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ClimateGO

Thematic Study

Successes and Failures in Climate-Smart Governance

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1. Introduction: Climate-Smart Governance

Climate change has profound and far-reaching impacts across Europe, and there is a need for urgent action to both mitigate climate change and to adapt to the changing conditions.

ClimateGO project addresses the need for regions and cities to take proactive action against climate change. It emphasizes the importance of implementing laws and strategies to achieve climate targets while considering implications for society and nature.

The main goal of the ClimateGO project is to enhance the capabilities of administrative bodies and policymakers to create effective climate-smart and resilient policies, as well as to improve their ability to implement these policies successfully. A common challenge for all project partner is to ensure the continuity of sustainability actions in political changes.

This Thematic Study was compiled through a questionnaire and key stakeholder interviews at ClimateGO partner regions and cities:

- Päijät-Häme in Finland,
- Alzira in Spain,
- Grenoble in France,
- Maribor in Slovenia,
- Kosice in Slovakia and
- Waterford in Ireland.

2. National Level Climate Targets

EU is striving for climate neutrality by 2050. In shorter term, EU has a set a target for reducing net greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55 % by 2030, compared to 1990 levels. According to the Effort Sharing Regulation, EU Member States have emission reduction targets for the year 2030 ranging from 10 to 50 %.

Of ClimateGO partner countries, Finland and Ireland have Climate Acts with stricter emission reduction targets than the EU regulation. Finland aims at 60 % emission reduction by 2030, and Ireland at 51 % reduction. In comparison, for instance Slovakia aims at 20 % emission reduction by 2030.

FUTURE INSIGHTS: Podravje region, Slovenia

Looking ahead, the Podravje region sees several urgent priorities in its climate transition. Climate adaptation remains at the top of the agenda, particularly in addressing heat extremes, water management, and the resilience of critical infrastructure. Investment in green urban planning, including the use of green spaces and nature-based cooling systems, is seen as essential for mitigating the health impacts of heat waves. Ensuring the availability and quality of water resources, including proper wastewater management, is also viewed as a strategic priority.

On the mitigation side, energy transition is a major concern. There is a strong push to promote the use of solar energy in urban areas, though the current grid infrastructure presents significant limitations. Stakeholders call for the removal of technical barriers and better coordination with national authorities to allow wider adoption of renewables. In terms of economic resilience, the region is exploring job creation in sustainable sectors and support for local businesses through green finance. Governance reform is also seen as critical. There is a growing call for a mission-led approach to decarbonisation, aiming for carbon neutrality by 2035. This would involve creating empowered local teams, building an economic case for transformation, and ensuring that governance structures are capable of supporting bold, innovative actions. More broadly, fostering public sector innovation, empowering civic-led initiatives, and improving policy coherence will be essential to achieving these ambitions.

3. Regional and City Level Climate Commitments

Regional and city level strategies and programmes support the implementation of national climate strategies in all the partner regions. For example, in France SRADDET, the Strategy for sustainable and equal development elaborated by the Regional Council provides a general framework for the regional climate, air, and energy plans. At the same time, regional SRADDET must be compatible with the National Low Carbon strategy.

In Ireland, the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act requires that local authorities identify a Decarbonising Zone in their jurisdiction. Decarbonising Zones are a mechanism to harness a portfolio of actions, projects and technologies to deliver national and regional climate objective at local level. Their aim is to give Local Authorities the mandate to take risks, innovate and develop demonstrator projects which, where successful, can be replicated and scaled up nationally. Waterford City and County Council chose Waterford City as the Decarbonising Zone and set out the goals and how to achieve them in the Roadmap for a Carbon Neutral Waterford.

FUTURE INSIGHTS: Košice Self – Governing Region, Slovakia

Košice Self – Governing Region (KSK) plan to update the adaptation strategy with a focus on vulnerability assessment, risk analysis, and defining solutions. Also plan to prepare and implement nature-based measures in the Roňava River basin.

One of the most important things related to climate-change is prioritization of submitted water retention projects within the regional project portfolio.

In 2025 the monitoring of implemented measures to mitigate the impacts of climate change in the region will be conducted, along with the development of thematic maps based on data collected from ongoing regional initiatives (municipalities and cities – Part I, KSK – Part II). The monitoring will focus on measures implemented by KSK and other entities. Data collection will take place in collaboration with water councils and organizations under the jurisdiction of KSK.

The methodology for calculating retained water and carbon sequestration in the natural ecosystems of the Košice Region will be designed to assess water retention and carbon sequestration and will include an interactive tool for calculating sustainable water and carbon resource management. It will also provide detailed procedures and calculation mechanisms, such as in Excel or other suitable software, allowing for flexible and independent calculations in the future.

A report evaluating the implemented climate change mitigation measures in the Košice Region, with a focus on determining water and carbon balances, will quantify the amount of retained water and carbon. This formulation clearly indicates that the aim of the report will be not only to assess measures but also to determine specific values related to water and carbon balance.

In the Košice region in Slovakia, the Regional Hydrogen Strategy, the Low-Carbon Development Strategy, and the Integrated Regional Development Plan are key policies. These policies focus on hydrogen as a key element for decarbonization, reducing emissions in transportation and industry, and promoting sustainable mobility.

In Spain each autonomous community has its own Climate Action Plan, aligned with national objectives. The Valencia Community has policies prioritizing decarbonization, energy efficiency, and climate adaptation. Key strategies include the Valencia Strategy against Climate Change, the Climate Change and Ecological Transition Law of the Valencia Community, and the Energy and Climate Plan of the Valencia Community.

In Slovenia, key strategies include The Strategy for the Transition of the City of Maribor to the Circular Economy, the Podravje Regional Development Plan, and the Sustainable Urban Mobility Plan of Maribor. The circular economy strategy focuses on waste management, resource efficiency, material recovery, and supports climate mitigation by reducing GHG emissions.

In Päijät-Häme, Finland, the regional Green Transition Programme was finalised in 2024. The programme targets a carbon-neutral Päijät-Häme by 2030, achieving a circular economy, and strengthening biodiversity. The Green Transition Programme combines earlier climate and circular economy roadmaps, while emphasising also biodiversity. The Regional Strategy that is being updated in 2025 supports the achievement of goals.

FUTURE INSIGHTS: Waterford, Ireland

Waterford City and County Council in Ireland has developed the "Roadmap to Carbon Neutrality 2040" as part of its plan for climate-smart governance. This document aligns with the national climate action objectives set out in the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act. A steering group, composed of various organisations and decision-makers, has been established to ensure the roadmap's effectiveness and viability. This group is responsible for disseminating the roadmap and assessing whether any adjustments are necessary to create a collaborated, clear, and achievable plan. This approach enables everyone, from individual citizens to large organizations, to take meaningful action and contribute to a strong, climate-smart governance framework. Additionally, the ClimateGo project plays a vital role in building relationships with other European cities, allowing Waterford to learn from their best practices and adapt them accordingly.

4. Governance and Key Stakeholders

ClimateGO partners implement climate and sustainability strategies with various actors, while the governance structures vary between countries. Local governance is led by municipalities and cities, but the role of regions differs.

In the Sloveninan Podravje region, climate governance is primarily led by the City Municipality of Maribor, which collaborates closely with a diverse ecosystem of institutions. Among the most central actors is ENERGAP – the Energy and Climate Agency of Podravje – which has evolved from a traditional energy agency into a regional centre of excellence for climate change mitigation and adaptation. The Regional Development Agency for Podravje–Maribor complements these efforts by ensuring the alignment of national strategies with local implementation and coordinating sustainability-focused regional development. Public Service Holding Maribor (JHMB), which manages critical infrastructure and utilities in the city, is also involved in climate-related planning and implementation.

In addition to public institutions, non-governmental and research-based organisations contribute significantly to shaping Maribor's climate transition. The E-Institute works through national and international networks, such as Climate-KIC and the Slovenian Centre for Circular Economy, to promote systemic solutions and climate resilience in infrastructure and investment. Korimako leads the Thriving Communities initiative, aiming to radically rethink and reorganize how communities respond to climate change, emphasizing mission-led and transformative approaches. The University of Maribor, together with NGOs and private sector partners, participates in collaborative projects and serves as a knowledge-sharing hub. The Maribor Green Mission for Climate, born out of the MISSION CE CLIMATE project and further developed through the ClimateGO project, is an example of successful stakeholder mobilization, aiming to overcome the siloed approaches in local governance.

In Finland, Regional Councils act as regional development and planning authorities. Regional councils supervise regional planning and the interests of the region, but municipalities have their own independent governance structures, and have the right to tax their residents. The Regional Council of Päijät-Häme plans and implements sustainability action with various stakeholders including municipalities, regional business and administration organizations, higher education institutions, and the wellbeing services county. Activities include regular meetings, workshops and joint projects. One example of reaching the municipal mayors and council leaders is a monthly Chairman forum.

In Grenoble, regional level actors include the Regional Council of Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes, and the regional arm of the Ministry for Ecological Transition. At the inter-communal level, the City of Grenoble collaborates with, for instance, the Metropolitan Authority and ALEC (Local Energy and Climate Agency). ALEC organizes annual or biennial meetings to share data on greenhouse gas emissions and other climate-related information. Observatories have been set up to study local climate parameters, and work sessions are organized to enhance expertise on climate issues. Some of these are focused on decision-making with elected officials, while others are more technical and involve municipal agents to collectively enhance expertise on climate issues (workshops, conferences, network meetings, etc.)

As an example of stakeholder cooperation, Waterford City and County Council is responsible for managing climate actions. Key actors include the Health Service Executive, South East Technological University, IDA Industrial Park, the Chambers of Commerce, and the Southeast Energy Agency. These actors are part of the Carbon Neutral Waterford Stakeholder Group, working together on projects like transport and district heating. The aim is also to increase cooperation with large employers in Waterford.

In the Košice region, climate governance involves the Košice Self-Governing Region, Municipal Councils, the Technical University of Košice (TUKE), and private sector partnerships. These entities collaborate on regional policies, energy and mobility strategies, and green technology deployment.

In Alzira, the Alzira City Council is the main institution responsible for implementing and overseeing climate policies in the city. Alzira has implemented several key projects with key stakeholders including citizen participation through the Local Environment Councils and the Murta Council, and via public consultations and surveys. Other key stakeholders include the private sector and local businesses, especially those operating in sectors like energy, agriculture, and mobility; Regional and Autonomous Institutions like the Generalitat Valenciana, the Valencia Provincial Council, the Valencia Federation of Municipalities, the Ribera Alta Consortium, and other regional entities. An example of cooperation is the agricultural sector with the integration into biodiversity conservation networks and the use of diagnostic tools to assess agriculture's vulnerability to climate change.

5. Obstacles in Climate-Smart Governance

Although climate governance structures and strategies are in place, there is still a need for additional measures to implement sustainability actions. Obstacles identified include a lack of policy support from the national level, which is needed to implement certain actions. For example, national level delays in implementing strategies impact both the willingness to act in the regional and local level, and also the funding available for actions.

Common challenges for all ClimateGO partners include cooperation between the actors and capacity building needs. Good cooperation is done with different stakeholders, but it is still sometimes difficult to define the sharing of responsibilities, and to get all actors involved. The lack of synchronisation and clarity in roles can cause delays and duplications in the execution of climate projects. For example, stakeholders across the Podravje region report that fragmented governance remains a key obstacle in climate action. The lack of coordination across sectors and institutions often leads to inefficiencies and dispersed responsibilities, which undermines the implementation of coherent strategies.

Awareness raising and capacity building needs differ in partner regions, but overall, there is a need for continuous training sessions and skills development for different actors to help them better understand and address climate challenges within their respective fields. These skills development actions should include practical workshops, specialized conferences, and targeted training on specific topics. Climate governance

FUTURE INSIGHTS:

Päijät-Häme, Finland

Climate-smart governance has been promoted in Päijät-Häme through, for instance, a joint effort of seven municipalities on drafting Climate Action Plans. The participatory process was coordinated by the Päijät-Häme Regional Council with financial support from the Finnish Ministry of Environment. The plans were approved at municipal councils at the end of year 2024 and the beginning of 2025. ClimateGo project continues the work by providing a training on climate plans for the municipal decision makers starting their term after 2025 municipal elections.

Climate-change walks are another example of raising the awareness of decision-makers. During the walks led by local experts, participants will explore the observable impacts and risks of climate change in their own hometown or region, engage in discussions on various solutions, preparation strategies, and adaptation methods.

Municipalities cannot solve sustainability crisis themselves, and cooperation with local and regional stakeholders is essential. An example of cooperation with industries is Climate Partnership between municipalities and companies. The partnership helps especially small companies to begin climate work.

requires continuous development of technical capacities in areas such as energy efficiency, circular economy, and climate resilience. A lack of specialisation can limit the effectiveness of some policies. A development area is also consistent data gathering and sharing, as well as establishment of relevant indicators.

There are challenges in implementing programs and projects both in the regional and municipality level. The programs have ambitious goals, but their implementation often faces the difficulty of adapting these goals to local needs and the environmental, economic, and social reality. Especially smaller municipalities would need support for implementation, as skills levels, ambitions, and resources vary. The challenge in balancing immediate economic needs with long-term sustainability goals is difficult, especially in municipalities that face economic troubles. Securing adequate funding for the implementation of sustainability actions is essential.

A key area of improvement recognised, for example, in Slovenia, is financial literacy and the ability to access funding for climate projects. Municipalities often lack the expertise to apply for national and European grants or to design innovative financial instruments such as energy performance contracts or green procurement schemes. Public procurement itself is an underutilized tool in advancing climate objectives. Awareness-raising campaigns and participatory programs are also needed to encourage behavioural change and community ownership of climate actions. More support is required to develop robust monitoring and evaluation systems, allowing for better data collection, assessment of policy effectiveness, and real-time adjustments to strategies.

Additionally, outdated and insufficiently enforced national regulations hinder adaptation measures. For example, current construction standards do not necessarily reflect the realities of climate extremes, such as heavy rainfall, heat waves, or strong winds. There are also concerns regarding the readiness of infrastructure systems—particularly the electrical grid—to support renewable energy integration, especially solar power.

Promoting greater citizen awareness and participation is a common need. While progress has been made in citizen participation, greater community involvement in adopting sustainable practices could be achieved through continuous awareness campaigns and environmental education. Citizen support for sustainability action and demands for decision-makers would also assist in ensuring continuity in climate governance.

6. Successes in Policy Implementation

Even though there are challenges in climate governance, also significant progress has been made in all ClimateGO partner regions and cities. The achievements are linked both to strategies and programs, and the concrete implementation of sustainable practices.

For example, Grenoble has been developing the Donut theory inspired by Kate Raworth since 2022. This socio-environmental framework helps analyse investment projects in terms of social and environmental limits, as well as the quality of life, democracy, and empowerment. It is both a decision-making compass and a help to elaborate terms of references of projects.

Concrete actions in Grenoble include a bike school created already in 2017, teaching over 700 children to cycle safely. Due to its success, the project expanded in 2023 to include four full-time bike teachers, a fleet of bikes, and its own premises. The school is open to both children and adults. The municipality produces 12 000 meals daily for schools, nurseries, care homes, and employee restaurants. They have increased the use of local and organic food, with 60% of school food and 95% of nursery food being organic. A new social pricing system has also been implemented, reducing canteen bills for 65% of families.

In Alzira, examples of achievements include the "Alzira, a River of the Future" project, which integrates green and blue infrastructures and promotes citizen participation through public consultation days. There has also been significant progress in implementing the Climate and Sustainable Energy Action Plan that guides local climate actions, improves energy efficiency, and promotes sustainable mobility. Furthermore, the management and preservation of La Murta and La Casella Municipal Natural Park has been a notable example of commitment to environmental protection.

The Podravje region has made notable progress in climate policy implementation. One of the most successful initiatives has been the transformation of ENERGAP into a climate agency, with a regional mandate to provide guidance and technical support to both municipalities and citizens. ENERGAP has spearheaded the preparation of comprehensive vulnerability assessments and is finalizing the region's Climate Adaptation Strategy. The agency's longstanding commitment to education, stakeholder engagement, and international collaboration has earned it national and European recognition.

The City Municipality of Maribor has demonstrated leadership in adopting forward-looking climate strategies. It has implemented energy performance contracting to retrofit public buildings, leading to significant reductions in energy use and greenhouse gas emissions. In 2025, the municipality adopted a dedicated Strategy and Action Plan to address the impacts of heat waves, protecting vulnerable groups such as the elderly, infants, and outdoor workers. Maribor has also embraced the circular economy, integrating waste management and resource efficiency into its climate mitigation agenda. The Maribor Green Mission for Climate, led by the Regional Development Agency for Podravje-Maribor, has become a regional platform for integrated and participatory climate governance, bringing together diverse stakeholders in a shared mission for resilience.

Košice in Slovakia has begun the deployment of hydrogen technologies, and they are establishing the region's first hydrogen valley. Good progress has been made in green public transport, with transition to low-emission buses in Košice. Other achievements include cross-sector collaboration, meaning effective partnerships between government, academia, and private entities for clean energy projects.

Waterford has established a Business Pledge for a Cleaner, Greener Waterford. The Council recognised the challenge particularly for small businesses to reduce emissions. Businesses who make a pledge to take action and provide evidence of reducing emissions get a discount on their Council rates bill. Over 1000 businesses have made the Pledge and are working towards reducing their emissions. At the same time, the Council is providing advice to businesses helping them to access funding and training.

Other good examples include the North Quays development, where a sustainable transport bridge is constructed to make sustainable transport easier for people living on the North side of the River Suir. The Community Climate Action Fund supports 17 communities in Waterford. The projects implemented cover improvements in transport, renewable energy, community gardens, water saving and much more. The projects have inspired people across Waterford to improve the environment where they live.

In Päijät-Häme, climate work has been based on joint climate neutrality commitment made in 2019, when the region joined the national HINKU-network. The aim of regions and municipalities in the network is to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 80 % by the year 2023. In the beginning of year 2025, all ten municipalities in the region have published their own climate action plans. Päijät-Häme is also a member of the EU Mission on Climate Change Adaptation.

The largest city of the Päijät-Häme region, Lahti, has set an ambitious goal of being nature positive in 2030. This means a situation in which the combined effect of human activity on biodiversity is positive, that is, strengthens the well-being of nature. Net positive impact involves not only net zero emissions, but also the sustainable use of natural resources and, quite obviously, halting the loss of biodiversity.

FUTURE INSIGHTS: Grenoble, France

Grenoble has a strong and longstanding commitment to social, environmental, and democratic transitions. The city's environmental engagement dates back many years; for example, in 2005, it became the first municipality in France to adopt a climate plan. Another key initiative is the PCAEM (Plan Climat Air Énergie Métropolitain), developed by the Grenoble Urban Community, which plays a central role in climate governance. In addition, the City of Grenoble has established its own PCAET (Plan Climat Air Énergie Territorial, 2023-2027) to implement new actions within its competences to reduce carbon emissions and improve air quality.

Looking ahead, Grenoble is actively preparing for the future through the “Grenoble 2040” project. The aim of this initiative is to set a clear course towards a collective future that is desirable, sustainable, socially just, and environmentally secure. With the ambition of stimulating imagination, this approach draws on current scientific knowledge and citizen participation to enable the city to project itself into desirable futures by 2040. The babies born in Grenoble in 2022, the year the city was awarded the European Green Capital title, will be young adults in 2040, facing major climatic and environmental challenges. The “Grenoble 2040” project provides a global framework for questioning and evaluating existing public policies, integrating and developing local actions, and bringing together all local stakeholders to anticipate future disruptions and co-create a sustainable future together.

7. Evaluation of Strategy and Policy Implementation

Evaluation of sustainability achievements can be challenging. The City of Grenoble monitors its actions through the tracking of activities by each relevant department and project team. The main monitoring indicators and the results are summarized in an internal "territorial observatory," which is useful for producing reports on social and environmental areas. For certain initiatives, evaluation processes are conducted, including measurement campaigns, carbon audits, and sociological surveys. A carbon audit is produced for the City's activities and its CCAS (Centre Communal d'Action Sociale). Evaluations are done together with the network of partners and specialized consulting firms, and the methodological notes are regularly produced.

Certification frameworks can also be of value for evaluation. Grenoble belongs to the "Territoires Engagés Transition Ecologique" (Territories Committed to Ecological Transition) framework, for which Grenoble holds the highest level. Alzira's PACES (Climate and Sustainable Energy Action Plan) was designed under the Covenant of Mayors framework, and it includes specific metrics to evaluate emission reductions and improvements in energy efficiency.

The Alzira Urban Agenda includes indicators to measure progress in areas such as mobility, land-use planning, climate change adaptation, circular economy, and resource management. These indicators are aligned with the Spanish Urban Agenda, allowing for monitoring progress in the context of national objectives, ensuring consistency and comparability at the national level. Likewise, in Päijät-Häme, some climate indicators are available from the national level, which ensures comparability of, for instance, emission data. However, there is still a need to develop indicators more specific to the region and different sectors.

FUTURE INSIGHTS: Alzira, Spain

Alzira has made progress in, for instance, developing the regulatory frameworks, but priority actions still need to be developed to strengthen the region's response to climate change. These include greater climate awareness and education at both the citizen level and within political spheres. Additionally, urban and rural infrastructure must be adapted to reduce the impact of extreme weather events such as floods and heat waves. Improvement of climate governance is essential, with better coordination between administrative levels and private actors. Energy transformation and the implementation of nature-based solutions are also necessary.

Despite the challenges, successful initiatives have been identified in the Valencian Community. These include sustainable mobility efforts such as pedestrianization of urban areas and promotion of bicycle use. Climate risk management has seen progress with wildfire prevention plans and sensor-based sewer monitoring to prevent floods. An advanced regulatory framework has been developed, including the Valencian Climate Change and Energy Strategy and the Climate Change and Ecological Transition Law. These achievements demonstrate that effective policies can be developed with strong political and social will.

Based on the experience in Alzira, climate risk studies are recommended as a basis for more effective planning. Climate strategies should be adapted to local conditions, considering the geographic and socioeconomic characteristics of each territory. Encouraging citizen participation is important, allowing society to play an active role in decision-making. Maintaining and reinforcing existing climate commitments is crucial to prevent setbacks in environmental policies. In conclusion, combating climate change in the Valencian Community requires a comprehensive approach that integrates science, politics, and citizen action.

8. Future Insights

There is great uncertainty over the future of climate and sustainability policies from international to local levels. However, the EU and EU countries have set climate goals, and with the impact of climate change visible in Europe and elsewhere, both climate mitigation and adaptation are likely to stay on the agenda.

Still, the intensity and resources applied to implementing national guidelines and laws depend on the political orientation of each municipality. National and municipal elections can support or delay the implementation. The recent impacts of severe storms and floods have highlighted the need for climate resilience, which may keep climate change as a priority regardless of political changes. The commitments to green transition projects, like hydrogen valleys, can in part ensure continuity, although the focus can be on economic benefits.

Podravje's experience highlights the importance of establishing regional agencies that can act as trusted, well-resourced intermediaries between citizens, municipalities, and higher levels of governance. Building such an institution enables knowledge transfer, policy alignment, and long-term capacity development. The region also emphasizes the value of multi-stakeholder platforms such as the Maribor Green Mission for Climate, which helps overcome siloed approaches by creating spaces for collaborative action.

Other regions may benefit from starting with small, replicable pilot projects to build institutional knowledge and community engagement before scaling up. Integrating circular economy strategies with climate action offers another avenue for more holistic and resource-efficient development. Establishing dedicated adaptation plans for specific risks - like heat waves or water scarcity - can enhance resilience and protect vulnerable populations. Above all, aligning infrastructure investment with climate goals through revised standards and procurement practices is a critical step toward long-term sustainability.