

RePowering the regions: How working groups can support local decarbonisation efforts



Photo: CEE Bankwatch Network

‘RePower the Regions’ is a project that aims to help pioneering just transition regions in central and eastern Europe accelerate the decarbonisation process. Funded by the EU’s LIFE programme, the project is being implemented in nine countries: Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Ukraine.

The project draws on contributions from Bankwatch member organisations in each country. Each organisation has commissioned at least one study from national or local experts. These regional studies aim to enhance knowledge of decarbonisation pathways, develop a better understanding of energy transformation solutions, explore ways of unlocking EU funding mechanisms, and share best governance practices for inclusive, just and sustainable local and regional clean energy.¹

Implementing the just transition can be challenging for local authorities when it comes to public consultations, finding the right experts or creating sufficient buy-in for specific projects. Establishing decarbonisation working groups can help to

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¹ CEE Bankwatch Network, [RePowering the regions: A comparative analysis of decarbonisation strategies in nine central and eastern European countries](#), CEE Bankwatch Network, 10 December 2024.



meet the needs of local stakeholders and create a collaborative space tailored to the particular circumstances of each region.

The aim of these working groups is to provide guidance on objectives, milestones, targets and the prioritisation of actions for developing local clean energy plans for specific subsectors as well as implementation action plans. The working groups may choose to focus on energy efficiency, renewable energy sources, district heating or any other measures that can help advance municipal decarbonisation.

In addition to the usual stakeholders, such as municipal authorities and civil society, decarbonisation working groups can greatly benefit from the expertise of think-tanks, universities and research centres. Their primary aim is to provide a set of recommendations to advance decarbonisation planning, including proposals for mechanisms to monitor progress on decarbonisation processes.

As part of the RePower the Regions project, four decarbonisation working groups were established in just transition regions in Latvia, Slovakia, Estonia and Hungary. Each was specifically designed to address gaps identified in local-level decarbonisation processes. In other countries, although the need for a decarbonisation working group was recognised, efforts to bring local stakeholders together in such a format were not successful. This was largely due to limited stakeholder capacity, particularly within local municipalities, which are often overburdened.

Latvia

In early 2024, a working group was established to develop environmental protection guidelines for the development of solar parks across Latvia.² The initiative – co-led by the Solar Energy for Latvia Association and the Latvian Fund for Nature – brings together representatives from business and environmental organisations, including WWF Latvia, Green Liberty, the Latvian Ornithological Society, and the Latvian Organic Agriculture Association. The guidelines set clear environmental and sustainability standards that align with international best practices while minimising bureaucracy, providing a credible framework the planning, construction and operation of solar parks across the country.

The need for the guidelines arose to meet the demands of Latvia's recent rapid growth in solar power generation, with most new installations located on agricultural land.³ Currently, there are no standard environmental impact assessment procedures or specific environmental requirements for the development, construction and operation of solar parks. This regulatory gap creates environmental, management and competition risks, which could lead to unsustainable projects that generate social resistance and undermine the credibility of renewable energy development.

The working group's planned tasks include developing scenarios for sound environmental and sustainability practices during the design, construction and operational phases, promote and submit the guidelines for government approval, and raise awareness among solar-park developers, landowners, environmental experts and the general public. Since its establishment, the group has held 15 meetings,

² Latvian Fund for Nature, Green Liberty, Solar Energy for Latvia Association, Latvian Ornithological Society, WWF Latvia, Latvian Organic Agriculture Association, [Vides aizsardzības vadlīnijas saules parku attīstībai Latvijā](#), Latvian Fund for Nature, 6 November 2024.

including an inaugural meeting at which a memorandum of understanding was signed. Between May and July 2025, the working group met almost every week.

Setting up the working group initially proved difficult. Some individual solar park developers were reluctant to participate, fearing that new guidelines might impose additional requirements and reduce profitability. To support the process, the Solar Energy for Latvia Association, representing many solar park developers, contributed co-financing, which made it possible for experts to devote their time. Additionally, the environmental organisations involved in the group also contributed funding to ensure greater balance and credibility, preventing any single commercial interest from dominating proceedings and strengthening the legitimacy of outcomes.

Slovakia

In September 2024, the western town of Partizánske approved the establishment of a working group to advance the decarbonisation and modernisation of the town's district heating system.⁴ The group has been tasked with developing and supporting the implementation of a comprehensive project aimed at improving energy efficiency, reducing emissions, and integrating renewable energy sources in line with the EU Directive on Energy Efficiency.

Led by Partizánske's municipal office, the working group includes representatives from the town council, energy auditors, Friends of the Earth–CEPA, the local technical services, and financial experts. The group meets every two months and oversees overall project progress, helping to coordinate the preparation, planning and implementation of the heating system transformation.

The primary aim of the group is to create suitable conditions for an efficient, ecological and modern heating system that complies with existing legislation and meets the needs of heat consumers. The group functions as a long-term governance mechanism that reviews submitted materials, ensures consensus, and strengthens the quality and legitimacy of municipal decisions.

Transforming Partizánske's district heating system is a complex, long-term process requiring the involvement of a wide range of experts and officials. These include energy engineers, heating-system technicians, an architect, a civil engineer, an economic consultant, a public procurement specialist, IT and communications experts, municipal officers responsible for environmental affairs, spatial development, and financial planning, and the deputy mayor.

Collaboration between experts and officials is critical for the success of the project. Combining external specialists adept in the latest technologies with municipal technicians and officials – whose focus is often on maintaining existing systems – can foster innovation while ensuring stability. By integrating modern elements into established systems and encouraging broader acceptance, officials can help ease adoption by bridging the gap between experts and the public.

Political support and consistent engagement with the mayor, town council and municipal office is also essential. This requires the thorough preparation of project materials and the coordination of events aimed at promoting the project. Long-term success also depends on maintaining a visible and active presence in

⁴ Bleskovky, [Partizánske chce zabezpečiť komplexnú modernizáciu systému vykurovania](#), Zoznam.sk, 3 September 2024.

the local area, recognising that municipal priorities may change over a short period of time and acknowledging that planning and implementation typically take longer than in the private sector.

Estonia

The need to establish a decarbonisation working group emerged from discussions among colleagues at the Estonian Fund for Nature. Given Estonia's small size and the overlapping work of non-governmental organisations and agencies involved in community energy, it became clear that closer coordination would help strengthen joint initiatives and increase impact at the national level.

In June 2025, a working group was **established** to improve coordination between ongoing community energy projects, share experiences and replicable practices, and communicate key lessons with public authorities and the wider public through both traditional and social media. Though monthly meetings were planned initially, the group has tended to convene as needed.

The group is co-led by the Estonian Fund for Nature and the Estonian Green Movement, and includes representatives from Tartu Regional Energy Agency, Energiaühistu (Energy Cooperative), and the Estonian LEADER Union. Public authorities are not yet part of the group, and an open call for volunteers will soon be made.

The working group has two main objectives. The first is to raise public awareness of how community energy works and the benefits it can provide citizens. The second is to tackle legislative bottlenecks by developing policy recommendations. Drawing on lessons learned from pilot projects in southern Estonia, these recommendations will focus on simplifying legislative processes for emerging energy communities in Ida-Virumaa – the country's just transition region – as well as elsewhere.

The group will also prioritise media outreach and education, which are important for countering negative perceptions of energy cooperatives associated with Estonia's Soviet past. As the group is largely driven by non-governmental organisations, limited steering and administrative capacity have proved persistent challenges in building momentum.

Hungary

The northeastern city of Miskolc is participating in an EU mission designed to help 100 cities become climate-neutral by 2030. The programme encourages decarbonisation, energy efficiency and smart urban solutions, and provides guidance, networking and support to implement these changes.⁵ Locally, the initiative is known as CoolMiskolc.⁶

As part of this programme, Miskolc municipality planned to establish four working groups. They met occasionally in 2024, holding four online meetings, but have not convened since spring of that year. The municipality is still considering how to restructure and relaunch these groups.

⁵ Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, [EU Mission: Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities](#), *European Commission*, accessed 12 December 2025.

⁶ CoolMiskolc, [COOLMISKOLC](#), *CoolMiskolc*, accessed 12 December 2025.

In the meantime, the National Society of Conservationists (Friends of the Earth Hungary) has taken the initiative to create an informal working group that meets sporadically to discuss decarbonisation projects in the city. This group brings together local non-governmental organisations, municipal representatives, and other stakeholders to explore innovative community energy solutions.

The main challenges have been the ongoing uncertainty over the future of the official CoolMiskolc working groups and the municipality's limited capacity to participate on a consistent basis. To date, the municipality's support – particularly in the area of communication – has been crucial in mobilising local stakeholders. However, it remains unclear whether the eventual re-establishment of the CoolMiskolc working groups would replace the existing informal group or if all groups could work in parallel, focusing on different topics.

Recommendations for establishing successful decarbonisation working groups

- 1. Be flexible.** Given the potential influence of political, social, economic and other factors, it is impossible to predict exactly which measures municipal or regional authorities will prioritise within the time frames available.
- 2. Set specific goals and roles.** Each working group should specify well-defined objectives and clarify the responsibilities of each invited expert. Identifying subsectors requiring targeted support makes the selection of experts more straightforward.
- 3. Combine municipal management with expertise.** Bringing together experienced municipal officials and innovation experts helps strengthen local public administration capacity, delivering long-term benefits for existing and future projects.
- 4. Secure funding for participation.** Supporting the involvement of experts and local non-governmental organisations ensures effective engagement, particularly for local organisations, which are often overconsulted and underfunded.
- 5. Agree on a clear plan.** A pathway with defined stages and timelines should guide all working group activities. Deliverables and milestones should also be decided collectively, giving consideration to the identified needs of the region.



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