Supporting cities in achieving their climate neutrality objectives

Poland

Poland has a decentralised governance structure comprising 16 regions (voivodeships), each functioning as an autonomous authority responsible for planning and supporting long-term regional development. These regional administrations serve as the link between EU and national development policies and the local level. They produce regional development policies and strategies aligned with national policies, while being attentive to the regional context and challenges, and act as coordinators of development at the local level. The regional administrations are able to address local challenges through a broader regional lens, while also serving as principal collaborators with the national government in implementing policies from the national level to the regional territories.

Regional development strategies and policies must align with the Medium-term National Development Strategy, the Strategy for Responsible Development (SRD) for the period up to 2020 (with a perspective extending to 2030), and specifically with one of the ten integrated strategies: the National Strategy of Regional Development 2030 (NSRD). The SRD determines the country's social, economic, environmental, and spatial development until 2030. Meanwhile, the NSRD serves as the primary document shaping regional policy in Poland until 2030.

Polish regions have a significant role to play in achieving the objectives of the EU Mission on 100 climate-neutral and smart cities by 2030 (Cities Mission). They not only coordinate and support regional development but also serve as crucial partners to cities in their interactions with the national level. Moreover, Polish regions have responsibilities that are important to cities' work towards climate neutrality, while also having the potential to replicate knowledge and action models at the regional level and playing a vital role in encouraging other cities within the region to undertake ambitious climate action initiatives.

The involvement of regions in the Polish national Cities Mission platform

The Polish national platform for facilitating the implementation of the Cities Mission was launched at the end of 2023. Its objective is to foster closer collaboration and alignment among the national, regional and local levels, and to provide direct support to the five Mission Cities in their climate neutrality work. The platform involves a wide range of actors, including the Ministry of Funds and Regional Policy and the Ministry of Climate and Environment, the five Polish Mission Cities (Kraków, Łódź, Warsaw, Wrocław, Rzeszów), the five regional administrations of the Mission Cities, as well as the National Institute of Environmental Protection and Warsaw University of Technology acting as facilitators of the platform through the Horizon Europe CapaCITIES project.

The administrations (Marshal Offices) of the five regions - Lower Silesia, Małopolska, Mazovia, Łódzkie and Podkarpackie - represent an independent stakeholder group within the platform, equal with the other two stakeholder groups: the national ministries and the Mission Cities. It was important to involve the regions in the platform and its activities for several reasons. The decentralised governance structure in Poland makes regions crucial actors in development management and important in the communication between cities and national ministries. The long-term vision of the Polish national platform is to expand participation to additional cities interested in advancing their climate neutrality efforts. Regions play an important role in realising this vision, given their capacity to facilitate the inclusion of additional cities in the collaborative effort. Furthermore, regions can strengthen the efforts of Mission Cities and extend the impact of their work to neighbouring cities and municipalities, while also applying the lessons learnt from the Mission Cities to a broader regional context.

Efficient communication and collaboration between local and regional levels have historically faced obstacles due to divergent political agendas, resulting in diminished trust. Consequently, building trust among government levels emerged as a primary focus for the facilitators of the national platform. Their aim is to foster a neutral environment focused on supporting cities in achieving their climate neutrality

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objectives. The shared goal of Poland's five Mission Cities and regions to achieve the objectives of the Cities Mission has the potential to break down political barriers.

The role of Polish regions in the implementation of the Cities Mission

Polish regions have responsibilities in several domains of importance to climate neutrality, including public transportation and public roads, land use, environmental protection, public education (including higher education), and activation of the local labour market. Collaboration between cities and regions in these domains is essential to ensure alignment with regional strategies and priorities, efficiently implement actions and projects, and access relevant funding opportunities.

Leveraging their existing competences and capabilities, the five regions have identified several areas in which they can provide support to the Polish Mission Cities.

Policy

Regions are responsible for developing policies encompassing both general development strategies and specific sectoral policies like anti-smog resolutions, air protection programmes, and waste management plans. Climate neutrality-related goals are embedded both into regional development strategies (Mazovia) and into strategies such as Territorial Just Transition Plans (Łódzkie, Lower Silesia, Małopolska) and Climate and Energy Action Plans (Lower Silesia, Małopolska, Podkarpackie). In the development of these policies, which set out regional priorities, goals and actions, regions normally consider the needs and objectives of cities. Future regional policies in relevant domains can thus be formulated to support cities in accelerating their climate efforts.

Additionally, regions can influence national policymaking by proposing amendments to existing proposals. For instance, the CapaCITIES partners led one such policy-influencing initiative, involving the Polish Mission Cities and the five regions. Together, they conducted a collaborative analysis of the National Urban Policy Implementation Plan, currently undergoing revision, outlining detailed requests regarding its actions, wording, and structure. The results were then presented to the national committee responsible for policy implementation. This joint policy-influencing effort significantly reinforced the cities' messages towards the national level.

The national platform aims to eventually engage the Convention of the Marshals of the Voivodeships of the Republic of Poland, an association comprising all the regional administrations (Marshal Offices) in Poland, in advocacy efforts aimed at advocating for various climate-related regulations and pushing for more ambitious national climate goals.

Collaboration and transfer of knowledge and skills

One of the most significant responsibilities of Polish regions is education. This competence enables regions to support cities in outreach activities, such as organising awareness and knowledge-raising campaigns, which are important for obtaining the buy-in and engagement of local and regional stakeholders and citizens for climate initiatives. For instance, as a coordinator of the Covenant of Mayors Europe, the Mazovia regional administration offers webinars for local governments and newsletters for covenant members. In Lower Silesia, climate advisors have been appointed within local governments, and an educational campaign on climate neutrality is being conducted.

Furthermore, regions serve as important intermediaries in fostering collaboration between cities and various regional stakeholders, including universities that are equipped with innovative technologies, expertise, and skills beneficial for cities in their climate work. Additionally, regions can facilitate collaboration between larger cities and neighbouring municipalities in areas necessitating extensive geographical cooperation, such as transportation and mobility initiatives.

The five Polish Mission Cities are currently collaborating within the NEEST (NetZero Emission and Environmentally Sustainable Territories) project. This project, funded under the Pilot City Programme of the NetZeroCities project, is dedicated to developing innovative solutions for energy-efficient buildings. The project is scheduled to conclude in May 2025, and the facilitators of the national platform have

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planned to organise a workshop between the Mission Cities and the five regions. This workshop aims to develop instruments for implementing the solutions generated by the project.

Funding

Since 2007, regions in Poland have assumed full responsibility for a large share of European funds under Cohesion Policy, including the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+). Through their Regional Operational Programmes (ROPs), regions outline the investment priorities and funding allocations for these funds. While some programme priorities already align with the objectives of the Cities Mission, the forthcoming evaluation and amendment of the ROPs will provide an opportunity for Mission Cities to convey their needs to the regions, ensuring that the updated programmes better conform to the priorities and planned activities of the cities.

Polish regions additionally serve as intermediaries for national funds, including climate and environment funds, which are distributed to cities through grants issued via calls for proposals. They also maintain their own budgets, offering more flexibility than other funding sources as they can be adjusted to meet the strategic and investment needs of cities.

Lastly, regions can seek funding for projects that are closely aligned with the priorities and requirements of cities through EU-funded programmes like LIFE, Horizon Europe, or Interreg. The funds acquired from these projects can then be allocated to activities within the cities, supporting the implementation of the actions outlined in their Climate City Contracts.

Recommendations and lessons learnt

The facilitators of the Polish national platform have acquired valuable learnings that may be insightful for other countries looking to involve regions in the local climate neutrality work.

- Establishing trust among stakeholders involved in the collaboration is paramount. This entails not only fostering political trust but also personal trust among the individuals engaged in the process.
- Recognise regions as more than just funding entities and policy developers; they are potential allies for cities to form stronger advocacy messages directed at the national level.
- Initiate a mapping exercise to identify national policies involving both regions and cities. This exercise facilitates understanding the advantages of collaboration. By pinpointing common barriers, challenges, and benefits, it becomes easier to create common views and messages directed to the national government. This approach is particularly valuable when local and regional priorities differ politically.

This case study has been developed in collaboration with the following partners of the CapaCITIES project: Dr Katarzyna Rędzińska, Faculty of Geodesy and Cartography, Warsaw University of Technology and Izabela Juszko, Climate Change Adaptation Unit, Institute of Environmental Protection – National Research Institute.

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