CEESEU-DIGIT

Central and Eastern Europe Sustainable Energy Union's Design and Implementation of regional Government Initiatives for a just energy Transition

D6.3 CEE BEST PRACTICES FOR INCLUDING VULNERABLE GROUPS

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Content

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1. Introduction

About CEESEU-DIGIT project

The main goal of the CEESEU-DIGIT project is the preparation of **a new type of regional energy and climate plans (ECAP) in six Central and Eastern European target areas,** which will be realized as a continuation of the CEESEU project, relying on the previously established collaborations. In addition to the mitigation measures, the documents prepared based on the new methodology **also try to place great emphasis on adaptation and landscape-level planning** compared to the existing energy and climate plans. In addition to the climate protection goals, the project also pays **special attention to vulnerable social groups and those affected by energy poverty.**

Within the framework of the CEESEU-DIGIT project, the **active and inclusive participation of minority communities becomes an essential aspect**. This document focuses on specific situations in Croatia, Estonia, Slovenia, Poland, Czech Republic and Latvia.

Purpose of the document

This document aims to **identify, analyse, and share best practices for incorporating vulnerable and marginalised groups as well as minorities into municipal just transition planning across Central and Eastern Europe**. Developed as part of the CEESEU-DIGIT project, it draws on experiences from six participating countries to offer insights into effective approaches, recurring challenges, and actionable recommendations. The purpose is not only to highlight what has worked, but also to **inform future policy and planning processes** so that vulnerable groups are equitably included in the green transition at the local and regional level.

Relevance of social inclusion in just transition

Just transition is not only about phasing out carbon-intensive technologies, but also about **ensuring that the benefits and burdens of the energy transition are fairly distributed**. In this context, **social inclusion is essential** for ensuring that marginalised communities are not left behind. Vulnerable groups are often the most affected by energy poverty and environmental degradation, yet the least involved in planning and decision-making processes. Their **participation is crucial** to building inclusive, resilient, and equitable municipal energy

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and climate plans. Without it, there is a risk of deepening existing inequalities and undermining the legitimacy and effectiveness of climate action.

Overview of vulnerable groups in the CEE context

Across Central and Eastern Europe, a diverse range of minority and marginalised groups face increased risks in the energy transition as shown below.

Vulnerable groups	Elderly persons, especially those living alone
	Persons with disabilities or chronic illnesses
	Single-parent households
	Low-income or unemployed households
	Residents of rural and remote areas
	Ethnic minorities and migrants
	Women and female-headed households
	Children and youth in energy-poor families

While the specific composition of these groups may vary between countries, common vulnerabilities include **low income, poor housing, limited access to services, and exclusion from public participation**. These overlapping forms of disadvantage heighten their exposure to energy poverty and reduce their ability to benefit from sustainability initiatives. Recognising and **addressing the unique needs** of these communities is key to designing **inclusive and just local energy and climate policies**.

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2. Mapping of Minority and Marginalised Communities

Identification of key groups

Across the six countries involved in the CEESEU-DIGIT project partners identified a range of minority and marginalised communities that face heightened risks in the context of the green transition and energy and climate planning.

The most mentioned vulnerable groups include:

- Economically and energy poor
- Elderly persons, particularly those living alone or on low fixed incomes
- People with disabilities or chronic health conditions
- Single-parent households
- Unemployed and low-income households
- Residents of rural or remote areas
- Ethnic minorities and migrants
- Women
- Children and youth in energy-poor households

These groups often experience multiple and overlapping forms of vulnerability, increasing their exposure to energy poverty, exclusion from participation processes, and limited access to renovation or subsidy schemes.

Country-specific examples

Croatia 	**Vulnerable groups were involved through participation in relevant project events (educational workshops) in which they shared their experiences and everyday problems they face, related to energy costs and their settlement, poor living conditions in general, etc. Another form of their involvement was achieved indirectly through communication with key organizations at the regional level (Red Cross, Institute for Social Work, etc.) that provide some kind of service to energy poor households. Several measures targeting vulnerable groups were defined in the ECAP.**
Czech Republic 	Vulnerable groups were partially involved in the ECAP development process through educational activities, however, no specific measures were defined to target such groups.

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Estonia 	ECAP development process was involving vulnerable groups through workshops and hackathons for youth and children and meetings with elderly nursing homes. There are some measures defined in ECAP (like ones for renovation) that are not specifically targeting vulnerable groups but might be linked with them.
Latvia 	Vulnerable groups were not involved in the preparation of regional Energy and Climate Plan (ECAP) due to the lack of resources and time constraints. However, the experts, municipalities and similar stakeholders who could contribute with their field specific knowledge were involved to gather information, map the issues and find solutions. Final ECAP also contains several measures and policies that target vulnerable groups.
Poland 	Vulnerable groups were involved in ECAP development process through workshops for energy poor, elderly and vulnerable people, meetings with the youth and round tables. In the ECAP several measures were developed to target those groups.
Slovenia 	Vulnerable groups were partially involved in ECAP preparation process in the sense they were attending workshops on the topic related to energy and climate for energy poor households and primary school children. Following this, in ECAP several measures were defined targeting those groups.

Summary of socio-economic vulnerabilities in the energy transition

The mapped groups across all countries share several socio-economic vulnerabilities:

- **Low income and limited financial capacity**, making it difficult to invest in energy efficiency or access co-financed schemes.
- **Poor housing quality**, including outdated insulation, heating systems, or inadequate infrastructure.
- **Limited digital or administrative literacy**, preventing them from navigating complex application processes.

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- **Low political representation and voice**, leading to exclusion from local planning and decision-making processes.
- **Geographical isolation** in rural areas, where access to energy services, support schemes, or renovation programmes is more limited.

These factors contribute to a cycle of energy poverty, social exclusion, and reduced resilience to climate-related risks. Mapping and identifying these groups is essential for designing inclusive and effective municipal just transition strategies.

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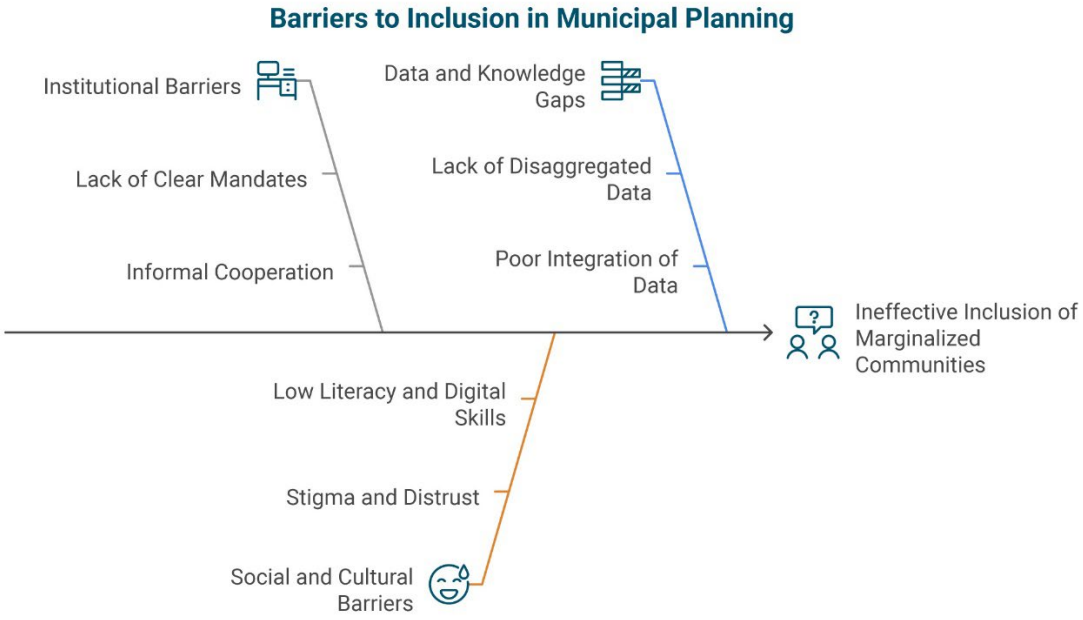
3. Barriers to Inclusion

Effective inclusion of minority and marginalised communities in municipal just transition planning remains a challenge across the CEE region. Responses from partners in Croatia, Poland, Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia, and the Czech Republic reveal a number of persistent and interrelated barriers that limit both participation and the tailoring of policies to the needs of these groups.



Institutional barriers

A common issue across all countries is the **lack of clear institutional mandates** or requirements for local governments to actively include vulnerable or minority communities in the development of Energy and Climate Action Plans (ECAPs). While some municipalities engage with social services or civil society organisations, this cooperation is often **informal or project-based**, without long-term policy backing or dedicated resources.

For example, in **Slovenia**, local governments have the legal ability to consult citizens, but no specific obligation or guidelines exist to ensure that minority or vulnerable groups are reached. Similarly, in **Latvia**, social aspects are not yet fully integrated into climate-related planning at the municipal level. **Croatia** reported that municipalities often lack dedicated staff or funding to implement inclusive outreach efforts, even when vulnerable groups are officially recognised.

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Social and cultural barriers

Several countries highlighted **stigma, distrust of authorities, and social exclusion** as key factors that prevent meaningful participation by vulnerable groups. In **Poland** and **Croatia**, elderly populations and minorities often do not engage with public consultations due to a history of neglect or a lack of accessible, community-based formats. **Low literacy or digital skills**, especially in rural areas, make it harder for affected populations to access information about available support or to participate in formal planning processes.

In **Estonia**, partners noted that some vulnerable groups, such as people with chronic illnesses, are not directly reached through ECAP processes due to **limited public awareness efforts and weak local networks**.

Data and knowledge gaps

A significant cross-cutting barrier is the **lack of reliable, disaggregated data** on minority and vulnerable groups within municipalities. In both the **Czech Republic** and **Estonia**, partners reported that while energy poverty is acknowledged in policy discussions, **specific data on how it affects marginalised groups is either unavailable or not used in ECAP development**. Without this data, it becomes difficult to tailor measures or monitor the impact of policies on inclusion.

In **Latvia**, mapping of climate risks exists, but it is not yet integrated with demographic or socio-economic vulnerability indicators, limiting its use in inclusive planning.

These institutional, social, and data-related barriers often reinforce one another, leading to a lack of representation of the most at-risk populations in just transition processes. Addressing them requires not only technical improvements, such as better data collection, but also political will and long-term structural change in how municipalities engage with their communities.

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4. Strategies and Measures for Inclusion

Despite significant barriers, partners from the CEESEU-DIGIT project countries identified promising strategies and practical measures to better include minority and marginalised communities in municipal just transition planning. These approaches highlight the importance of collaboration, targeted outreach, and participatory engagement tailored to local contexts.

Participatory planning approaches

Several partners emphasized the value of **structured and inclusive participation processes** to involve underrepresented groups in shaping local energy and climate policies. In **Croatia**, participatory budgeting at the municipal level has opened channels for citizen input on energy-related projects, creating opportunities for community members to directly influence how resources are allocated.

Poland reported the use of **targeted workshops for youth and elderly citizens**, implemented through NGOs, to ensure that these often-overlooked groups are informed about and involved in local ECAP planning. These workshops helped raise awareness of climate-related policies while creating a space for these groups to voice their specific needs and concerns.

Collaboration with NGOs and social services

Cross-sectoral cooperation emerged as a key factor for success. In **Croatia**, the local energy agency **MENEA** has worked closely with municipalities and civil society organisations to identify vulnerable groups, conduct energy audits, and deliver tailored support. In **Estonia**, municipalities collaborated with **elderly centres and social care institutions** to reach residents at risk of exclusion, particularly the elderly and chronically ill.

Such partnerships allow for deeper community reach, local trust-building, and more culturally sensitive engagement, which is particularly important when working with groups that have historically experienced institutional neglect or marginalisation.

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Tailored outreach

Partners also highlighted the importance of **adapting outreach methods** to reflect the needs and realities of minority communities. In **Croatia**, specific **meetings with Roma community representatives** were organised during the development of the local ECAP in Prelog, ensuring that Roma voices were heard in the planning process. These meetings were held in familiar environments and facilitated through trusted intermediaries.

Multilingual communication, while not yet widely adopted, was recognised as a necessary next step by partners in **Latvia** and **Estonia**, especially for reaching linguistic minorities and improving accessibility of energy-related information. In several cases, municipalities created **simplified and visual materials** to ensure comprehension among low-literacy populations.

These strategies demonstrate that inclusive planning is not only possible but effective when it is rooted in local partnerships, responsive communication, and the active involvement of those most affected by the energy transition. Replicating and scaling these approaches across CEE municipalities will be crucial for ensuring a socially just transition.

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5. Measures Tackling Vulnerable Groups in Developed ECAPs

While developing their ECAPs partners and their regions defined measures directed at vulnerable groups. The best practices in definition of such measures are described below.

Croatia

The ECAP in Croatia was developed for Medjimurje County, north most county bordering both Hungary and Slovenia and surrounded by rivers Mura and Drava. It has the area of 729 km2 and 105.250 inhabitants (2021.).

Figure 1 Location of Medjimurje county in Croatia

Within the Energy and Climate Action Plan (ECAP), a **targeted and socially inclusive approach** has been adopted to address energy poverty among vulnerable groups, such as the elderly, people with disabilities, low-income households, and rural populations. These measures focus on information, financial support, and coordinated partnerships to ensure that no one is left behind in the energy transition.

The first key measure involves the **implementation of information campaigns and educational initiatives**. These campaigns are designed to raise awareness about energy efficiency (EE), inform citizens about available support programs, and ensure broad public outreach through various channels such as social media, local newspapers, brochures, and leaflets. Importantly, these efforts are not limited to information sharing, they also include practical, participatory educational activities. Workshops and training sessions are organized specifically for vulnerable citizens, often accompanied by live demonstrations of energy-saving technologies and real-world examples that illustrate how energy efficiency leads to cost

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reductions. Furthermore, trained professionals are engaged to provide personalized advice for low-income households, making energy-saving knowledge directly applicable. These awareness-raising activities are enriched through **community engagement programs**, which actively encourage the participation of schools, municipalities, and local organizations in energy-saving actions. The campaigns are tailored to address the specific needs and contexts of target groups, for example, the elderly or people with disabilities, through accessible and relatable messaging. In some cases, **behavioural incentives**, such as reward schemes or local competitions, are introduced to motivate households to adopt more sustainable energy practices. Much of this work is already underway through local and regional initiatives, but the ECAP stresses the need for active involvement from energy agencies, local and regional authorities, social welfare institutions, and civil society organizations that have established connections with vulnerable populations.

The second measure focuses on **providing financial assistance to vulnerable groups** through a variety of direct and indirect support mechanisms. This includes energy bill subsidies, energy vouchers, emergency financial aid, heating cost assistance, and housing allowances. The objective is to reduce the energy cost burden on the most at-risk households and facilitate access to energy-efficient technologies that they would not be able to afford otherwise. These forms of assistance help prevent energy disconnection, reduce financial distress, and directly contribute to improved living conditions and household stability.

A third and equally important measure involves the **establishment of structured collaboration with social institutions and NGOs**. These partnerships enable the delivery of targeted support to citizens facing energy poverty by combining local government resources with the on-the-ground experience and networks of NGOs and social enterprises. NGOs contribute by offering counselling, education, and the distribution of energy-efficient equipment, helping to ensure that assistance reaches those most in need. **Local initiatives** are also encouraged, such as volunteer programs and community-based support networks that can help elderly or low-income individuals by installing energy-saving devices, advising on energy tariffs, or navigating bureaucratic processes with utility providers. These collaborations ensure that vulnerable groups have access not only to financial and technical support but also to consistent, human-centered guidance and follow-up.

Together, these three measures represent a **holistic and inclusive strategy**: empowering vulnerable citizens through knowledge and community engagement, providing direct economic relief to alleviate energy stress, and building a strong network of institutional and civil society actors to support long-term, sustainable change. The ECAP thus aligns social equity with environmental goals in a meaningful and practical way.

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Latvia

The ECAP for Latvia was developed for Vidzeme planning region situated in the north-central Latvia, north of Daugava river. It covers area of 19.770 km2 and has population of 211.309 (2022.).

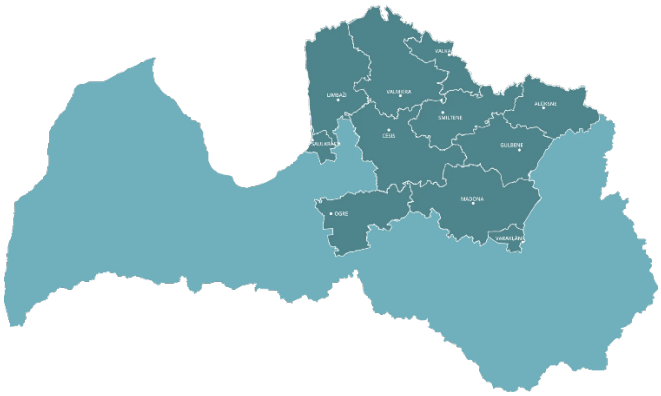

Figure 2 Location of Vidzeme planning region in Latvia

The ECAP introduces a **series of comprehensive and socially responsive measures** aimed at reducing climate-related risks and improving the quality of life for vulnerable population groups, particularly in the face of increasing urbanization, heat extremes, and socioeconomic inequality.

To enhance public health, safety, and urban resilience, the plan calls for the continued **development of public drinking water fountains** and improvements to the accessibility and quality of public swimming areas. These interventions aim not only to offer relief during heatwaves but also to promote equitable access to safe recreation and hygiene infrastructure. By doing so, municipalities contribute to lowering heat-related health risks while encouraging sustainable use of local water resources.

Recognizing the shortage of affordable housing, the ECAP proposes the **construction of new multi-apartment buildings**. This measure directly addresses the housing needs of low-income and socially excluded groups, while also enabling greater energy efficiency through modern construction standards.

Urban spatial planning is also targeted, with a requirement to identify and preserve existing green areas and plan for the creation of new ones that can play a crucial role in mitigating urban heat island effects and flood risk. These areas are essential for maintaining cooler and healthier microclimates, especially benefiting groups more vulnerable to temperature extremes

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such as the elderly, children, and women. Greener spaces also lower energy consumption by reducing the need for artificial cooling in nearby buildings.

The ECAP emphasizes climate preparedness by calling for an **update of municipal civil protection plans** in accordance with climate risk forecasts. This forward-looking measure ensures municipalities are better equipped to handle extreme weather events, thereby minimizing threats to public safety and economic losses, and enhancing the efficient use of human, material, and financial resources in emergency scenarios.

In tandem, municipalities are urged to **identify high-flood-risk zones** and prioritize the installation of additional flood monitoring stations. This allows for quicker and more accurate alerts, facilitating timely evacuations and protective actions, especially in communities with limited capacity to respond independently.

In the face of increasing climate-related health risks, municipalities must **revise occupational safety standards** in public institutions, ensuring alignment with the growing threats from heat, cold, and air pollution. Updating these requirements contributes to safeguarding employee well-being, reducing the potential impact of climate change on physical and mental health at work.

The healthcare system's resilience is addressed through a measure that strengthens institutional capacity during periods of extreme climate variability, particularly heatwaves. By planning for the deployment of additional healthcare personnel, the measure helps avoid system overload and ensures rapid medical response and continued access to care for all residents.

The ECAP also integrates **public education campaigns** to raise awareness about the negative impacts of burning low-quality fuels such as wet wood, plastic, and chemically treated paper. These efforts are essential in tackling local air pollution and its disproportionate effects on low-income and health-compromised populations.

Further practical assistance is offered through **technical support to vulnerable and low-income households**, enabling them to replace outdated and polluting heating systems (e.g., biomass and coal) and adopt energy efficiency measures. This not only improves household comfort and health but also reduces ongoing energy costs.

Finally, recognizing the barriers that underserved groups face in accessing jobs, healthcare, and social services, the ECAP promotes the **improvement and availability of public transport**. Emphasis is placed on on-demand services in rural areas, the inclusion of basic amenities like toilets on regional buses and charging facilities to encourage cleaner transport

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options. Enhanced transport infrastructure connections will ensure that all residents, regardless of location or mobility, can access essential services and participate in economic and social life.

Poland

Polish ECAP has been developed to cover Mazovia (Mazowieckie) region situated in mid-north-eastern Poland. It has the area of 35.579 km2 and the population of 499.725 (2019.).

Figure 3 Location of Mazovia region within Poland

The ECAP presents a **comprehensive and inclusive strategy** for ensuring the just participation of vulnerable groups in the energy transition. These measures reflect a recognition of the structural and social barriers that prevent many households, particularly those with limited income or marginalized status, from accessing the benefits of energy efficiency and clean energy.

One of the foundational measures is the **systematic thermo-modernisation of residential buildings**, aimed at significantly improving energy performance through insulation, heating system upgrades, and building envelope improvements. Additionally, by implementing passive building standards and integrating renewable energy sources in municipal buildings, local authorities aim to lead by example. These public sector investments are intended to set a standard for the commercial sector and inspire similar improvements in privately owned buildings, creating a ripple effect across the built environment.

To further reduce energy consumption in households, the ECAP promotes the **adoption of energy-efficient appliances**, including household equipment, consumer electronics, and LED lighting. For the poorest households, the plan stresses the need for full public funding of such

investments, recognizing that without financial support, the initial cost remains a major barrier. This is paired with education efforts, ensuring that beneficiaries understand how to use new technologies efficiently, which helps extend their lifespan and maximize energy and financial savings.

Education and training also play a central role. Through programs delivered by energy consultants and building administrators, vulnerable citizens are equipped with the knowledge necessary to reduce consumption, navigate support programs, and participate in decision-making processes related to building upgrades and energy services.

The ECAP also addresses the psychosocial barriers linked to energy poverty, specifically the stigma and shame that can prevent individuals from seeking help. To counter this, **social awareness campaigns** are proposed that normalize the experience of energy poverty and promote a sense of shared responsibility for solving it. At the same time, it is crucial to develop support systems that allow for anonymous requests for assistance and guarantee neutrality in the delivery of support, ensuring dignity and trust in the process.

At the policy level, the plan highlights the need for an **integrated, multi-level strategy**. This includes the development of a technical inventory of buildings, monitoring of energy cost increases, and provision of support tools such as tax credits and subsidies. Importantly, such a strategy must be implemented in cooperation across ministries and local authorities to avoid fragmentation, ensure complementary efforts, and enable effective outreach to those most at risk of energy poverty.

The plan also acknowledges the role of **existing social support mechanisms** such as energy benefits, social tariffs, and fuel-related allowances (e.g. “coal” supplements). While these measures provide short-term financial relief, they do not address underlying inefficiencies and therefore have limited long-term impact on reducing energy poverty. Their use should be complemented by more structural interventions focused on energy efficiency.

To bridge the gap between funding opportunities and actual implementation, **energy consulting services** are highlighted as a crucial measure. Energy advisors assist vulnerable households in choosing suitable support programs, preparing necessary documentation, and managing the technical aspects of investment implementation. Their role ensures that financial support translates into real, on-the-ground improvements.

Lastly, the ECAP encourages the **use of preferential loans and targeted national programs** such as “Stop Smog” and “Clean Air”, which provide tailored support for people in financial difficulty. These programs, while aimed at improving environmental outcomes, also serve as

key tools for addressing social vulnerability and ensuring that no one is left behind in the energy transition.

Slovenia

Slovenian region that was involved in the development of ECAP was Spodnje Podravje situated in the north-east central part of Slovenia dominated by Drava river. It covers the area of 2.170 km2 and has 325.994 inhabitants (2020).

Figure 4 Location of Podravje region in Slovenia

Within the framework of their ECAP, local authorities in Podravje have identified **targeted actions to support socially vulnerable citizens**, especially those who are recipients of social assistance and face barriers to participating in the energy transition. These measures focus on increasing awareness, improving energy efficiency in housing, and ensuring that the most at-risk populations are not left behind.

The first measure centres on providing **personalized energy consulting services** to socially vulnerable individuals. This includes recipients of social welfare who reside either in single- or two-family houses or as tenants in individual apartments within multi-apartment buildings. The goal is to offer these citizens expert guidance on how to improve the energy performance of their homes, reduce energy bills, and increase comfort. Through these consultations, residents are informed about specific technical solutions, such as insulation or heating system upgrades, and more importantly, about available financial instruments that can help them implement these improvements. By directly engaging with households, the measure also seeks to **overcome informational and motivational barriers** that often prevent vulnerable citizens from initiating renovations or applying for subsidies.

Complementing this direct advisory support is a second measure focused on **raising awareness and motivation among socially vulnerable residents living in multi-apartment buildings**. Recognizing that many of these buildings are in poor energy condition and house a significant share of low-income residents, the measure aims to build community-

wide understanding of the benefits of energy efficiency and renewable energy solutions, such as façade insulation, improved heating systems, and solar installations. This awareness campaign not only informs residents about the technical and environmental advantages but also emphasizes the long-term financial savings and improved living conditions that such investments bring. In parallel, the measure supports collective investment processes in multi-apartment buildings, helping communities organize, plan, and implement energy renovation projects with the inclusion of vulnerable tenants.

Together, these two ECAP measures represent a holistic approach, combining education, technical support, and motivation, to empower socially disadvantaged households to actively participate in the green transition and benefit from safer, healthier, and more affordable homes.

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6. Lessons Learned and Replicability

Through the development of regional energy and climate plans (ECAPs) partners from participating countries shared valuable experiences in trying to better integrate minority and vulnerable groups into municipal just transition planning. Their insights reveal both successful practices and ongoing challenges, offering lessons that can inform future ECAPs across the CEE region.

A key success factor across partner countries was **intersectoral collaboration**, particularly between municipalities, NGOs, social services, and local energy agencies. For instance, in **Croatia**, cooperation between local governments, energy agencies, social organisation and NGOs enabled tailored outreach, community engagement, and field-based support. Similarly, **Estonia** reported effective partnerships with elderly centres and health-related services to reach chronically ill and older residents who are often excluded from traditional planning processes.

Direct fieldwork and **in-person outreach** were repeatedly highlighted as crucial to engaging groups that are typically underrepresented in public consultations, such as rural households, Roma communities, and low-income elderly individuals. In **Poland**, workshops and school-based activities involving youth and elderly citizens were successful in both raising awareness and generating community input.

Despite these successes, several limitations were identified. Many municipalities face **insufficient financial and human resources**, particularly smaller or rural ones. This restricts their ability to maintain long-term inclusion efforts, develop tailored outreach materials, or conduct in-depth mapping of vulnerable populations.

Institutional resistance and lack of political will were also noted—particularly when inclusion is not mandated by national frameworks. In the **Czech Republic**, municipalities struggled to identify or support minority groups due to the absence of policy guidance and limited data. Similarly, **Latvia** and **Slovenia** indicated that the inclusion of social aspects in ECAPs still depends heavily on project-based funding rather than being a systemic requirement.

Recommendations for future ECAPs and just transition planning:

- **Institutionalise inclusion** by integrating mandatory social impact assessments and stakeholder mapping into ECAP guidelines.
- Ensure **dedicated funding** for inclusive planning processes, including resources for translation, facilitation, and local partnerships.

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- Support **capacity-building at the municipal level**, particularly in smaller cities and rural areas, to improve understanding of social vulnerability in the energy transition.
- Promote the use of **data collection tools** that allow municipalities to better identify and track the needs of minority and marginalised groups.
- Encourage **peer learning and exchange** between municipalities, showcasing good practices and tested outreach methods that can be adapted to different local contexts.

The experiences gathered through the CEESEU-DIGIT project show that while inclusion in just transition planning remains uneven, promising local innovations exist and can be replicated and scaled—provided the right support structures are in place. A people-centred transition is not only more just, but also more effective and durable in the long term.

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7. Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

Inclusion of minority and vulnerable communities in municipal just transition planning across the CEE region remains inconsistent, often hindered by institutional, social, and data-related barriers. However, the CEESEU-DIGIT project has highlighted numerous promising practices, particularly where local governments collaborate with NGOs, social services, and community groups to engage hard-to-reach populations.

These examples demonstrate that inclusive planning is both achievable and impactful, but require structural support, adequate funding, and clear policy mandates. Where inclusion is embedded into planning processes through legislation, funding, and capacity-building, municipalities are better equipped to design effective and equitable energy and climate policies.

Key Policy Recommendations:

- **Formalise inclusion** by requiring municipalities to conduct stakeholder mapping and social impact assessments as part of ECAP development.
- **Secure dedicated funding** for inclusive planning efforts, covering outreach, translation, facilitation, and cooperation with local actors.
- **Build local capacity**, especially in smaller or rural municipalities, through training and peer exchange on social aspects of the energy transition.
- **Improve data systems** to track the needs of minority and vulnerable populations, enabling better targeting and monitoring of support measures.
- **Promote equity** as a core component of ECAP goals, not as an add-on, ensuring the just transition serves all members of society.

Ultimately, advancing a just transition in Central and Eastern Europe will depend on the ability to **translate these insights into long-term strategies**, making inclusive planning the norm rather than the exception.

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Annex 1 - Good Practices

CROATIA

Project I-PRODER – Challenges for preventing and combating energy poverty

- Level of influence: Regional
- Targeted minority or vulnerable group: energy poor households
- Implementing organisation: Medjimurje Energy Agency Ltd. (MENEA)
- Project link: https://www.menea.hr/projekti/projekt-i-proder-izazovi-za-sprjecavanje-i-suzbijanje-energetskog-siromastva/
- Stage of progress: In implementation

The I-PRODER project was applied to the Interreg Slovenia – Croatia programme under Priority 1: Accessible and connected region and Specific Objective 6.2: Increasing the efficiency of public administration by promoting legal and administrative cooperation and cooperation between citizens, civil society actors and institutions, especially with the aim of resolving legal and other obstacles in border regions. The partnership consists of 4 energy agencies, 2 from Croatia and 2 from Slovenia, each covering specific target region in the respective country.

The main objective of the project is to improve the knowledge and competences of different decision-makers and to encourage their commitment to action towards preventing and combating energy poverty in households in a bottom-up manner. Interventions will be based on recommendations that will be defined through the implementation of a comparative analysis of the situation key to raising awareness among decision-makers, as well as energy audits conducted in households.

Project BOLSTER - Bridging Organizations and marginalized communities for Local Sustainability Transitions in EuRope

- Level of influence: Regional
- Targeted minority or vulnerable group: The target group of the BOLSTER project comprises ten European regions, with seven of them identified as "target regions" due to their high risk of being impacted by the European Decarbonization Strategy (EGD) due to their concentration of carbon-intensive industries. Specifically, the project seeks

the active participation of residents of the Istria region of Croatia in policy formulation, as well as awareness-raising initiatives and participation in pilot activities.

- Implementing organisation: The Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management, University of Rijeka
- Project link: https://bolster-horizon.eu/about/
- Stage of progress: In implementation

Within the framework of the BOLSTER project, aimed at uniting marginalized organizations and communities for local transitions towards sustainability in Europe, notable practices have been identified. These include a participatory and qualitative approach to research to understand the experiences and needs of marginalized communities. In addition, the organization of multi-stakeholder forums with equitable participation of key actors in the regions, as well as the strengthening of the capacities of organizations representing marginalized groups, are highlighted. The project is committed to ensuring a just and sustainable transition, ensuring that procedures and decisions are equitable for all, especially those marginalized. It also seeks to adapt transition plans to the specific demands of marginalized groups, thereby increasing support through participation in multi-stakeholder forums.

CEES project - "Community Energy for Energy Solidarity"

- Level of influence: Local
- Targeted minority or vulnerable group: EU citizens facing energy poverty
- Implementing organisation: ZEZ (Green Energy Cooperative)
- Project link: https://www.energysolidarity.eu/
- Stage of progress: In implementation

The CEES project aims to evaluate and validate best practices associated with energy poverty, addressing aspects such as the identification of those affected, collaboration with affected people and various stakeholders, implementation of energy efficiency measures, strengthening energy knowledge, and support to actions against energy poverty through legal and financial frameworks. The ultimate goal is to measure the impact of these mechanisms and measures. Ultimately, CEES seeks to empower energy communities (ECs) and

organisations, including those in adjacent sectors such as financial advice, healthcare and fire/police services, to apply the most effective interventions to alleviate energy poverty.

JETforCE - Just Energy Transition for Central Europe

- Level of influence: Regional
- Targeted minority or vulnerable group: citizens from different regions who will be involved in the energy transition through digitalization, ensuring equal access to digital tools.
- Implementing organisation: IRENA – Istrian Regional Energy Agency Ltd.
- Project link: https://www.interreg-central.eu/projects/jetforce/
- Stage of progress: In implementation

The main objective of the JETforCE project is to achieve a just transition to green energy in Central Europe, encouraging the active participation of citizens in challenging situations. Among the best practices identified are: the creation of digital tools for citizen engagement, facilitating opinion on new green energy policies; improving energy planning at local and regional level by providing digital knowledge and solutions; promoting awareness about the need for a just energy transition, with emphasis on citizen participation through pilot activities; and the specific focus on vulnerable groups, ensuring their active participation to guarantee a more equitable transition.

ESTONIA

EUTeens4Green project

- Level of influence: Regional
- Targeted minority or vulnerable group: Youth
- Implementing organisation: PWP Liit
- Project link: https://euteens4green.org/
- Stage of progress: Finalised

The EUTeens4Green project has been launched as an apparent response to the needs of the current situation. It offers an opportunity for teens to take ownership and become actors of

change while proposing actions to help build a green recovery in their region and hence contribute to the good governance of the Cohesion policy.

By allocating grants to teens to contribute to advancing the green transition in their regions, this project is a call to action to allow youth-led actions to grow locally and contributes to unleashing the potential of the young generation when it comes to their engagement and mobilisation in society.

The assembly has provided 40 young people from Ida-Virumaa with a unique opportunity to influence one of the biggest societal changes in Estonia in recent decades. This has allowed youth representatives to evaluate the region's Territorial Just Transition Plan and propose changes to ensure youth gets a fair deal.

SLOVENIA

ENERGISE project

- Level of influence: Local
- Targeted minority or vulnerable group: households experiencing energy poverty
- Implementing organisation: Focus Drustvo Za Sonaraven Razvoj (FOCUS)
- Project link: https://energise-project.eu/
- Stage of progress: Finalised

Within the ENERGIZE project, Focus and Umanotera have implemented since 2016 actions to foster community management of vital resources. This approach, based on horizontal relationships and a sustainable paradigm, highlights community energy, which involves citizens in renewable energy production, energy efficiency, collective purchasing and community management of the electricity grid. These practices promote the exploitation of local resources, energy independence, savings and employment generation, with local benefits. Although community energy is still developing in Slovenia, experiences such as a photovoltaic power plant in Nova Gorica demonstrate community interest and participation. The experience highlights the need to overcome barriers such as lack of knowledge, experience and funds, highlighting the importance of community competence and activity for the success of these initiatives.

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POLAND

Warsaw Participatory Budget

- Level of influence: Local
- Targeted minority or vulnerable group: Elderly
- Implementing organisation: City of Warsaw
- Project link: https://um.warszawa.pl/waw/bo/participatory-budget-in-warsaw; https://www.researchgate.net/publication/370788289_OLDER_ADULTS_AS_A_TARGET_GROUP_OF_USERS_OF_GREEN_AREAS_IN_PROJECTS_OF_THE_WARSAW_PARTICIPATORY_BUDGET
- Stage of progress: Ongoing

Urban green areas, ensuring relaxation, contact with nature and social integration, play a key role in the health and well-being of people aged 60+. The Warsaw Participatory Budget (WPB) is one of the publicly available programs that have been used to support activities aimed at improving the accessibility and attractiveness of the city for its residents since 2014. Through it, they decide on what activities to allocate part of public funds (0.5% of the city's budget of the previous year) – amenities in the immediate vicinity, district or in the entire city. Each edition is based on a fixed scheme: establishing and announcing the rules of the program, submitting projects, verifying them, voting and announcing the winning projects that will be implemented. Older adults are one of the social groups to whom projects can be dedicated.

CZECH REPUBLIC

Project CONGREGATE

- Level of influence: Local
- Targeted minority or vulnerable group: citizens in renewable energy cooperatives
- Implementing organisation: SEVEn, The Energy Efficiency Center
- Project link: https://www.euki.de/en/euki-projects/congregate/
- Stage of progress: Finalised

In the Congregate project, a leading practice for municipalities is the organization of workshops and information campaigns in the preparatory phase of projects. This approach seeks to effectively involve the local community and other stakeholders, fostering greater participation and understanding in the creation of municipal energy communities. This process not only provides greater control over local energy production, but also strengthens the influence of

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local governments on energy policies. The direct participation of the population in energy transformation and sustainable development contributes to the energy self-sufficiency, economic strength and environmental friendliness of the municipality.

Mobile energy consultation centres

- Level of influence: National
- Targeted minority or vulnerable group: households and communities in rural areas
- Implementing organisation: Ministry of Industry and Trade
- Project link: https://www.mpo-efekt.cz/cz/home
- Stage of progress: In implementation

In the Mobile energy consultation centres project, best practices include a focus on advisory and consulting services aimed at increasing energy efficiency. By promoting individual and national contributions to energy-saving projects in the country, the grant seeks to address energy efficiency issues at the national level. The country, the grant seeks to address energy efficiency issues at the national level.

LATVIA

COME RES project

- Level of influence: National
- Targeted minority or vulnerable group: owners of multi-apartment buildings who are not yet actively participating in Renewable Energy Communities (RECs).
- Implementing organisation: Institute of Physical Energetics (IPE); Latvian Environmental Investment Fund
- Project link: https://come-res.eu/
- Stage of progress: Finalised

The COME RES project has identified and implemented exemplary practices in the Municipality of Marupe, which stands out for its commitment to promoting smart environmental solutions. Through public campaigns on green energy and active promotion of energy communities in its Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plan Program (SECAP), the

municipality has demonstrated leadership in adopting sustainable practices. Collaboration with the Riga Region Planning Authority to install photovoltaic panels on apartment buildings, in partnership with homeowners' associations, shows a comprehensive approach. The financing of 85% of each pilot project through the EU project "Energize Co2mmunity" and the remaining 15% through national funds illustrates the economic viability of such initiatives.

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