PLANNING CLIMATE ACTION AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

Lessons Learned on developing and implementing SECAPs from the LIFE Unify Project

Center for Transport and Energy

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Executive Summary

While local level climate action is certainly an integral part of the ambitious climate agenda of the European Union as a whole, it is by no means easy to achieve on the scale required. Strategic thinking is key, and this is manifested through what are known as Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plans, or SECAPs. These are complex planning documents meant to be prepared by local authorities, whose methodology was developed through and whose implementation is monitored by the Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy.

This report analyses the experience of the LIFE Unify project partners with SECAP development and implementation in five different countries: Czechia, France, Poland, Slovenia, and Spain.

It turns out that applying a "one size fits all" approach towards municipalities can be a challenge given how very different the contexts are in the respective Member States. We also note that, especially for smaller municipalities, institutional support from the national level is paramount along with availability of funding for both SECAP drafting, and - more importantly - their implementation. In some cases, the involvement of municipalities in the activities of the Covenant has been undermined by the already existing requirement - or at least expectation - for local authorities to adopt energy planning documents that are however not in line with the SECAP methodology. It also appears that quite often, regional development agencies or independent associations of municipalities are best poised to coordinate common climate and energy efforts of the individual villages and towns.

The most active and established countries when it comes to involving municipalities in climate action, such as France and Spain, have much to share and can lead by example, bringing numerous other local governments on board, notably in Central and Eastern Europe. However, the experience should always be adapted to the specific realities and needs of the given locality so as to ensure that the process is inclusive and the plans are actively endorsed by the local population. A well-carved SECAP that includes ambitious targets but is taken off the table with the next change in local government is a risk that ought to be avoided at all costs.

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1. Introduction

Recent years have seen a substantial rise in the prominence of climate in legislative agendas, the COVID-19 pandemic notwithstanding. While the European Green Deal and increased EU climate ambition are primarily concerned with pan-EU or Member State–wide targets, the sub-national level has been receiving comparably little attention. That is unfortunate given the practical necessity of bringing regions and especially municipalities on board as integral contributors to global mitigation efforts.

With over 70% of EU citizens expected to live in urban areas by 2030, **EU municipalities will play a fundamental role in accelerating climate action** across the European Union and in moving forward the necessary transformation to a decarbonized society, therefore contributing to the long-term objective of the Paris Agreement to limit global temperature rise to 1.5˚C.

Furthermore, regions and municipalities are the first to be affected by crises and are therefore at the front line of the climate change struggle. They are also primary platforms for **citizen engagement** and, therefore, best poised to develop effective and **adapted solutions** through the development of sustainable mobility and transportation, the deployment of renewable energy, incentivizing prosumerism and energy communities, the support of energy efficiency in buildings, the promotion of green spaces in cities, sustainable food chains and much more.

With more than 10 000 signatory municipalities in the European Union and beyond (representing over 335 million people), the **Covenant of Mayors** (CoM) initiative is a primary point of reference for EU municipalities engaged in climate action. By joining the initiative, municipalities commit to developing and implementing **Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plans**, or SECAPs (formerly known as SEAPs, which were narrower in scope). Using the SECAPs methodology to develop local action plans ensures their scope is rather comprehensive (SECAPs include both mitigation and adaptation aspects) and should—at least theoretically—ensure stricter compliance with EU targets, easier access to streams of funding and more attentive monitoring.

With the adoption of the European Climate Law in July 2021, the European Union increased its climate ambition to an EU-wide 55% reduction in net GHG emissions by 2030 as compared to 1990 and to the achievement of climate neutrality by 2050. After some delay, the CoM initiative also included the 2050 climate neutrality target within its updated "Signatories' Vision". However, while the CoM's website claims that "signatory cities pledge action to support implementation of the EU 55% greenhouse gas-reduction target by 2030 and the adoption of a joint approach to tackling mitigation and adaptation to climate change", there has in reality been no reference to the 2030 targets in the commitment document itself. Clear signals on climate ambition towards municipalities by the CoM will be important to ensure overall EU-wide climate ambition, especially as SECAPs remain a key tool to accelerate climate action at the local level.

Support for the development and implementation of SECAPs is an important axis of the LIFE Unify project, assisting the work on EU-wide and Member State–wide climate mitigation targets.

The approaches and work methods differ among the involved partners, as do the local realities (including the skills, obligations, resources, levers, and obstacles). Some partner organizations of the LIFE Unify project have worked with individual municipalities on the development of their SECAPs, some have focused on broader information-sharing and direct advocacy efforts and others still have worked mostly with local citizens groups, supporting their calls for enhanced local-level climate action. Whatever the means, this engagement with the local level has brought about interesting findings and trends that are worth pointing out.

This report strives to summarize the experience acquired in five different EU Member States—Czechia, France, Poland, Slovenia, and Spain—over the past two years. Its emphasis is therefore on an analysis of the national contexts and the formulation of key lessons learned. In its conclusions, the report also attempts to highlight, despite the significant national differences, common gaps, and potential ways forward.

2. Good and bad practices from the national contexts

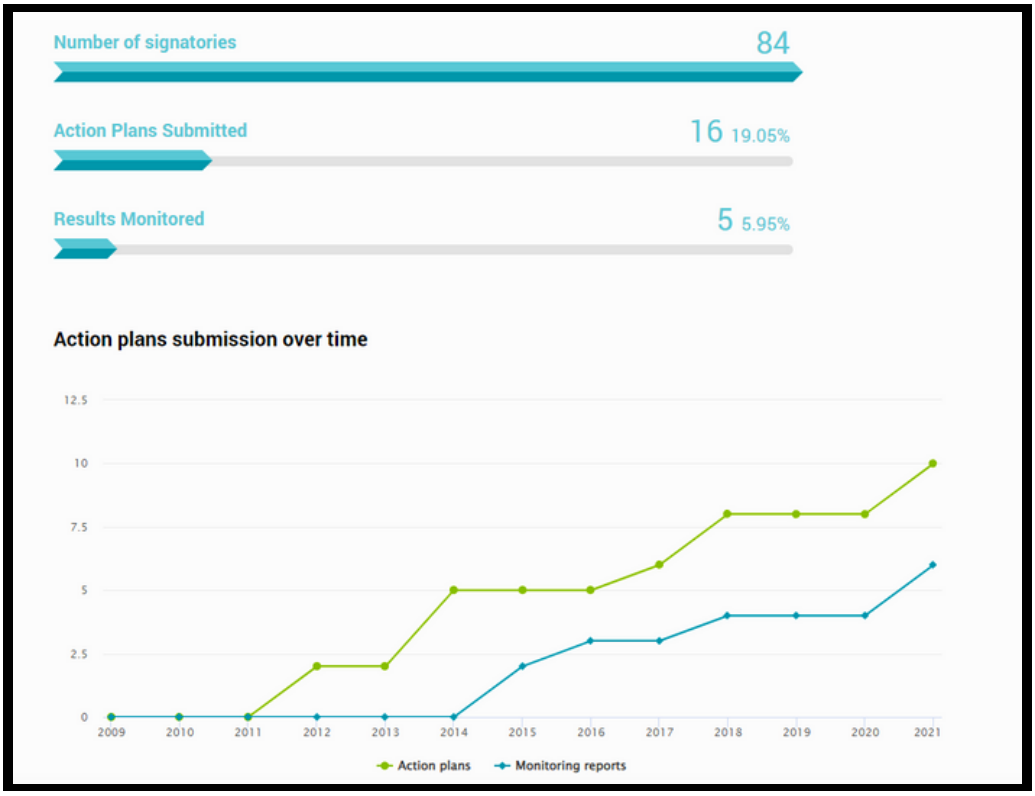
In the following country profiles, we cover the respective national contexts and recount the varying experiences acquired by project partners throughout the course of the LIFE Unify project as regards the development as well as the implementation of SECAPs. We strive to identify both good and bad practices and thus to set a solid basis for future advocacy and communication work on the topic.

CZECHIA

a. Context

As of 2021, there are 6 253 municipalities in the Czech Republic—a large number for a country of 10 million, and nearly unprecedented in international comparison. Many of the **local governments are thus only administering very small populations**, often amounting to just hundreds (or even dozens of) people. This poses additional challenges for the development and implementation of local strategies such as SECAPs, which to date remain a fully voluntary endeavour on the part of individual municipalities.

Figure 1: CoM signatories and SE(C)APs submitted in Czechia



Source: Covenant of Mayors

Regardless, the idea of large-scale involvement among municipalities and local authorities in the climate and energy agenda remains something of a novelty in Czechia. Historically, the standard setup has been a centralized energy system with a limited number of large fossil-based energy sources with few municipalities actively involved in what the future of their energy balance would look like, let alone whether it should be driven primarily by decarbonization targets. This has also been reflected in the **remarkably low number of city-signatories to the CoM**, amounting to roughly 20 by early-2021—in Hungary, for comparison, there were about 200 by the same time, and even in Belarus, there were 22. As described further however, recent developments are a cause for cautious optimism.

b. Experience with SECAP development

In reality, more often than climate mitigation, **adaptation concerns appear to be the logical entry point** for Czech local authorities to the topic, with an increasing number of adaptation strategies being developed on the municipal level. This can be considered the result of directly felt consequences from climate change, including drought, heatwaves and floods, and the related concerns of the public. There has therefore been significant untapped potential for the inclusion of mitigation considerations and the development of SECAPs as complex strategic documents.

The national focal point for the CoM remains the Ministry of the Environment. In Centre for Transport and Energy (CDE) experience, this is not an ideal situation since **the capacity of the ministry to engage with municipalities is very limited**—less than

one full-time employee is allocated for this agenda at the ministry—and few efforts were made to broadly disseminate the information on the CoM and SECAP development. Within the LIFE Unify project, CDE has organized meetings with over 20 mayors from the coal-mining regions, attempting to identify the barriers that prevent their signature to the CoM and the drafting of SECAPs, and it appeared that the **lack of information dissemination** is a key impediment.

All the more important is the role of **Local Action Groups** (MAS in Czech), which have recently taken a **leadership role in advocating for the climate agenda on the local level**. In reality, MASs are responsible for a large portion of the CoM signatories, whose number finally spiked in 2021 thanks to several of the groups assembling a large number of small municipalities joining almost simultaneously. If there is a good practice to be identified, it would be the dissemination of knowledge through MAS channels. This is then coupled with another trigger of positive change: public funding schemes for SECAP development and local energy management that have existed for several years, albeit they are constrained in their allocated funding (to a maximum of several hundred thousand euros per call) and have historically been faced with limited awareness among municipalities as their potential recipients.

If we were to look at the practical state of SECAP development in Czechia, at the time of this writing, municipal authorities more often than not procure a third party to lead the drafting process and produce the plan. In fact, there are only a few entities—predominantly private consultancies—able to produce this document, hence a real market has been lacking. The level of engagement of the individual municipalities in the process and the identification with the outcomes vary, and this then foreshadows the potential for full implementation of the plans.

c. Experience with SECAP implementation

The **stability and willingness of the political representation on the municipal level** appears to be a **key factor determining the success of SECAP implementation** in Czechia. Given that, in most cases, the plans are drafted by external contractors, it is apparent that ownership by the authorities can become an issue. Moreover, as demonstrated in several cities CDE has been in touch with, a post-electoral change in the local government often leads to a rethinking of strategic priorities and poses another risk for the long-term implementation of a particular SECAP.

A good practice that CDE has been promoting among mayors is the establishment of a **municipal energy manager** within the city hall. Provided that the related tasks are well defined and that a competent person is found to take on this role, it can (and perhaps should) become the focal point within the administration for the long-term implementation of the plan, including the identification of available funding opportunities. An important outreach and advocacy role is played by the independent Association of Municipal Energy Managers.

Notably, **updating outdated SE(C)APs** in municipalities which joined the CoM and drafted their plans years ago already appears to be an issue. Neither Jeseník, Hlinsko nor

Ostrava (the first signatories, joining the CoM in 2010/2011 and adopting their plans around 2012) have updated their plans in line with the new requirements and developments in EU and national climate and energy policy, though the city of Ostrava at least launched the process in autumn 2021.

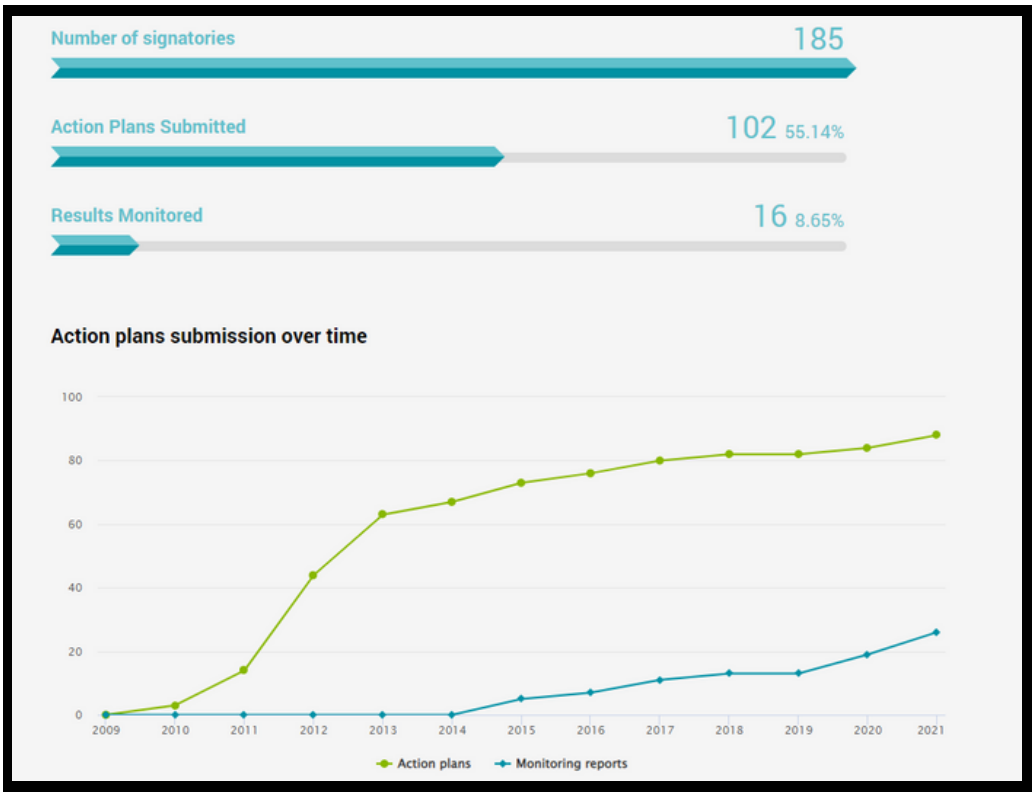
A litmus test for the success of SECAP implementation in Czechia will be its success in the capital of Prague, which recently drafted an ambitious and broad document that includes the establishment of a municipal energy community. Now, it will have to stand the test of time and a possible change in political representation after the municipal elections in late 2022.

FRANCE

a. Context

The French context is based on territorial specificities and the **obligation for local authorities to adopt climate and energy policies.** Since 2015 all French cities with more than 20 000 inhabitants must develop, implement, and evaluate a SECAP, which can be revised every six years. This document must include an assessment of climate impacts on the territory, ambitious objectives and the actions needed to achieve them.

Figure 2: CoM signatories and SE(C)APs submitted in France



Source: Covenant of Mayors

The SECAP must be compatible with the relevant regional climate and energy plan (Schéma régional d'aménagement, de développement durable et d'égalité des territoires—SRADDET) and must explicitly take into account the national climate and energy objectives, including climate neutrality by 2050.

As of 2021, 286 SECAPs had been adopted in France (although a mere 102 action plans were submitted through the CoM as many municipalities are not a part of the Covenant) out of the 755 local authorities obliged to produce them. Local authorities are therefore encountering certain delays in the production of these documents.

b. Main obstacles to develop and implement SECAPs

In France, local and regional authorities face several key obstacles in the creation and implementation of their SECAPs.

Firstly, there is a **lack of knowledge and information** about climate and energy issues and policies. Thus, mayors and local authorities are confronted with a lack of tools, a lack of knowledge on climate and energy issues and a lack of methods to build their SECAP. Although the state produced framework documents in 2015 to support the creation of SECAPs, each territory still has its own method, its own indicators and its own data.

Secondly, **human resources are largely insufficient**, particularly in the smallest municipalities. Since 2015, most of the local authorities have faced either stagnation in the number of "territorial agents" (public servants who work in cities), if not a reduction. Without sufficient human resources, the planning documents cannot be drawn up, consultations cannot take place and projects cannot be built, implemented or monitored. In addition to increased human resources, local authorities also need training on issues related to the low-carbon transition.

Thirdly, there is **insufficient funding** for local climate investment. Local authorities do not have the means to carry out the various transition projects, even though the urgency to act and their formal competences are constantly growing (renovation, sustainable transport, renewable energy, etc.). According to the I4CE Institute, achieving climate objectives at the local level requires at least an additional investment of 1.7 billion EUR per year by 2023.

c. Good and bad practices within the SECAPs

Despite these many obstacles, 250 local authorities had completed a SECAP by late 2021. By reading the SECAPs produced, it is clear that the exercise has many **shortcomings**, both in terms of ambition and in terms of the way in which they are drawn up and implemented.

Climate Action Network France notes the following obstacles:

1. In France, **SECAPs do not currently meet the national climate and energy targets**. Indeed, only half of the SECAPs (49%) have a target of reducing final energy consumption by 2030 that is at least as ambitious as the national target, and only 35% of the SECAPs have a target which is ambitious enough for the predicted energy consumption in 2050.

2. Furthermore, only one in 10 SECAPs have a **greenhouse gas emissions reduction target** of over 82% by 2050, which is compatible with the national objective—and the gaps are particularly large in the building and transportation sectors.

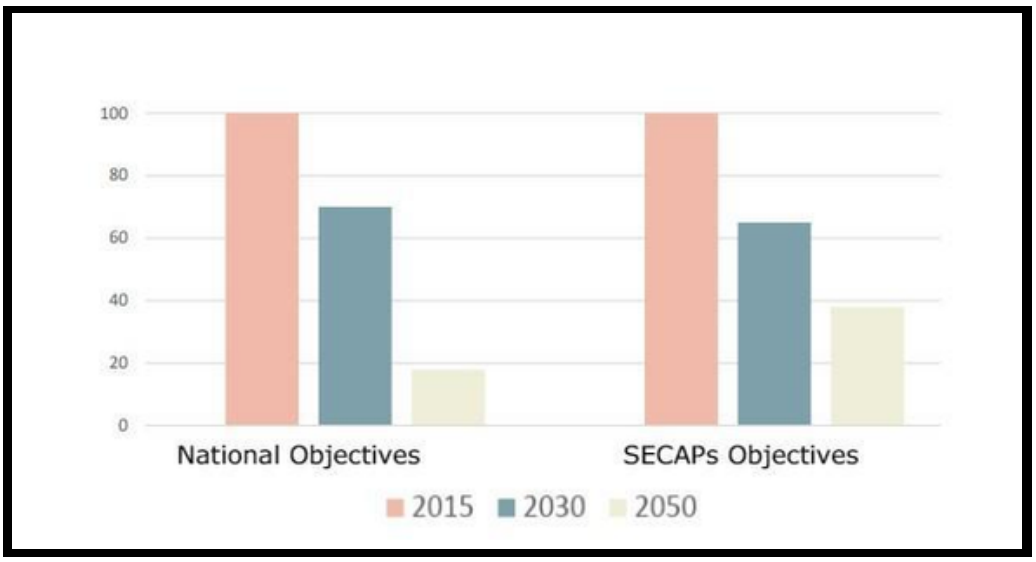
3. The **mobilization** of community services, partners and, above all, citizens is **very uneven**. The inclusion and effective participation of all should be prioritized in order to have SECAPs that are adapted to local needs and realities. To help mobilize community services, cities must review the governance of the local authority to make their SECAP a cross-cutting document. To do this, it is important to structure the governance by appointing a lead councillor and a project manager as well as a thematic leader in the community services.

4. SECAPs need to be better interlinked with other local planning documents; local authorities must link with other strategic documents (local urban plans, local housing programmes, urban travel plans, etc.).

5. While SECAPs must take into account, beyond mitigation, adaptation as well, in reality few SECAPs in France consider issues related to climate change **adaptation**.

6. Finally, all the SECAPs must better quantify the **needs in terms of human resources and investments** for the implementation of actions and the technical and financial means mobilized.

Figure 3: GHG emission reductions: French national target and aggregate SECAPs target



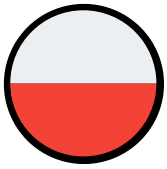
Source: ADCF

Good practices should nevertheless be emphasized. This sharing of experiences should inspire other local authorities. Below is a non-exhaustive selection:

1. The European Metropolis of Lille aims to reduce GHG emissions by 45% in 2030 and 89% in 2050 compared to 1990 thanks to energy savings, energy efficiency and decarbonization of the energy mix. These objectives are particularly interesting as they are accompanied by measures combining savings, efficiency, and renewable energy. In addition, the city is committed to undertaking an annual climate analysis of its budget. Expenditures are labelled under three categories: "very favourable", "favourable" and "unfavourable" for mitigation, adaptation, and air quality.

2. The Grand Douaisis territorial authority is distinguished by the consideration it gives to savings in its SECAP through various forms: energy, material, structural, organizational and collaborative savings. For instance, the SECAP includes mutualization of the means of transport, deactivation of public lighting for part of the night and the translation of travel limitation objectives into urban planning documents.

3. The La Rochelle metropolitan area has set a number of very ambitious climate objectives including greenhouse gas emission reductions of 30% by 2030 and 75% by 2040 as compared to 2019. These two reduction targets are combined with a goal of "carbon neutrality in 2040" to be achieved via carbon offsets accounting. In order to meet these targets, numerous actions to reduce emissions will be developed and residual emissions will be offset through a voluntary local carbon market.



POLAND

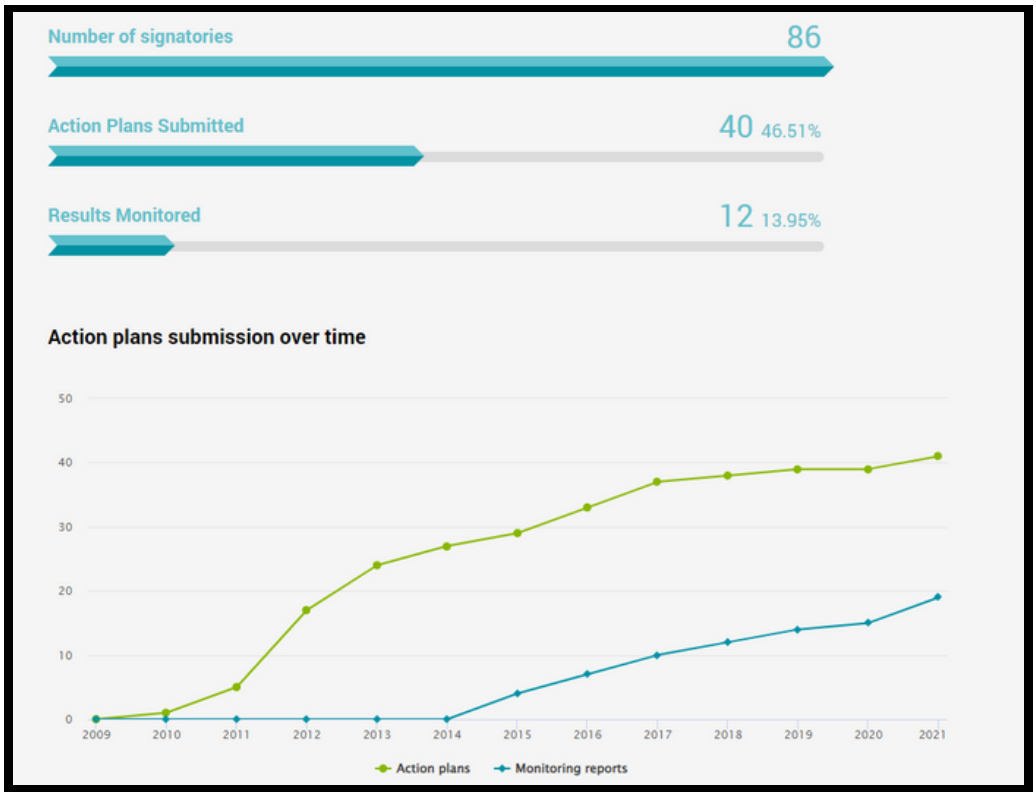
a. Context

Poland is one of the biggest European countries, therefore there is a need to arrange effective levels of regional and local management within the country. In Poland, local authorities have two layers: (i) local authorities—municipalities and powiats—and (ii) regional authorities, called voivodeships. In cities above 100 000 inhabitants (with a few exceptions), municipalities and powiats are merged.

In Poland, **SECAPs are expected to be prepared by municipalities**. Moreover, only municipalities so far have applied to the CoM—the main promoter of SECAPs. The CoM currently includes 86 Polish municipalities, of which 53 are active members. Currently, only one of the associated municipalities (Zabrze) has prepared a SECAP in line with the methodology proposed by the CoM.

Polish and European expectations about climate policy planning on the local level have substantial differences and similarities at the same time.

Figure 4: CoM signatories and SE(C)APs submitted in Poland



Source: Covenant of Mayors

b. Main obstacles to develop SECAPs

A key obstacle is the **lack of cohesion and quality among the municipal plans**.

Cohesion is undermined by the Polish government promoting separate plans for adaptation and for mitigation of climate change and not encouraging multiple issues to be merged in one document. Therefore, energy poverty and other important issues are generally missing altogether.

Quality is neglected because there is no local custom or governmental guidance on how to engage stakeholders actively in drafting these documents. As a matter of fact, neither the low-carbon plans nor the adaptation plans are compulsory. Municipalities strive to reduce the workload and costs of their preparation as much as possible, and public consultation is commonly secured at a minimum level.

Besides quality and cohesion, local plans also **lack sufficient ambition,** endorsed by the attitude of the national government. In addition, local Polish authorities have very limited authority over energy issues; therefore, it is not easy for them to be ambitious. Electricity production is controlled by national energy companies—even local energy transmission lines are under their management. Heat production and transmission have been mostly privatised, and municipalities manage it only in smaller cities where privatisation was unsuccessful.

The energy efficiency of buildings, most of which are private, is mostly a decision for building owners, and municipalities lack effective means of influencing them. The situation is similar in the transport sector: municipalities have authority only over roads—their building and maintenance—as well as public transport networks.

c. Good practices within the SECAPs

A remarkable good practice is the **Polish government's active encouragement of local authorities** to prepare local level policy documents on climate issues.

Starting in 2015, over 1 000 municipalities had prepared **low-carbon economy plans** by 2020. This movement was triggered partly by governmental expectations and by financial support for the preparation of such plans. Currently, many of those plans are being revised, although a majority will probably not be updated. Those plans are very similar to SEAPs, the format previously promoted by the CoM.

Moreover, since 2017 over 45 municipalities (mostly cities above 50 000 inhabitants) have prepared what are known as **municipal adaptation plans**. The preparation of 44 of these plans was organized and financed within a governmental project. The capital of Warsaw prepared their document within a LIFE project, and a few other municipalities prepared a document with the support of the National Funds for Environmental Protection and Water Management. The documents are fairly similar to the adaptation part of SECAPs.

Unfortunately, despite the development of both low-carbon economy plans and municipal adaptation plans, **only a small number of municipalities have also decided to join the CoM** in recent years, as indicated by the aforementioned figures.

d. Experience with SECAPs implementation

Nevertheless, some municipalities were able to set ambitious goals and see to their implementation. Unfortunately, these are mostly municipalities which have not (yet) decided to join the CoM. Of CoM members, the following stand out: **Częstochowa, Bielsko-Biała and Niepołomice**. These municipalities have a long history of ambitious and wise policy as regards energy efficiency in their building stock as well as investment in renewable energy (mostly photovoltaic).

Currently, one of the most advanced cities in energy transition is **Bydgoszcz**, which has been a CoM member since 2011. Even though the municipality has not submitted a SE(C)AP to the CoM, it is advanced in its realisation of a 100% renewable city programme based on energy efficiency goals as well as investments in photovoltaics, biogas and waste management. The plan is a continuation of efforts undertaken in the first generation of SEAPs. All of that is supervised by an advanced, live energy monitoring and management system devoted to this role.

It is clearly problematic that **national law does not allow for direct sales of electricity** produced by a city to its inhabitants. This impacts smaller municipalities in particular, which have invested in wind or solar installations themselves. Many municipalities have also enabled large private wind investments on their land, but the only gain they get is a fee for the land acquisition and income taxes (if there is income). Meanwhile, there is no mechanism to ensure that all the green energy produced on their land can be used by them or their inhabitants.

Based on the Institute for Sustainable Development (ISD) experience, there are also other municipalities which did not present their energy plans in SEAPs or SECAPs but managed to implement ambitious energy policies: Kisielice with wind farms, biomass heating and solar; Poddębice and Uniejów with 100% geothermal town heating systems; and the municipalities surrounding Żywiec, with hundreds of PV installations and over 2 GWh of annual solar electricity production. There are many more, but since the Polish government does not reward municipalities with ambitious energy policies, many of them remain in the shadows.

SLOVENIA

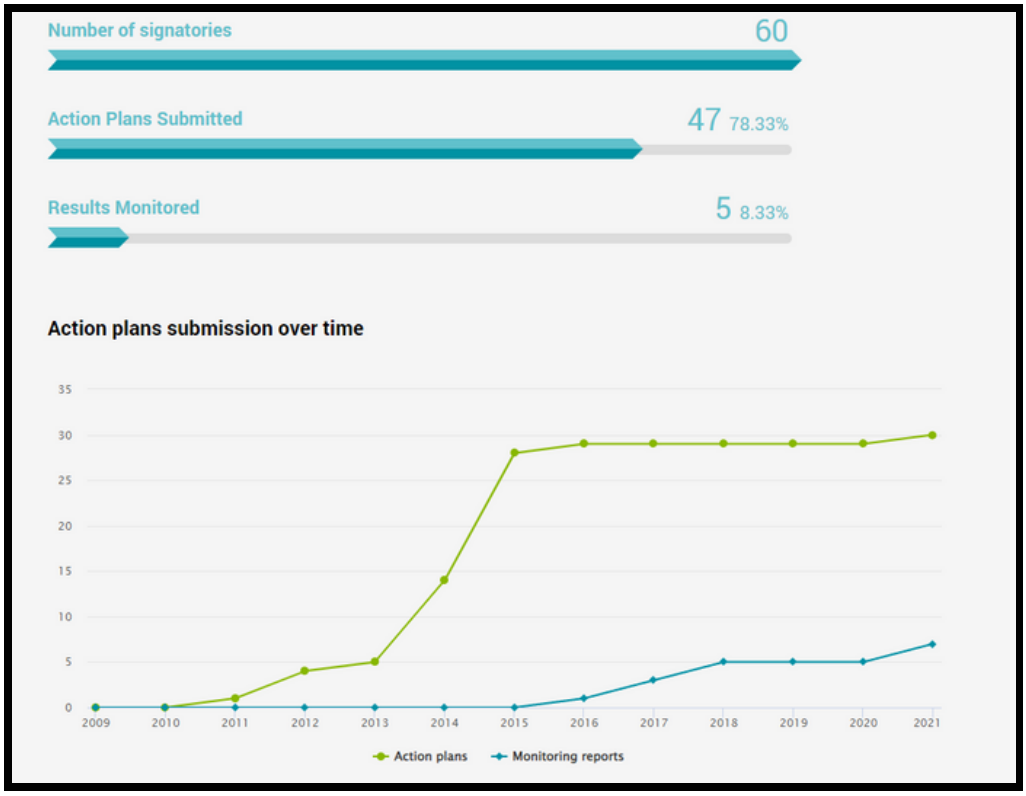
a. Context

In Slovenia, **municipalities are only obliged to prepare local energy concepts** (LECs). These are similar to the former SEAPs under the CoM, although most of them do not include climate action planning. A LEC is a mandatory document for all local communities or municipalities, and it represents the basic planning document for spatial and economic development. The Ministry responsible for energy prescribes the methodology of preparation, which includes public participation and the obligatory content of the LEC. However, LECs are mainly focused on energy, and climate planning and actions do not play a key role.

On the other hand, **there is no national structural framework for the preparation of SECAPs**. Municipalities are showing interest in increased climate ambition; there are currently 23 municipalities, including three city municipalities (Novo Mesto, Kranj and Nova Gorica) that have a greenhouse gas reduction goal for 2030. But five of these do not have SECAPs; they have instead included their 2030 targets in revised LECs and SEAPs.

There are currently 60 CoM signatories out of the 212 municipalities in Slovenia. However, only one regional SECAP has been adopted (in the Gorenjska region). It includes all of the 18 municipalities in the region. The regional SECAP consists of analysis and measures for all the municipalities and additional regional measures. The City Municipality of Koper is currently in the process of finalizing their SECAP.

Figure 5: CoM signatories and SE(C)APs submitted in Slovenia



Source: Covenant of Mayors

b. Main obstacles to develop and implement SECAPs

Out of 212 Slovenian municipalities, approximately half have a population of less than 5 000 residents. While almost a fifth of all citizens in the republic live in only two municipalities, Ljubljana, and Maribor, in total, more than a third of the country's population lives in just twelve municipalities. **Access to finance is a recurrent problem** for most municipalities (especially the smaller ones) interested in preparing SECAPs. **Lack of know-how and human resources** are also major barriers.

Local energy agencies and **regional development agencies** play a major role in the Slovenian SECAP context. Due to the lack of capacity among local authorities, they are the ones leading the process of preparation and writing the SECAPs for municipalities. In addition, they are also a key forum to exchange good practices and hence a key driver of municipal long-term climate planning in Slovenia. As financial resources are also a major problem for municipalities, most of the SECAPs that were either adopted or are being adopted are financed within European or regional projects.

Since municipalities are obliged to prepare LECs, many local authorities focus on their preparation and revision and **lack capacity to prepare additional documents on a voluntary basis**. Furthermore, the Ministry of the Environment and Spatial Planning, the Ministry of Infrastructure and the Government Office for Development and European Cohesion Policy are not very supportive when it comes to SECAPs, as they are not obligatory. This results in preparation of SECAPs largely being based on the voluntary engagement of individual municipalities and their willingness to set more ambitious long-term climate and energy goals.

c. Good and bad practices within the SECAPs

Municipalities in Slovenia are actively implementing climate measures with an emphasis on energy efficiency, especially in the field of residential buildings and municipal building renovation, sustainable mobility measures and the use of renewable sources for electricity and heat. Despite this, it is hard to pinpoint the implementation of SECAPs due to the lack of actual submitted plans. In this context, the **lack of a structural framework and finances, alongside a lack of interest from key state actors** to support more ambitious local long-term planning can be identified as bad practice in SECAP implementation.

Nevertheless, there are some good practices helping to secure ambitious long-term planning on the part of municipalities and the implementation of ambitious measures which should be emphasized:

- **Local climate activities traffic light**: The Jozef Stefan Institute developed a web application (within the LIFE project "ClimatePath2050") that delivers better insight into municipal activities in several climate action implementation areas and encourages the exchange of good practices between them. The scoreboard includes 54 indicators that show the activities of municipalities as regards climate change mitigation in buildings, transport, agriculture, forestry and industry, waste management, electricity generation from renewable sources and district heating. This is emphasized as a good practice as it enables better monitoring of the implementation of local measures; moreover, it also provides a good basis for municipalities to plan their long-term climate and energy measures.

- **Gorenjska region SECAP**: This was the first SECAP in Slovenia. It was set at the regional level and includes all 18 municipalities of the Gorenjska statistical region. The process was coordinated by a regional development agency. It enabled many smaller municipalities without sufficient resources and capacity to better plan their measures within a regional context. Already, it has resulted in many regional sustainable mobility measures (regional car sharing, connected municipal public transport, regional cycling infrastructure, regional centre for mobility, etc.).

SPAIN

a. Context

In a decentralized country such as Spain, and especially in terms of policies and regulations, the coordinated and coherent participation of the different territorial administrative levels is essential to forge a sustainable, prosperous, and resilient future.

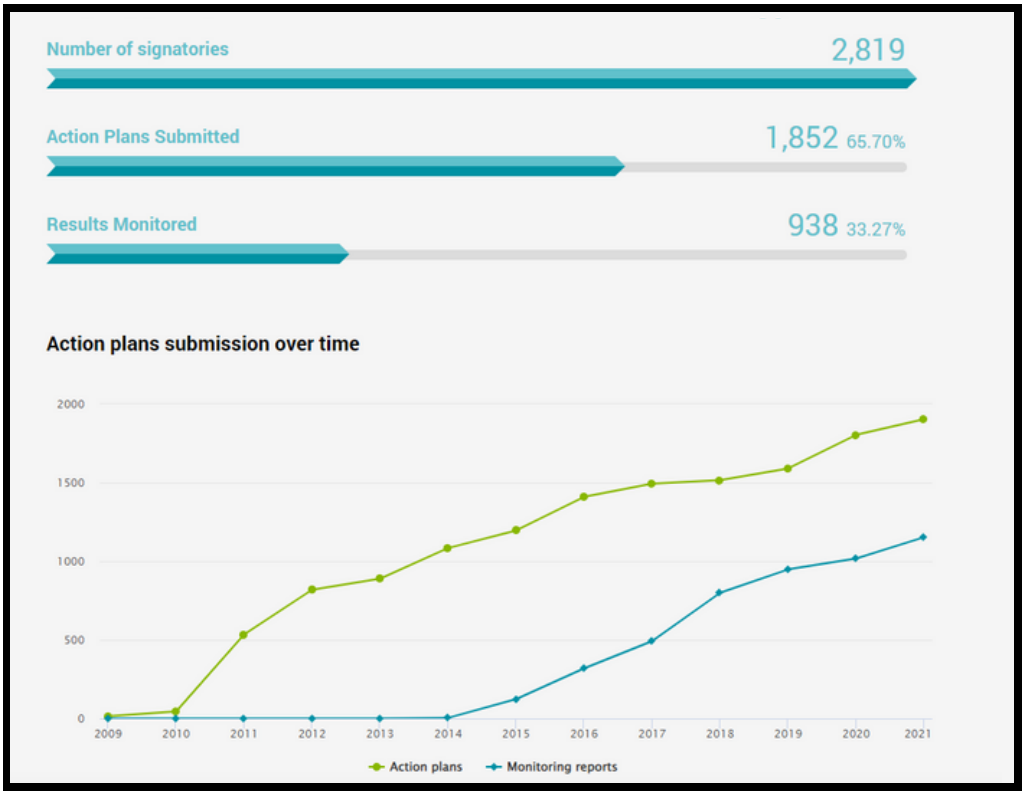
In this context, the role of Spanish cities and municipalities is key to consolidating progress towards the decarbonization of the economy that the society needs.

Local Spanish authorities carry out delegated competences in several emitting sectors: transport, residential and tertiary buildings, heat and cooling, public lighting, industry, agriculture, and waste, but also, in terms of energy and local electricity production, through the deployment of renewable prosumerism and energy communities in cities. That is why the Spanish National Energy and Climate Plan (NECP) and the national Long-Term Strategy (LTS) include actions at the sub-national (regional and local) levels to carry out a great number of the planned measures and policies.

Spain is divided into 17 autonomous regions plus 2 autonomous cities, 50 provinces, and around 8 000 municipalities. By December 2021, over a third of Spanish municipalities (2 833 local entities) joined the CoM initiative. Of the signatory entities, around two thirds (1 901 local entities) have submitted an action plan on climate and energy, as required by the CoM.

Since its creation, the initiative has evolved, adapting to the changes that have taken place in European regulations on climate and energy over the last decade, with increasingly ambitious climate and energy targets for municipalities and cities. However, **not all the submitted action plans have been updated according to these regulatory changes**, and they often include targets that are far too low.

Figure 6: CoM signatories and SE(C)APs submitted in Spain



Source: Covenant of Mayors

b. Main obstacles to develop and implement SECAPs

In Spain, **80% of signatory entities are small municipalities** with less than 10 000 inhabitants that usually rely on **insufficient human and material resources** and are thus faced with a lack of specialized technicians to prepare and develop SECAPs. Generally, local entities, especially the smaller ones, do not have a specific department or area focused on climate change. Instead, they deal with climate and energy issues from other areas such as environment or urban planning, leading to a narrower scope of actions and lower impact of the measures that are put in place.

Often, there is a **lack of knowledge and information** about the active role that municipalities and cities can play in the necessary transformation. This explains why only a third of the municipalities have been encouraged to be part of the CoM initiative. Although less and less common, in some cases there is a lack of interest and social awareness about climate and energy issues and policies, which discourages the local authority to act against climate change without the support and understanding of its people.

Another important brake on the local engine for the development and subsequent implementation of SECAPs are **insufficient economic resources and funding sources** for local climate investment to carry out various transition projects within their competences, such as building renovation, sustainable transport, renewable energy, waste management and so on. Municipalities and cities are the lowest step in the pyramid of competence, spanning smaller territories, which means that they usually receive a smaller amount in the distribution of state and European funds. Given the urgency to act and the growing recognition of local action on the pathway towards a low-carbon economy and climate-resilient society, more money should be directed to local mitigation and adaptation projects.

In addition, there is a large barrier in the **continuity** of the policies that are implemented in Spain as the governing parties change, including the development and implementation of action plans. This makes it very difficult to guarantee over time the effective implementation of the measures and projects envisaged in an action plan that in most cases covers several years.

c. Good and bad practices within the SECAPs

Although there is a standard design format that facilitates the development of SECAPs, most local entities have submitted their own plan formats, prepared with their own methods and indicators, while including at least the minimum required content. The key elements that should be included are a general characterization of the municipality, a Baseline Emission Inventory (BEI) and a Risk and Vulnerability Assessment (RVA).

When looking into different SECAPs as they were submitted, some interesting and useful measures arise among mitigation and adaptation actions at the local level. If properly implemented, these measures result in valuable experience that may inspire other local entities, as shown in the following examples:

- A growing number of municipalities and cities are committed to promoting **active, clean and sustainable mobility** through effective measures such as the pedestrianization of downtowns and sidewalk widening, the placing and expansion of cycle lanes towards the realization of a solid and connected network between urban centre and periphery, the electrification of existing urban bus fleets and the purchase of new electric buses, and the creation of regulated parking services to limit the use of private motorized vehicles. Some examples that illustrate the implementation of these mobility measures within Spain include Barcelona's sustainable and active mobility initiative, Pact for Mobility, the new mobility regulation Pamplona 30, Pontevedra's alternative mobility programme and Valencia's municipal bicycle agency.

- Likewise, more and more municipalities and cities are coming to support **100% renewable energy in public and private buildings** through extra incentives and grants for the implementation of photovoltaic generation facilities and the deployment of high efficiency heating and cooling networks, tax deductions for the installation of electric charging points and the promotion of renewable **prosumerism** in households and businesses. Furthermore, Barcelona Energia, the public electricity supplier, which since July 2018 has offered 100% renewable energy to the Barcelona Metropolitan Area, aims to contribute to saving both costs for citizens and tons of CO2 emissions for the city.

- Novel initiatives such as CitiEs 2030's "Climate Neutral Cities in 2030"—started in September 2021 by the municipalities of Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia and Seville, and which were joined in December 2021 by the city councils of Valladolid, Soria, Zaragoza and Vitoria-Gasteiz—aim to achieve a **comprehensive and holistic approach** to accelerating the energy transition and move towards decarbonized urban models that are more sustainable and habitable for citizens.

- Finally, in terms of **adaptation**, new concepts are emerging as regards spaces for climate refuge (e.g. Barcelona's "Climate Shelters in Schools") and metropolitan forests (e.g. the Metropolitan Forest of Madrid) which, together with the renaturation of spaces and the reforestation of degraded areas, aim to contribute to more biodiverse, green and healthy cities while also increasing their climate-resilience.

Despite the good intentions reflected in some SECAPs, not all measures end up being properly implemented, as shown in the following examples of bad practices:

- In some cases, **low emission zones have been poorly implemented** due to initial social opposition together with a lack of widespread political support, resulting in overly lax restrictions that do not help meet the emission reduction targets stipulated for these central areas. This is the case for Madrid's low emission zone. Former "Madrid Central" zone was first withdrawn with a change of local government and then replaced by the new "Distrito Centro", undergoing a worrying setback with less strict restrictions than its predecessor, for example, on the accessibility of motorized traffic to the central hub.

- The aforementioned **lack of funding is slowing down neighbourhood regeneration** and rehabilitation through the much-needed deployment of renewables, especially on urban and industrial surfaces, as well as the urgent retrofitting of existing buildings, many of which are part of the old construction stock.

- **Urban naturalization** and green spaces, small carbon sinks and clean air for citizens encounter difficulties mainly due to a lack of public spaces and concrete-free surfaces.

3. Conclusion

The LIFE Unify project has provided all involved implementing partners with the opportunity to map out the state of play when it comes to the implementation of climate action on the municipal level in the European Union. In this report, we strived to summarise the experience acquired in five different EU Member States over the past two years. From this, the following lessons can be drawn:

1. Firstly, **the divergence of situations in the individual Member States is striking and fundamental**. Clearly, this divergence begins with some very engrained and structural variables, including the size of individual municipalities, the number of inhabitants, the respective administrative divisions, vertical/horizontal distribution of power and the formal competences of municipalities vis-a-vis other public entities. It is then amplified by differing historical experience with handling energy-related matters, especially as regards their decentralisation and the (need for) ownership of individual municipalities. Climate-related priorities have generally come into play at the local level only later, but even there the level of ownership among municipalities varies.

On the one hand, we have France, where each larger town has had to draft and adopt a SECAP, and Spain, where close to 3 000 individual municipalities have voluntarily joined the CoM. On the other hand, Poland or Czechia have only a very limited number of signatories and even fewer municipalities were so far able to come up with a plan of their own which meets the standards set by the CoM. These diverse situations across countries fall into a wide range of approaches to taking action against climate change in different types of municipalities, in which good practices and satisfactory solutions may serve as guideline examples to be adapted in other places.

2. Secondly, **the municipalities need more support to develop and implement ambitious SECAPs**. Despite the key role of local entities in the fight against climate change, there has been a delay in local climate action due to slow recognition and institutional support at the national level. This has been particularly the case for the "new" Member States of Central and Eastern Europe where, due to limited capacity, adequate support from the CoM secretariat at the national level has often been missing. Another drawback that should be addressed by national institutions is the lack of information and technical experience in the field.

It appears that leaving all matters related to the drafting and implementation of SECAPs to the municipalities and to the CoM, both of which have limited capacity, is not enough, and **leadership within respective Member States is necessary** both to bring more signatories on board and to keep the current membership active. In the cases of Slovenia and Poland, we have even noticed an effective duplication of climate-relevant municipal strategies that are promoted on the national level.

3. Thirdly, **the involvement of all political parties and citizens in climate action at the local level is fundamental** for the policies to succeed, acknowledging the need for an active role on the part of cities and municipalities in the transition towards climate neutral economies and climate-resilient societies. The lack of political engagement and social awareness may explain the lower numbers of municipalities that have joined the CoM's initiative in some countries.

Moreover, the examples of Slovenia (where a regional development agency coordinated the SECAP drafting process) or Czechia (where many of the new signatories are brought in by Local Action Groups) show that it should not necessarily be only local governments that take part in CoM activities but perhaps also district- or regional-level groupings wherever appropriate. Those can then also explore ways to pool resources and personal capacities, such as those of an energy manager.

4. Fourthly, while institutional support on the national level is key for boosting climate action locally, so too is the **need for adequate and consistent funding through established financial instruments**. This is especially relevant for national contexts where there are many small municipal units which have historically not dealt with energy issues. As a result, it becomes rather burdensome for villages or towns of only several hundred or thousand inhabitants to develop a full-scale SECAP including the Baseline Emissions Inventory and the Risk and Vulnerability Assessment, in addition to ensuring its subsequent implementation. Funding opportunities from national or EU instruments—and the broad awareness of such tools—appear paramount to bringing such entities on board.

Pondering possible ways forward, the conviction that cities and municipalities remain a fundamental actor capable of accelerating climate action and ensuring the EU's compatibility with the Paris Agreement remains. Likewise, SECAPs are clearly important instruments that can guide this endeavour. However, for better implementation, several conditions must be met simultaneously. SECAPs must be better embedded in national-level strategies and their development needs to be actively promoted by the CoM, including through its national focal points. Both the creation of the plans and their implementation should be generously funded by state institutions, and their drafting needs to be done in a participatory process with broad political support wherever possible. Meeting these conditions can eventually increase the clout of the local level in climate action planning across the European Union.

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