

RGI Strategic Plan

1. Background

Europe's energy system is passing through an exciting period. Building a competitive European electricity market, maintaining security of supply and tackling climate change urgently require and trigger new ideas, new solutions and action. Electricity grids have a central role in solving the challenges of this transition. Many of the key characteristics of the past are no longer valid: fossil and nuclear sources are increasingly being replaced by renewable energy sources. Renewable energy production and electricity consumption sites generally no longer match, sources such as solar and wind are weather dependent. New power-lines can connect generation sites with the big consumer areas, and can smoothen weather-dependent variability of renewables by allowing electricity exchange across regions. Thus, modernising and expanding the European electricity grid is an essential building block in the transition of Europe's energy system from fossil dependence towards renewable energy. The transition process is fully ongoing and effecting to a varying degree the need for transmission and hence for modernised and new grid infrastructure.

Evidently, transitions of this kind do not come without challenges. In the case of grids, these challenges include also issues of public acceptance. More work is needed to prove that new power lines really are building blocks towards a renewables-based future, and to ensure that social and environmental concerns are well understood and addressed in grid plans and projects. RGI is an association made up of organisations that have joined forces to proactively deal with these issues and provide innovative solutions to Europe and its people.

2. The Role of RGI

Since 2009 transmission system operators (TSOs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as Members of the Renewables Grid Initiative have joined forces in finding ways to help develop the infrastructure which is needed to integrate large shares of renewable energy with greater public and policy support.

Players from both sides have become aware of their mutual interests in realising timely and environmentally sound grid development projects with improved stakeholder and public engagement. For the NGOs, preventing bottlenecks in integrating renewable energy into the electricity system is highly important for combating climate change; TSOs, on the other hand, are convinced that the protection of the environment, transparency and public participation are indispensable for public acceptance. These two interests are mutually represented in RGI's activity.

RGI is different from other organisations that deal with grid-related issues. It unites partners that traditionally represented two 'opposing' sides in society but that now pursue common objectives. By combining the different starting points and perspectives, RGI is able to grow beyond a one side defence of interests. The energy transformation needs public support to become a success story. Building on

diversity makes it possible for RGI to develop a joint narrative founded on the perspectives and views of different partners.

RGI Members challenge each other to constructively explore, define and take on new roles and responsibilities to support and facilitate the necessary infrastructure for the transition to renewables. The Renewables Grid Initiative has grown into a forum where trust and the power of collaboration are fundamental pillars of the joint learning process. Out of this process, RGI has become a new stakeholder, often representing more mature and advanced positions than what individual players may dare to stand for alone. By putting new ideas into practice, the possibility of RGI partners to speak with one voice has increased tremendously.

RGI currently unites 10 TSO and 7 NGO Members: Amprion, BirdLife Europe, Climate Action Network Europe, EirGrid, Elia, Germanwatch, Legambiente, Natuur & Milieu, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, Red Eléctrica de España, RTE, Statnett, Swissgrid, TenneT, Terna, WWF International and 50Hertz.

3. RGI Mission Statement, Strategic Objectives and Organisational Enablers

The RGI Mission Statement states that “RGI is a unique collaboration of NGOs and TSOs from across Europe. We promote transparent, environmentally sensitive grid development to enable steady growth of renewable energy and the energy transition.”

In view of this mission, RGI’s activities contribute to the achievement of three long-term ambitions¹

1. Full Clarity on the Need for Grids in the Electricity System to Integrate an Increasing share of RES
2. Sharing and Implementation of Best Practice and Innovative Approaches
3. A supportive political, policy and regulatory framework

In response to the long-term ambitions, RGI Members have jointly agreed upon three Strategic Objectives, each of which contributes to the achievement of the longer-term ambitions introduced above. The Strategic Objectives help to operationalize the long-term ambitions to which RGI wishes to contribute. They have been formulated with the perspective of a 5-year horizon and shall be revised and reconfirmed on an annual basis. Each Strategic Objective is accompanied by a list of activities that support achievement of these objectives. Together, the Strategic Objectives and the list of activities provide the umbrella for RGI’s yearly work programmes, described via the annual Business Plan, which is an internal working document.

¹ You can find comprehensive considerations about the selection of these long-term ambitions in the annex to this document.

3.1 'Full Clarity on the Need for Grids in the Electricity System to Integrate an Increasing share of RES'

Strategic Objective 1

"RGI has developed a comprehensive narrative which resonates with, and is supported by its own partners and other external stakeholders and is communicated to all relevant European and national institutions."

Rationale: The "need" question is one of the most frequently asked by those who realise they may be directly affected by the development of a new power-line. Clearly, it is easier for many people to accept the idea of a power-line in their vicinity if they are reassured about its need as part of the energy transition. While multiple studies confirm the need for grid development to integrate an increasing share of renewables under very different scenarios, this is difficult to understand for non-expert audiences. RGI Members therefore wish to work jointly on the development of a comprehensive "need" narrative, which is transparent about the impact of different assumptions about the future and reveals the trade-offs between different scenarios. Such a narrative has to be available in multiple languages and disseminated via channels and formats which resonate with a variety of different audiences, in particular those who are directly affected by power lines. A diverse and influential group of stakeholders, including relevant European and national institutions, has to understand and support this narrative and build upon it to explain the need for grids to their different audiences.

Supporting activities regarding the 'Full Clarity on the Need for Grids in the Electricity System to Integrate an Increasing share of RES'

- RGI takes action to further develop and publicly promote a joint narrative about the need for sustainable grid infrastructure to integrate increasing shares of renewable energy sources in the system, engaging both RGI Members and relevant external stakeholders.
- RGI Members speak up for each other in explaining the need for grids to integrate an increasing share of renewables from both utility and distributed generation, and they acknowledge that grids can be built without harming nature and with respect for stakeholders' needs and wants.
- RGI engages with relevant external stakeholders to assess the need for grids to integrate an increasing share of renewables, under different future decarbonisation pathways.

3.2 'Sharing and Implementation of Best Practice and Innovative Approaches'

Strategic Objective 2:

"RGI supports initiatives to improve transparency, participation and nature protection during all grid implementation stages, thus leading to better projects and contributing to public support for the grid necessary for an increasingly renewables-based power system."

Rationale: Best practice application dedicated to improve transparency, participation and nature protection leads to more informed stakeholders with respect to the process of new infrastructure development. It is essential to incorporate local values and knowledge that help to improve the overall design of new projects. Through this, negative impacts and disagreements are minimized, trust in institutions increases and potential conflicts are reduced. Best practice application is not able to mediate all diverging interests, but it reassures stakeholders that all possible steps are taken while deciding about new projects' specifications to find fair compromises.

Efforts to learn what best practice procedures are and how they can be implemented in different contexts are ongoing all across Europe. RGI's role is to contribute to this process, and to ensure, that any insights gained in one place can be built upon elsewhere. By supporting relevant initiatives and facilitating exchange, a roll-out of best practice happens much faster and allows different players to enter into a mutual learning exercise.

Supporting activities regarding ' Sharing and Implementation of Best Practice and Innovative Approaches'

- RGI collects and facilitates the development of Best Practice solutions for nature conservation, transparency and participation across Europe both in the development of new grids and modernising or maintaining the existing infrastructure.
- RGI effectively disseminates, communicates and supports the implementation of best practice solutions.
- RGI facilitates cooperation between TSOs and NGOs to jointly work on better processes in each "RGI country" and with the European Institutions.
- RGI seizes opportunities to learn from best practices outside of European "RGI countries" and from beyond Europe.
- RGI will consider informing and advising other similar and emerging activities between TSOs and NGOs within and beyond Europe.

3.3 'A Supportive Political, Policy and Regulatory Framework'

Strategic Objective 3:

"RGI builds public support and advocates for sustainable grid development with relevant EU and national legislative, regulatory and implementing institutions, and for supporting policies and good governance."

Rationale: A supportive political, policy and regulatory framework is an important enabler both for the implementation of best practices and to secure clarity on the need for grids to integrate large shares of renewables. Due to its unique TSO/NGO Membership and track-record in achieving unexpected outcomes, RGI has grown over the past years into a player who is increasingly heard by different audiences and contributes to shaping perceptions of other relevant players and to the discourse as such. RGI Members are convinced that by taking their part in the task of explaining the need for grids and best practice implementation, this will improve public and stakeholder support and positively influence the relevant political, policy and regulatory context in which grid development takes place. Consequently, RGI's third strategic objectives aims at taking a strong, active role in developing and securing this supportive framework with the different relevant institutions. By demonstrating benefits and countering some repeated misleading arguments², we want the public and influential stakeholders speaking up for change, which then again can be used as a platform and momentum to achieve positive change.

Supporting activities regarding 'A Supportive Political, Policy and Regulatory Framework'

- The RGI Secretariat continuously engages with its Members to understand political and regulatory challenges and to define possible actions.
- RGI actively engages with institutions such as the European Commission, ENTSO-E and ACER to promote activities, which help to explain the "need" case and define and implement best practice processes. This will include activities and interventions such as, but not limited to, workshops, demonstration projects, communication activities and supporting coalition-building efforts.
- RGI develops position papers and policy briefings, which elaborate on open issues, explains the need for grids to integrate an increasing share of renewables and how to implement better processes, and uses these for communication purposes.

² See annex of this document

3.4 Organisational enablers

In addition to the three Strategic Objectives and related supporting activities, RGI Members agree that there is a list of cross-cutting organisational enablers which need to be secured to systematically work towards the achievement of the Strategic Objectives. These enablers are:

- RGI provides the leading platform for cooperation between TSOs and NGOs; the Secretariat facilitates the continued dialogue of all partners and fosters an atmosphere of trust and a mutual understanding of the different but jointly reinforcing roles of RGI partners in society.
- RGI helps to establish TSO/NGO relationships to enable achievement of the strategic objectives.
- RGI supports NGO fundraising activities and considers NGO needs in its own fundraising activities, to secure adequate and targeted NGO participation and contributions to achieving the strategic objectives.
- The Secretariat ensures that the added value of being a member of RGI is always clear by:
 - transparently communicating the nature, purpose and outcomes of the Secretariat's work.
 - regularly reviewing RGI activities with its Members.
- RGI will focus on new Members and partnerships including TSOs and NGOs and other grid-related actors in the energy community such as DSOs; this will allow RGI to broaden its stakeholder representation and intervention opportunities.

4. Annex - Comprehensive considerations on the selection of the three long-term objectives

4.1 Full Clarity on the Need for Grids in the Electricity System to Integrate an Increasing share of RES

We observe today significant support amongst a wide range of stakeholder groups, including a majority of the public, for a renewables-based electricity system to counter climate change. Nonetheless, perspectives of different stakeholders on the details of this future electricity system, and the implications for grid development, vary significantly.

In this context, three arguments need a proactive response:

Argument 1:

While some believe in large wind parks and electricity highways as the main solution for the energy transition, others argue for decentralised small-scale solutions, automation, electricity storage and flexibility options. This influences perspectives regarding where and how much new grid infrastructure is needed. The most optimistic supporters of energy saving plus decentralised, small-scale and 'smart' technical solutions argue that (almost) no new grid infrastructure will be needed.

→ Indeed, innovative technologies and control mechanisms and demand side management will influence the overall need for new grid infrastructure. However, a system responding to all the three European overarching objectives of sustainability, competitiveness and system security will, in any case, require modernisation and new development of grids to a certain extent. To increase the support of some European stakeholders, this subject needs to be better explained, both on a principal and system-wide level and for each individual project.

Argument 2:

Strong statements from the past that integration of large shares of renewables is technically unfeasible still resonate today, and some fear that more renewables will mean lower security of supply.

→ Technology evolves. Many of those who ten years ago would have taken a firm position against the feasibility of integrating large shares of renewables now agree that technology is ready, as long as the right infrastructure and steering mechanisms are put in place. In order to increase support among European stakeholders, we need to explain that there is no contradiction between rapidly growing renewable energies and system security, and we need to show how to achieve this.

Argument 3:

Some stakeholders believe that the harm done to nature and local environments by some newly built grid infrastructure can outweigh the benefits.

→ Infrastructure development, as most human activities, does have an impact on the local environment. Throughout the different phases of grid development, continuous care has to be taken to keep this impact as low as possible and, if possible, positive. However nature protection and grid development are not a contradiction if habitat and species protection on the one side, and tackling climate change and air pollution on the other, are included into the development of plans and projects from the earliest stages. Innovative solutions show that under certain circumstances grids can even provide a benefit to nature. We need to do more to make sure grid development protects nature, and to increase understanding of the societal benefits of grid development and that failure in fighting climate change will harm nature far more than environmentally sensitive infrastructure development.

4.2 Sharing and Implementation of Best Practice and Innovative Approaches

Different players in the past have done substantive work to improve procedures of grid development and implementation and there is now a strong body of knowledge on good practice. Negative impacts can be avoided, minimised or compensated by consistently and proactively applying transparent and participatory procedures and measures for nature protection in the design of plans and projects. In this way it is possible to find a good solution considering the varying interests of different stakeholders and to build support for grid development.

Again, this perspective which all RGI Members share, is often countered with two different arguments.

Argument 4:

It is true that developing new power-lines is a highly complex undertaking. For many reasons, it takes years from initial planning to completion. In the light of this, some stakeholders argue that a transparent, participatory and environmentally-sensitive process will cost even more time and money without providing evident benefits.

→ Grid development projects consist of multiple phases which build upon each other. Targeted activities at higher levels of decision making and in early phases of planning contribute to avoiding some conflicts at later stages. An investment of time and resources is hence necessary from the very initial stages of policy making, planning and setting up a new project, even if the benefits of this investment become evident only years later. A successful outcome depends on many different actors, incl. project promoters, policy makers, public institutions and civil society at local, regional and national level to take their role and responsibility in this

Argument 5:

Some stakeholders in light of the urgency to modernise the European grid propose to accelerate the development by relaxing the high standard of European environmental protection legislation to allow for easier granting of permits.

→ Based on their experience, RGI Members promote an opposite perspective. A clear and stable operational framework in terms of protected areas, and rules governing sustainable development actually helps enable TSOs to plan and build new lines. A stable, predictable, consistent and clear framework of environmental protection law is therefore a direct contribution to enable timely, cost-effective and sustainable electricity infrastructure development. Beyond this, all RGI Members agree that avoiding negative impacts on the environment is desirable in its own right. Strict application of best practice approaches resulting in environmentally sensitive grid development will demonstrate to European, national and regional stakeholders that nature conservation does not need to be compromised to enable timely grid development.

4.3 Supportive Political, Policy and Regulatory Framework

The third long term ambition deals with a supportive political, policy and regulatory framework. Both 'clarity on the need for grid development' and on 'implementation of best practice' depend on such a supportive context. At the same time, providing enhanced clarity on grid needs and demonstrating more thorough implementation of best practices positively influences the political, policy and regulatory framework.

We need vocal political support for grids as enablers of the energy transition. In this, we need to recognise that there are many ways to establish a renewables-based electricity system, and that different scenarios on how this future will look are more or less attractive for different stakeholder groups. It is therefore also a societal and political decision to pursue certain pathways over others. Comprehensive and transparent explanation of the need for grid development under different future scenarios is the basis for an open discussion on the benefits and costs of each of these scenarios. Clear political backing for necessary grid development under certain scenarios is indispensable for project promoters. Policy uncertainty raises investment costs and decreases confidence among investors and the public and potentially undermines trust in political institutions. Vocal political support can help to increase the clarity on the need for grid development also amongst local populations, and through this increase the overall legitimacy of developing new infrastructure and the 'ease' of doing so.

Application of best practices is ultimately an effort taken by the parties who are directly involved in policy making and in planning and permitting processes. However, their possible sphere of action at any given moment is determined by external factors, including the institutional, policy and regulatory frameworks. These can enable or hinder the application of best practices during the various phases of grid development. Where these frameworks do not encourage consideration of nature and affected citizens at the level of policy making and high level planning (i.e. at EU, EU-Regional and national levels), the issues all have to be addressed at the project stage. In this situation the wish for quicker infrastructure development at low costs may appear to be in contradiction to good practice in stakeholder engagement

or nature protection. We therefore need to demonstrate the benefits of better practices that put in place a 'virtuous cycle' consisting of increased public support and pressure for yet more of the same. Doing so helps to promote positive changes to institutional, policy and regulatory frameworks.