

EU's Strategic Environmental Investments

Assessment Paper

DECEMBER 2023

**Climate Neutrality in the EU:
Analysing Best Practices and
Strategic Allocation of Funds in the
area of Agriculture and Biodiversity
conservation.**

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1. Introduction

In today's rapidly changing global environment, the magnitude of our collective response to the challenges of climate change has become a testament to our commitment to future generations. At the forefront of this global endeavour, the European Union (EU) has embarked on an ambitious journey through its European Green Deal (EGD). This pathway, emblematic of the EU's pledge to transition towards climate neutrality, necessitates a paradigm shift in public funding mechanisms and their ensuing incentives.

Under the banner of the "Climate Neutral EU" initiative, nestled within the larger frame of the European Green Deal, significant strides have been made, especially within the Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries. These nations, historically characterized by their industrial backdrops and energy matrices, are now emerging as hubs of transformative environmental endeavours. This metamorphosis is facilitated by projects catalogued within the 'Best Practice Database', a crucial element of the overarching [Towards a Climate Neutral EU: Efficient Allocation of EU Funds](#) project. This database, which was prepared under the collaborative efforts of various partners including the European Climate Initiative (EUKI), aims to ensure that the EU's financial commitments translate into tangible, effective, and sustainable outcomes on the ground.

However, the road to a climate-neutral Europe is intricate. By November 2021, the majority of National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs) had been established. However, while most Partnership Agreements were approved by this date, discussions surrounding certain Operational Programmes continued.

It's noteworthy that the deadline for the RePower chapter, a segment of the NRRPs, was set for 31 August 2023

This article delves deep into the intricate narrative of EU-funded projects, focusing on selected initiatives from the Best Practice Database (BPD), especially those pertinent to agriculture and biodiversity, primarily in the CEE countries. Through this exploration, the goal is to magnify the efficacy of EU funding, bolstering the continent's resolve against climate change and moving unwaveringly towards a sustainable future.

2. Categorizing the EU's Environmental Projects

The categorization of environmental projects within the Best Practice Database reflects the EU's strategic efforts towards climate neutrality. Each category targets specific environmental challenges, demonstrating the EU's multifaceted approach to sustainability.

Environmental Conservation and Biodiversity: Projects like *LIFE 4 Oak Forests* and *NaturaConnect* embody efforts to preserve biodiversity and natural ecosystems. *LIFE 4 Oak Forests* focuses on restoring natural conditions in oak forests, crucial for biodiversity and carbon sequestration. *NaturaConnect* develops a resilient trans-European nature network, maintaining ecological balance and biodiversity across Europe.

Climate Change Adaptation and Resilience: *Urban Life Circles* and *LIFE Adapt Brdy* showcase strategies for adapting to climate change. *Urban Life Circles* enhances urban biodiversity through interconnected green spaces, while *LIFE Adapt Brdy* implements forest management practices in Czechia's Brdy Highland to build climate resilience.

Sustainable Energy and Infrastructure: *Own Your SECAP* and *LIFE COOLCITYIT* pursue sustainable development and energy efficiency. *Own Your SECAP* will enhance climate resilience in landscapes, focusing on sustainable land and water management.

LIFE COOLCITYIT uses IT systems for managing blue-green infrastructure in cities, addressing urban climate adaptation.

Water Management and Aquatic Health: The *DANUBE4all* project exemplifies initiatives for sustainable water resource management, crucial for maintaining ecological balance and supporting life.

Technology and Innovation for Environmental Protection: *SeaClear2.0* and *Safeguard* use advanced technology for environmental protection. *SeaClear2.0* addresses marine litter management, while *Safeguard* focuses on ecosystem-based management in Lake Varna, aiding in biodiversity conservation.

Waste Management and Circular Economy: *Wetlands Green Life* and *LIFE IP RESTART* align with the EU's commitment to a circular economy. *Wetlands Green Life* conserves marshes, peatlands, and wetlands, critical for carbon sequestration, while *LIFE IP RESTART* focuses on the sustainable utilization of solid biomass.

Each category, represented by these projects, demonstrates the diverse ways in which the EU is advancing towards climate neutrality. For more information on these and other initiatives, visit the [Best Practice Database](#).

3. Financial Analysis of EU Environmental Initiatives

Money talks, they often say. In the realm of environmental sustainability, the level of financial backing not only underscores the commitment of stakeholders but also often determines the scale and scope of impact. Here, we delve into the monetary aspects of the EU's environmental projects, shedding light on overall expenditures and contributions.

3.1. A Snapshot of Financial Commitment

From nurturing biodiversity to fostering climate resilience, the combined cost of all ongoing projects stands at a substantial €202,778,139.50. This figure represents the total investment across a diverse range of project durations, from the earliest starting on July, 2017, to the latest ending on June 2029. The EU has generously contributed €146,577,080.88, reaffirming its dedication to environmental sustainability.

3.2. Projects Under the Financial Microscope

Certain projects have received notable financial backing, reflecting their strategic importance. For instance, *Wetlands Green Life* garnered the highest EU contribution in absolute terms, receiving a whopping €21,566,152. On the other hand, *Bringing back the extinct sturgeon into the North-Eastern Baltic Sea* received a more modest support of €846,007, indicating a different scale of intervention.

Interestingly, when it comes to funding percentages, *NaturaConnect* stands out with a full 100% financial backing from the EU, highlighting its critical nature. Conversely, *Balancing solid biomass for climate neutrality* in CEE countries received 55% funding, suggesting it is leveraging multiple funding streams or a model of shared responsibility.

3.3. What Does the Money Tell Us?

Significant EU funding could be a catalyst for success and sustainability, providing projects with the necessary resources and stability to achieve long-term goals. It can

accelerate progress, facilitate comprehensive research, and enable wide-scale implementation of solutions.

Furthermore, this financial scaffolding is instrumental in translating abstract goals into tangible environmental impacts, be it through the restoration of natural habitats, improvement of air and water quality, or mitigation of climate change effects. Every Euro spent contributes to a greener, more sustainable future.

However, the dynamics are not one-dimensional. Lower EU contributions do not necessarily reflect a project's lower value but might indicate a sustainable model that draws on diverse funding sources, fostering a sense of shared ownership and responsibility among various stakeholders.

In essence, the financial insights paint a picture not just of expenditure, but of priorities, partnerships, and the potential for real-world impact. They beckon readers to understand that behind these numbers lie stories of innovation, collaboration, and a relentless pursuit of a sustainable future. Each Euro allocated to these projects is an investment in the Climate Neutral EU initiative. By funding projects like *Wetlands Green Life* or *Balancing solid biomass*, we are directly funneling financial resources into efforts that either reduce emissions or enhance carbon capture, both critical paths to achieving climate neutrality.

Conversely, shorter projects like *Build up Skills (BUS)* initiative might indicate a more focused scope, perhaps targeting a specific issue or employing a proven solution. These initiatives might emphasize swift action and observable changes within a shorter time frame, catering to pressing environmental concerns.

4. Assessing Project Durations

The duration of a project can reveal much about its scope, complexity, and the anticipated timeline for achieving its objectives. In this section, we decode the timelines of various EU-funded environmental initiatives, offering a perspective on what the project durations signify.

4.1. Interpreting Durations: A Tale of Timeframes

At a glance, the projects showcase a wide spectrum of durations, ranging from a succinct 18 months for *Build-up Skills (BUS)* to a substantial 120 months for *Wetlands Green Life*. This variability hints at the diverse nature of environmental challenges and the corresponding approaches adopted to address them.

4.2. What Does the Duration Convey?

A longer project span, such as that of *Wetlands Green Life*, often suggests a complex, multi-faceted initiative requiring substantial time for research, implementation, and assessment. It might involve extensive stakeholder engagement, substantial behavioral shifts, or the establishment of new infrastructures or policies.

Conversely, shorter projects like *Build up Skills (BUS)* initiative might indicate a more focused scope, perhaps targeting a specific issue or employing a proven solution. These initiatives might emphasize swift action and observable changes within a shorter time frame, catering to pressing environmental concerns.

4.3. The Significance of Time in Environmental Stewardship

The timeframe of a project is more than just a start and end date; it is a reflection of the urgency, complexity, and depth of the environmental challenges at hand. Longer projects may provide the luxury of thorough research and gradual implementation, yet they require sustained commitment and resources. Shorter projects, while agile and potentially impactful in the immediate term, may face challenges in ensuring long-term sustainability and scalability.

In the realm of environmental sustainability, time is not just a metric—it is a resource. The duration of these projects underscore the EU’s strategic approach in allocating this resource, balancing the immediate demands of environmental crises with the foresight required for sustainable, long-term solutions.

As we explore further in subsequent sections, we will uncover more about how these timeframes intersect with the projects’ specific goals, achievements, and ongoing challenges, providing a deeper understanding of the EU’s environmental portfolio. Each project’s timeline reflects its role within the Climate Neutral EU initiative. Longer durations, like that of *Wetlands Green Life*, signify complex, large-scale initiatives with the potential for significant contributions to climate neutrality, while shorter projects like *Build-up Skills (BUS)* offer quicker, more focused gains in specific areas of the climate agenda.

5. Project Spotlights: Successes and Challenges in EU Environmental Projects

This section's spotlight on innovative projects reaffirms the EU's commitment to its Climate Neutral initiative, showcasing direct action and strategies that contribute to this ambitious goal. Each project, though distinct, aligns with the broader objective of EU climate neutrality, underscoring the multifaceted approach necessary to tackle this global challenge.

- **SeaClear2.0:** This project's innovative use of autonomous robots not only advances marine conservation efforts but also supports the EU's climate neutrality goals by addressing the oft-overlooked underwater environments. By preserving marine ecosystems, SeaClear2.0 contributes to healthier oceans, which play a crucial role in global carbon sequestration and climate regulation.
- **Life WatClima:** With its emphasis on climate resilience, LIFE WatClima represents a proactive step towards the adaptation measures essential for a Climate Neutral EU. The initiative's focus on creating strategies to withstand future climatic impacts is directly in line with the EU's vision for a climate-resilient society by 2050, an integral component of the climate neutrality objective.
- **Build up Skills (BUS):** This program aligns with the Climate Neutral EU initiative by promoting green skills in the construction industry, essential for reducing the sector's carbon footprint. By enhancing expertise in sustainable construction, the EU moves closer to its climate-neutral ambition, given that the built environment significantly contributes to overall carbon emissions.
- **Wetlands Green Life:** This long-term commitment to biodiversity conserves vital ecosystems that naturally capture and store carbon. By protecting wetlands, the project supports the EU's biodiversity strategy for 2030, a critical pillar of the

Climate Neutral initiative, given the role of healthy ecosystems in carbon sequestration and climate adaptation.

- **LIFE Latest adapt:** This initiative embodies the Climate Neutral EU's principle of employing nature-based solutions to tackle climate challenges. By harnessing natural processes, it provides a sustainable approach to urban challenges, reducing emissions, enhancing resilience, and contributing to the EU's goal of balancing human needs with planetary boundaries.

Each initiative, unique yet aligned with the EU's Climate Neutral goal, showcases effective strategies and actions in this global effort. For further details on these and related initiatives, refer to the [Best Practice Database](#).

6. Strategic Insights and Future Directions for EU Environmental Policy

The insights derived from our environmental projects are not just illuminating but also immensely actionable. They have the potential to significantly influence both existing and forthcoming EU policies, directives, and decisions. Recognizing this, we propose an integrated set of recommendations that bind the strategic insights from our projects with concrete steps that can be implemented by various stakeholders within and outside the EU apparatus.

6.1. A. Policy Relevance and Strategic Integration:

1. **Direct Policy Linkage:** Ensure all environmental projects explicitly align with and reference applicable EU policies, demonstrating their direct relevance and contribution to overarching goals such as the European Green Deal and the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030.
2. **Feedback Mechanisms:** Establish structured channels for continuous feedback between project teams and policymakers. Insights and data from ongoing projects should be regularly reviewed and considered during policy amendment and legislative drafting sessions.
3. **Policy Evolution:** Advocate for policies that are adaptive by design, capable of evolving based on new data, trends, and findings from various environmental projects. This approach acknowledges the dynamic nature of environmental challenges and solutions.

6.2. B. Specific Calls to Action:

- **Enhanced Intersectoral Collaboration:** Formalize mechanisms for ongoing dialogue and collaboration between environmental project leaders and EU policymakers through regular forums, summits, or joint task forces.

- **Adaptive Funding Strategies:** Review and adapt funding mechanisms to allow for more responsive allocation, supporting emerging challenges or scalable pilot projects effectively and promptly.
- **Knowledge Sharing and Capacity Building:** Create EU-wide platforms and programs for knowledge exchange, best practice dissemination, and skill enhancement across project teams and stakeholders.
- **Community and Stakeholder Engagement:** Prioritize and expand initiatives that drive community involvement and local ownership, recognizing and empowering local communities as key stakeholders in environmental stewardship.
- **Sustainability Audits and Impact Assessments:** Mandate comprehensive sustainability audits for ongoing and completed projects to evaluate long-term impact, scalability, and the potential for integration into broader policy initiatives.
- **Legislative Integration and Feedback Loops:** Embed formal procedures for project insights to influence and be integrated into legislative reviews and policy development cycles, establishing a two-way interaction between field initiatives and policy formulation.

By intertwining strategic directions with specific, actionable steps, the EU will not only harness the innovation and practical solutions emerging from its environmental projects but also ensure these insights are reflected in a dynamic, responsive policy environment. This integrated approach is crucial for the collective journey towards a sustainable, resilient, and climate-neutral EU by 2050.

7. Policy Integration and Impact

The insights from our array of environmental projects are more than just individual successes; they play a crucial role in informing, shaping, and driving wider EU policy initiatives and legislative agendas. As we navigate towards a climate-neutral Europe, integrating the knowledge and learnings from these projects into the EU's policy frameworks is paramount. This seamless integration ensures a consolidated, effective approach to the escalating climate crisis.

Biodiversity Strategy for 2030: Initiatives such as "Wetlands Green Life" and "NaturaConnect" are pivotal to realizing the goals set forth in the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, especially the commitment to safeguarding 30% of the EU's land and seas. These projects are beacons, providing invaluable data and methodologies that, when amplified and replicated, have the power to bolster ecosystem resilience and biodiversity conservation across the continent.

European Green Deal: The majority of the projects we have scrutinized play a significant role in propelling the European Green Deal forward, particularly its ambitious objective of establishing Europe as the pioneer climate-neutral continent by 2050. For example, *SeaClear2.0* and *LIFE LATEST* adapt are flag-bearers of innovation in environmental stewardship, presenting tangible solutions that can be woven into wider EU policies concerning waste reduction and climate adaptation.

Farm to Fork Strategy: There exists a noticeable void in projects that directly address sustainable agriculture. However, the principles and insights from initiatives like *LIFE IP RESTART*, with its focus on the circular economy, are translatable and could profoundly influence policies within the Farm to Fork Strategy. These insights underline the importance of sustainable resource management practices that can be adapted to agricultural methodologies, ensuring that food systems align with and contribute to overarching environmental objectives.

Policy Recommendations:

- **Foster Cross-Policy Synergy:** Advocate for increased cross-policy dialogue and collaboration, ensuring comprehensive integration of project insights across diverse policy spheres.
- **EU-Wide Knowledge Repository:** Propose the creation of an accessible, EU-wide repository or platform for consolidating and sharing data, best practices, and key learnings from these projects, making them readily available for policymakers and stakeholders.
- **Incentivization of Project Replication:** Advance policy measures that provide incentives for the replication and scaling of successful project models across member states, enhancing uniformity in environmental standards and practices.

This deliberate and strategic alignment not only fortifies the EU's environmental policy frameworks but also ensures that the journey to a sustainable, resilient future is a collective, informed, and cohesive effort.

8. Conclusion

As we dissect the intricate tapestry of EU-funded projects, it becomes clear that the success of these endeavors hinges not just on financial support but on a range of critical factors. These projects, cataloged within the 'Best Practice Database', particularly in Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, narrate stories not only of triumphs but also of the challenges and continuous learning involved in the pursuit of environmental sustainability and climate action.

The alignment of these initiatives with the "Climate Neutral EU" objective underscores the necessity of strategic planning, innovative solutions, financial acumen, and unwavering commitment. However, while each project validates the EU's strategic funding approach, they also reveal areas for enhancement and growth. The journey towards environmental preservation and climate neutrality is complex and ongoing, demanding not just celebration of achievements but also introspection and adaptation.

In moving forward, especially in the CEE context, it is essential to recognize the evolving role of these projects. Our current era, marked by urgency and potential, requires us to intensify our efforts, innovate continually, and strategize with precision and foresight. The roadmap to a climate-neutral EU is laid out, but it is a path that requires constant evaluation and adjustment.

In this continued endeavor, we must focus on what constitutes a 'good' project. It's not merely about the allocation of funds; it's about how these funds are utilized, the sustainability of the projects, the involvement of communities, and their alignment with broader environmental goals. Our recommendations, derived from thorough analysis, suggest a path forward: enhancing cross-policy synergy, creating a centralized knowledge repository, incentivizing project replication, and establishing robust feedback mechanisms. These steps are crucial for not only advancing current projects but also for laying a solid foundation for future initiatives.

Thus, as we commit to environmental conservation and climate action, we must remember that our efforts are more than a commitment to the present; they are a

responsibility to future generations. The battle against climate change is ongoing, and together, fortified by unity, purpose, and an informed approach, we march towards a sustainable, greener horizon, where EU-funded projects are not just financially sound but holistically successful.