Challenges and Opportunities

The study identifies several challenges for energy communities, including the fragility of trust in the face of organizational changes, communication problems among stakeholders, and the risk of value co-destruction even in highly trusting environments. The rapid loss of trust represents a significant threat to the stability of such initiatives.

To address these challenges, the findings suggest strengthening the role of cooperatives and local leaders as trust intermediaries, investing in more transparent and accessible communication strategies, and promoting strong interpersonal relationships to reinforce identification-based trust. The study also recommends encouraging citizen engagement—particularly among vulnerable groups—and developing cooperative models capable of sustaining long-term value co-creation throughout the energy transition.

## Policy Recommendations

The study's recommendations emphasize the importance for cooperatives of strengthening social relationships to build identification-based trust, improving communication to prevent trust erosion, and fully embracing their role as intermediaries.

For businesses, investing in accessible communication strategies and reducing informational barriers are considered essential.

For policymakers, the study recommends promoting cooperative models to enhance citizen participation and foster the inclusion of vulnerable groups.

Finally, managers should identify factors that may lead to trust erosion and recognize that while trust is built gradually, it can be lost very quickly.