



# Community at the core of healthy and favourable living conditions

ComAct educational materials



## What is a community?

According to German sociologist Karl Mannheim:

***“Community is any circle of people who live together and belong together in a way that they do not share this or that particular interest but a whole set of interests.”***

Residents of a multi-family apartment building can be seen as a community who, as well as living in the same place, share an interest in keeping the building in good condition and improving its energy efficiency.



## Benefits and challenges of joining or creating a community

As an owner of a dwelling in a multi-family apartment building is also a co-owner of common property that cannot be divided among co-owners, it is important for residents to join or create a community in order to take joint decisions on improvements to their living space. Besides making technical improvements to the building, taking care of the common spaces and making them attractive and appealing to the residents can strengthen the community.

In most cases, the community members in multi-family apartment buildings are diverse and heterogeneous. Their interests and financial possibilities are very different. Only a small proportion of owners in unrenovated buildings are wealthy, however, and predominantly residents belong to low-income groups or may even be dependent on social help. This creates a challenge for renovation as owners may not be able to raise the funds required.

Such a broad social mix can make it difficult for residents to reach an agreement to make energy efficiency improvements. However, renovation is also an opportunity to improve social cohesion and to seek and find viable compromises.



## Homeowners' associations

A homeowners' association (HOA) is an organised community of homeowners living in a multi-family apartment building.

Besides the formal aspects of this form of self-organisation, there are numerous sociological features that characterise this kind of community. One of the most important is that membership is based on the ownership of an apartment in a particular building. This means that members have no opportunity to choose the other members of this community and consequently cannot influence those with whom they share a common property and the related responsibilities.

Another issue is the specific understanding of common property. Property rights comprise the rights of possession, use and disposal. However, owners do not only have rights, but also responsibilities regarding their common property and its condition. They are obliged to ensure the proper maintenance, operation and technical re-equipment of the building's common property, including renovation. This aspect is often problematic as there may be a lack of understanding of the responsibilities, meaning the related tasks are not carried out. In particular, this is the case when additional payments for the maintenance of the common property are required.

Nevertheless, especially for implementation of joint initiatives it is very helpful to create an HOA. Renovation works are expensive and will not be covered by the maintenance reserves saved by homeowners. A legally established HOA is able to request a loan or financial support from a state programme. Loans should be coupled with socially targeted subsidies to increase the financial resources of the owners. Tackling the problems of the poorest can be an efficient tool to accelerate renovation.

Creating an HOA allows each owner to influence the quality and the level of payments for housing and communal services. The owners can independently decide on the efficient use of energy in their building, e.g. use of energy-saving light bulbs in common areas, installation of better quality water heaters and water and heat meters. The HOA can also control the quality of the housing and communal services provided and assert the right to receive quality services.



The rules for joint property are usually regulated by national law, but the general assembly of homeowners have the right to set their own internal rules on how the joint property is administrated.

All decisions on the building management, maintenance and capital repairs, cleaning and improving the adjoining land are adopted by the general assembly of owners in a collegial manner.

The **common property** of an apartment building (usually) includes:





# Community and renovation

As renovation relates to the common property of the building, it is the co-owners and not just the tenants who take decisions.

The renovation of a building can be initiated by individual owners or by a group of owners and discussed at the next general assembly. For the initiation and implementation of a renovation project it is advisable to create an initiative working group to actively assist the chairperson of the HOA or housing manager in all stages of the project.

The **initiative working group** consists of certain co-owners of the apartment building (at least three) who voluntarily take and assume certain responsibilities.

Usually, the initiative group educates and raises awareness among the other co-owners and residents on the issues relevant to the multi-family apartment building. The initiative group studies the problems arising and organises joint events.

Before starting renovation works the initiative group should analyse the composition of the residents and, if necessary, organise help for elderly or sick people who cannot prepare their own flat for certain repairs such as replacing radiators or windows (e.g. by cleaning window sills, or moving and covering furniture).



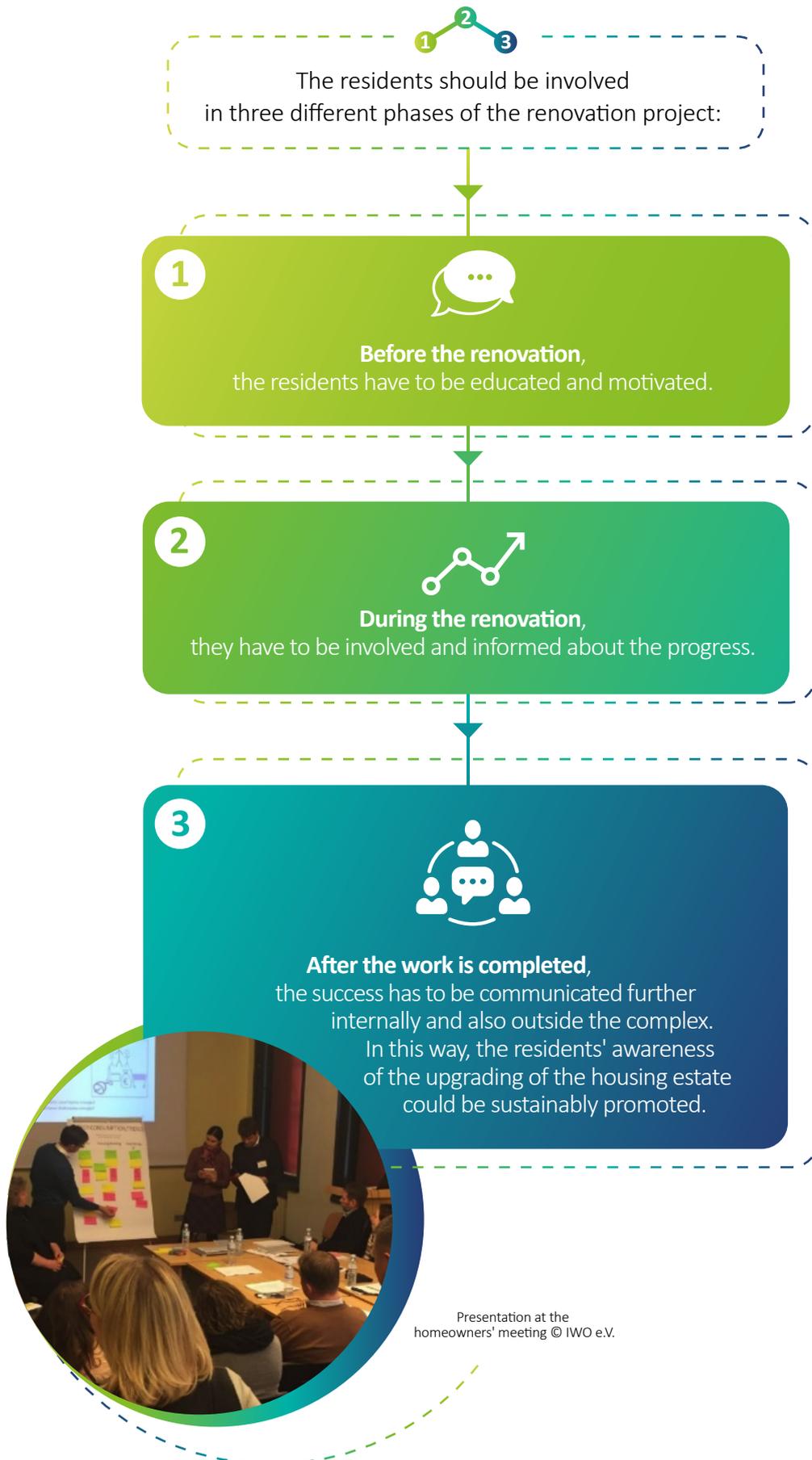
Constructive cooperation within the initiative group  
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For renovations, the initiative group should be made up of specialists from different fields: e.g. business, real estate and technical/engineering matters. The optimal composition would include an accountant, an engineer, a business representative or a specialist in real estate.

This initiative working group can be assisted by an energy advisor, building administrator or similar expert in the field.



Another major task is motivating and communicating with other residents. The more owners there are in the community, the greater the variation in financial positions and willingness to invest.



## Examples of active homeowners' communities

An initiative group in Kaunas, Lithuania has established a yard community, which has improved their common areas and made them a more attractive neighbourhood. This has led to more active involvement in decision-making and caring for the buildings they live in. Great first steps are community gardens, additional equipment for playgrounds, flea markets and a digital tool for prompt exchange on important matters.



Local initiative in Kaunas/Lithuania.

The neighbourhood garden "Grüne Weiten" in Berlin is part of the model housing project "Lichte Weiten e. V.", which is intergenerational, social and ecological.

The garden formerly consisted of several yards that lay fallow, unused and partially sealed. After the renovation of the residential buildings, the yards were combined and redesigned. The residents live a communal living concept, of which the neighbourhood garden is a central component. The planting followed the motto "native and edible or usable".



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There is also an open neighbourhood meeting place, a constructed wetland, bicycle sheds with a green roof, a composting facility and toilet, a shed, insect hotels, a sandbox and nature-oriented play facilities.



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