



THINK 2030

Paper summary

Implementing the European Green Deal at local level

Lessons on the role of cities in Poland in planning climate policy: Mitigation, adaptation, and just transition

In February 2020, four Visegrad capital cities – Warsaw, Budapest, Prague, and Bratislava – wrote to the European Commission asserting that *"the fight against climate change will be won or lost in cities."* They requested that the EU engage directly with cities to achieve its climate goals by allocating *"directly accessible, city-tailored EU funds"* to secure the EU's climate, energy and environmental objectives.

The four capitals highlighted the ambition of cities, calling for systemic change, and claiming, *"our efforts can only succeed if the EU puts regulatory and financial mechanisms in place that provide the necessary means for local authorities to act. In that case, our cities can move fast to prepare, submit and implement projects on the ground."*

As these cities did, it is often asserted that action in cities will be a key to solving the climate crisis. Cities globally are estimated to account for 70% of GHG emissions. In this spirit, the European Commission's European Green Deal aims to

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strengthen the urban dimension of cohesion policy and *"empower regional and local communities."*

It is thus of great importance to understand the factors that help or prevent them from taking decisive action for the climate.

Therefore, during the Think2030 conference, held in November 2020, a **paper** was prepared that draws lessons from cities in Poland about how they have implemented their climate policy planning to date, as well as the degree to which socio-economic factors, such as poverty, health, and wellbeing are considered in this process. Based on that the discussion was held, which led to the following recommendations.

Key policy recommendations

- Climate and energy policy need to be put at the heart of regular planning and development policy on both national and local level in all Member states rather than treated as an additional exercise. EU policy should guide national institutions to formulate policies in such a way that climate and energy are the backbone of everyday development policy at all levels of management of the country. This could be done by setting requirements, that EU investments should result from, or align with the strategic planning documents of regional or local authorities. At the same time these local plans should take an integrated approach to climate and sustainability as part of regular development policy, delivered e.g., through the spatial planning system, or any other development regulation system in a Member State.
- More ambitious cohesion policy should be formulated to address local capacity and implementation gaps, including a greater emphasis on indicators such as air quality, health, public spending per capita. One criticism of the current funding model is that it is still not results-oriented. Mechanisms should be put in place to ensure that countries which are achieving – or over-achieving – their targets are rewarded.
- While the EU institutions are, rightly, hesitant to intervene in the allocation of responsibilities at sub-national level, there may be merit in the Commission engaging in a discussion or launching studies on how local autonomy and multi-level governance can help contribute to more effective implementation of EU-level priorities. The EU could offer guidance on how to enable local and regional authorities to adopt a genuinely integrated approach which addresses a range of shared challenges in a more coherent and effective way. This could

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help to feed a healthy democratic debate, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe about the best allocation of responsibilities between governments and help to guide the principle of subsidiarity within countries.

- Socio-economic issues such as housing policy, health, and energy poverty could be integrated to a much greater extent in local planning. If we are to achieve the broader promise of the European Green Deal's ambitions for a more equal society that comprehensively addresses inter-related social, economic and environmental sustainability challenges, this is an area that local municipalities will have to improve on, in coordination with other levels of government. This could be aided again by more integrated local planning exercises, rather than treating separate issues in different plans.
- The EU should analyse existing national and local financing mechanisms and support schemes in its financing rules and, if they fulfil EU priorities, and enabling conditions are respected, create a space to strengthen them through additional allocation of EU funding, instead of creating new schemes.
- The EU should be working more directly with cities. However, a balance does need to be struck, also noting that the subsidiarity principle means respecting national competences, to ensure that such interventions remain consistent with national strategies and approaches. This should still allow space for additional action by ambitious cities.
- Cities should be active players in climate policy. They should gather in supporting groups and start more actively influencing both national and EU level policies, that address the climate policy issues. They should be consulted more actively on national policy planning for plans such as

Impact of pollution in Polish cities:

- In Poland, estimated **45,000 people** die prematurely each year because of pollution. A recent [report](#) by the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air found that cleaner air created by the coronavirus lockdown resulted in around 800 fewer premature deaths in Poland in April 2020.
- Poland is home to **36 of Europe's 50 most polluted cities** on an [updated list](#) published by the World Health Organization (up from 33 on the previous ranking).
- **72% of Polish cities** [violate](#) the EU's air quality target (second only to Bulgaria at 83%).
- If pollution levels were to meet the WHO guideline, residents in Warsaw [would gain 1.2 years](#) onto their life expectancy.

the European Semester, Operational Plans, National Energy and Climate Plans and other similar strategies.

- Cities also need to ensure proper consultation with citizens and stakeholders on climate policies and planning issues – a step which is too often overlooked or performed in a very limited way.
- Capacity building is a critical element for supporting cities, whether from EU or national level. At present many cities do not have the tools or administrative capacity at their disposal to fully engage in the design and implementation of sustainable local planning and policies. This is particularly important for small and medium cities.

The recommendations are also based on the most striking results of the analysis done in the paper, which are:

- EU policy has had a positive impact in pushing Polish municipalities to address climate change issues in recent years.
- EU funding has also provided funding for the preparation of adaptation plans, which brought fruitful results of climate analyses to local policy.
- The impending Just Transition Mechanism (JTM) has already catalysed a change in the discussion around the climate issue, and has led to increased local engagement.
- The isolated plans and inputs on the various aspects of climate policy, such as mitigation and adaptation, but also poverty, health or transport issues are now the norm.
- Separated planning exercises do not lead to comprehensive and sustainable local climate policy.

While the conclusions of this paper are based on the specific Polish experience, and will to some extent reflect its political specificities, they can serve to inform and frame the debate around these issues in most EU members states, particularly those most similar to Poland. Unlocking the potential for climate mitigation and adaptation in cities may be a useful avenue for progress in countries whose governments are less committed to climate action.



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