



# Advocacy and social actors fueling the just transition

A case study on Silesia, PL

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## Key messages

- Multilevel governance is key to the just transition process: NGOs can play an essential role by connecting various governmental levels and stakeholder groups, and facilitating access to (inter) national networks
- Implementation of local strategies: NGOs are well placed to implement initiatives related to the just transition process and hold authorities accountable, given their connections to, and understanding of, the local landscape
- Structured involvement is needed: NGOs' contributions must be formally acknowledged by public authorities, and included in the just transition implementation and monitoring processes

## 1. Introduction - Just transition in Silesia

The constellation of foundations, institutions, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and associations in Poland that are engaged in public debate on the just transition is unique. This case study dives into the roles local and national NGOs can play in the just transition transformation process, focusing on the example of Silesia.

The coal phase-out in Silesia has been ongoing since the 90s when the sudden mine closures and a restructuring of the energy sector took place provoking long-lasting socio-economic effects<sup>1,2</sup>. Despite losing two-thirds of its mines, Silesia still accounts for 82% of Poland's coal<sup>3</sup>, having a coal phase-out planned for 2049<sup>4</sup>. In order to achieve a climate-neutral economy that leaves no one behind, a regional transition strategy has been laid out in the Territorial Just Transition Plan (TJTP) by the Marshal's Office of the Silesian Voivodship (the highest-level administrative division of Poland)<sup>5</sup>. This process not only aims to reach the 2030 and 2050 climate and energy

targets<sup>6</sup>, but also to mitigate the impacts of mine closures by supporting the diversification of the economy, restoring environmental damage from mining activities, re-skilling workers from the fossil fuel sector, and providing clean and affordable energy to its citizens.

A just transition should not happen without including local communities' voices—this is one of the claims that national and local NGOs have been advocating for in different regions throughout Poland<sup>7,8</sup>. Activists and associations started questioning the impact of mining on their quality of life and the environment long before the national public authorities published the transformation plans for the region<sup>9</sup>. This case study highlights how local and national NGOs have been instrumental in helping other civil society actors, public authorities, and energy utilities to collaborate in the first steps of this process in Silesia<sup>10</sup>.

## 2. Local NGOs - More than one foot in the region

BoMiasto, a non-profit association of people interested in the development of urban democracy in Katowice since 2017<sup>11</sup>, is one of the main organisations advocating for and driving the just transition in Silesia<sup>12</sup>. The association promotes dialogue between residents and local authorities by implementing civic and awareness campaigns, in which they inform citizens about opportunities for activism, civic participation, climate change and the just transition<sup>13</sup>. Some of BoMiasto's strategic activities worth highlighting include:



Building a common vision for Silesia



Awareness-raising activities about democracy and climate



Advocating for a better quality of life at the regional level

By organising expert debates, publications, campaigns and educational activities (e.g., Youth Municipal Councils, School for Sustainable Development Leaders and the Silesian School of Smog Alarms), BoMiasto has helped the inhabitants of Silesia to shape their vision and transformation approach for the region. A key example was the publication of the Green Future for Silesia Manifesto (Zielona przyszłość Śląska), which demanded a “new, coherent climate and energy policy, that is based on evidence and broad social participation: citizens, experts, scientists, activists and local governments”<sup>14</sup>. While state-level representatives were negotiating at COP24 in Katowice, activists, NGOs and residents of Silesia region were aligning their perspectives and determining how to bring the manifesto to life<sup>15</sup>.

BoMiasto has fought against climate disinformation by helping journalists find verified information about the just transition process. As part of its climate education activities, the Association in collaboration with the ecological educator and journalist Sylwia Majcher, developed a guide with reliable sources on renewable energy, subsidies, and the challenges of the Silesian Voivodeship regarding the timescale in which the energy transformation must take place<sup>16</sup>. As the timescale issue has become a topic of national interest, the clash of interests has led to the spread of ‘fake news’, which makes the inhabitants vulnerable to political manipulation. This e-book has helped journalists creating a “shield” to stop the spread of false information<sup>17</sup>.

BoMiasto supported grassroots activities and civic activism connected to the just transition. For example, it carried out the project Śląskie dla klimatu (Silesia for Climate), conducting interviews with 20 activists across the region<sup>18</sup>. The result was a publication that showcased the perception and activities of such actors. BoMiasto also launched the project Climate Speakers Network<sup>19</sup>, a program that aims to strengthen the position of local social activists, support the Polish debate on

climate change and create a platform to talk about solutions for Silesia based on the [Climate Reality Project](#).

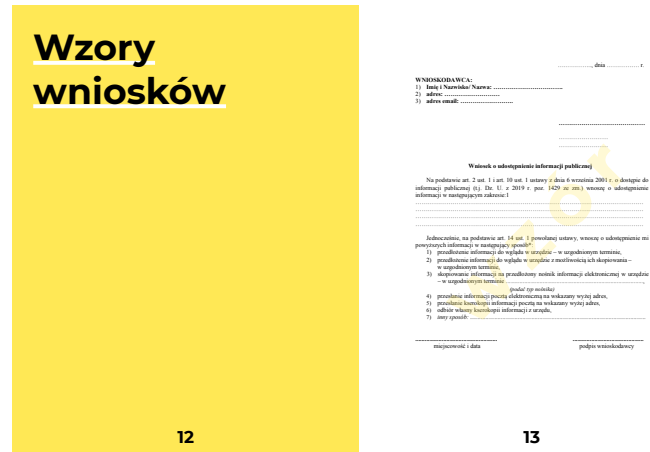


Figure 1: Excerpt of the “Antismog campaign manual”. Source: BoMiasto (2021)

Finally, BoMiasto’s actions have also supported the improvement of Silesian residents’ lives, as they have provided guidance to citizens to become more actively involved in effective anti-smog campaigns<sup>20</sup>. Thanks to the support of ClientEarth lawyers, they launched a guide with different actions and practical tips residents could take, such as how to request inspections and follow-ups, where to find legal deadlines, and how to appeal against decisions made by the local authorities. Furthermore, the manual provides examples from previous campaigns, that could be used as templates to carry out further actions.

The diversity of BoMiasto’s activities has helped to increase collaboration between public authorities and civil society to the point that they advocate jointly to influence the national ministries and strategic planning tools in Poland.

### 3. National NGOs - The power of networks and a unified voice

Another key actor in helping public authorities to move away from a centralised approach to planning, by encouraging the increased involvement of all stakeholders is the Polish Green Network (PGN, Polska Zielona Sieć). PGN is a nationwide public benefit organisation that clusters local NGOs, including BoMiasto, working on sustainable development, environment, and climate protection<sup>21</sup>. In the past years, this organisation has interacted with EU institutions through the umbrella organisation CEE Bankwatch Network<sup>22</sup> and participated on the development of the Just Transition Mechanism<sup>23</sup>. Furthermore, it has provided input on the development of the Territorial Just Transition Plans (TJTPs) to the national government, regional public authorities, and local governments. Some of PGN’s strategic activities worth highlighting include:

		
<p>Strengthening the role of local governments in the decision-making process and countering the centralised way of planning through advocacy activities</p>	<p>Widening public participation in the Just Transition Mechanism</p>	<p>Continuously following up on planning tools, such as the different iterations of the Territorial Just Transition Plans</p>

PGN’s work to strengthen local government decision-making processes is exemplified by a letter the network sent to the Polish Ministry of Development Funds and Regional Policy shortly after the Ministry received a grant to develop the TJTPs<sup>24</sup>. This document, co-developed with WWF Poland, was signed by mayors of eight local governments, as well as the Wielkopolska Voivodeship Board (Eastern Wielkopolska region).

It stressed that TJTPs should be transparent, with all affected parties having the opportunity to present their position and participate in the development of such plans. The most important claim within this letter was the request for a forum for consultations and dialogue, and a clear work schedule to help the public understand the phases of the transition.

In July 2022, the Minister of Development and Technology presented a draft stating the purpose of the Just Transition Funds according to the National Government's position<sup>25</sup>. The draft was open for public consultation before being sent for approval to The Sejm, the bicameral parliament of Poland. Once again, PGN swiftly published a position paper "to draw attention to six disturbing, from [their] point of view, issues"<sup>26</sup>. The central criticism was of the economic-centric approach applied to the definition of the Silesian Transformation Fund and the lack of inclusion of fairness and justice elements.

PGN has also helped widen public participation by continuously involving key stakeholders and residents in participatory and democratic processes. After gathering inputs from the first public hearing in Eastern Wielkopolska<sup>27,28</sup>, PGN, together

with the National Federation of Polish NGOs, Common Thing Foundation, and the Silesian Voivodeship, brought together 127 representatives from all sectors to discuss the vision for the development of the region until 2030<sup>29</sup>. The essence of this activity was to provide a democratic space where the opinions of individuals and institutions about the ongoing plans could be summarised and sent to the national public authorities.

PGN's continuous follow-up on planning tools is connected to their thorough evaluation of the TJTP drafts of all Polish regions<sup>30</sup>. Once again, the network advocated to involve all stakeholders affected, as this would be the only way to take appropriate social, environmental and economic actions. As a final remark, PGN highlighted the potential threat of the funds being allocated to polluters, rather than responding to community social priorities and pressing challenges from the phase-out of the coal industry in the regions. In other words, they emphasised that the Just Transition Fund and other associated funding mechanisms should only complement the investments to be made by energy utilities for restoring and rehabilitating land, in alignment with the 'Polluter-Pays-Principle'<sup>31</sup>.

## 4. Combining forces - When local meets national

Neither of the two highlighted organisations works in silos. In addition to the Polish Green Network, several other (inter) national networks have been active in this process, including [WWF Polska](#), [CEE Bankwatch Network](#), [National Federation of Polish NGOs](#), [Common Thing Foundation](#), [Climate Reality Project](#), [Europe Beyond Coal](#), and [Community Power Coalition](#). Besides BoMiasto, many local organizations have also worked on the ground with the inhabitants of Silesia, including the [Silesian Climate Movement](#), [Kongres Ruchów Miejskich](#), [Stowarzyszenie Zielony Imielin](#), [Stowarzyszenie Nasza Ziemia](#), the union [Porozumienie Związków Zawodowych „KADRA”](#), [Główny Instytut Górnictwa](#), [Park Naukowo-Technologiczny](#), [Euro-Centrum](#) and the [Sport Club SKARPA](#).

One of the first initiatives where PGN and BoMiasto provided an opportunity for opening up the public debate on the just transition in the region was the conference [Katowice 2050-Sprawiedliwa Transformacja](#) (Katowice 2050- just transition) in March 2018<sup>32</sup>. This event sought to trigger discussions about planning methods for a socially just coal phase-out and to gather input from the local communities on new open mines in Silesia. This initiative was the prelude to the Social Climate Summit held back-to-back with the Conference of Parties of the UNFCCC in December 2018 (COP24) in Katowice.

The Social Climate Summit provided local governments and social movements the space to shed light on their challenges and align their visions towards a greener future. Shortly after, BoMiasto launched a grassroots initiative called the [Śląski](#)

[Ruch Klimatyczny](#) (Silesian Climate Movement)<sup>33</sup>, with a just transition at its core, to offer educational, awareness-raising and advocacy activities. Driven by the values written in its own manifesto<sup>34</sup>, this network of activists keeps operating at the regional level to counter the inaction and denial of local authorities on the climate crisis, through protests, workshops, publishing e-books and participating in regional and city council meetings.

Though these activities took place in one of the most coal-dependent regions of Europe and Poland, the joint and single experience from these two organisations—in collaboration with many other NGOs and civil society actors—can serve as inspiration for other coal regions in Europe and around the world on how local and regional NGOs and civil society actors can fuel a just energy transition.

### Five key lessons that can be highlighted from BoMiasto and PGN's work are:



#### → **Connecting local, regional and national levels:**

Due to the more neutral political position local and national NGOs (often) take, they can facilitate local governments engaging with upper levels of government, as well as with energy utilities, unions, activists and citizens.



#### → **Accessing networks:**

As NGOs tend to join forces inter-regionally to secure resources for projects and advocacy strategies, they form a network crucial for experience sharing and knowledge exchange. If the NGOs operating in other coal or carbon-intensive regions have not yet formed a sufficiently large network, they can liaise with other NGOs such as CEE Bankwatch Network or Carbon Market Watch to ask for support and connect internationally.



#### → **Spreading knowledge:**

National and local NGOs can raise awareness about topics such as the just transition and climate change and make them tangible for lay and young people. They can also provide knowledge through publications offering reliable, accessible information, as well as organising conferences where residents can present their perspectives.



#### → **Engaging in advocacy and lobbying campaigns:**

Local and national NGOs are in the best position to support residents in finding (new) ways to make their voices heard, by providing the resources mentioned above or simply a space where they can meet with like-minded people.



#### → **Holding public authorities accountable:**

Local and national NGOs often more closely follow the planning process orchestrated by public authorities. Local and national NGOs have the contacts and ability to bring different perspectives into these processes, including residents and activists not often heard from.

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This document is part of a series presenting information and lessons learned on policy approaches at national, regional or local level supporting a just transition to a climate-neutral economy. The Just Transition Platform (JTP) assists EU Member States and regions to unlock the support in this transition. Visit the [JTP website](#).

## Endnotes

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