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COUNTRY FICHE

POLAND [PL]

In 2014-20, Poland implemented 24 Sustainable Urban Development strategies through Integrated Territorial Investment (SUD ITI), primarily centred around regional capitals. Additionally, six non-SUD ITI strategies were introduced in the Warmian-Masurian and Lublin voivodeships, focusing on medium-sized and small towns. These strategies addressed various Thematic Objectives (TOs), with particular emphasis on energy efficiency and sustainable urban mobility. Funding mainly came from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Social Fund (ESF), with some support from the Cohesion Fund (CF). Most ERDF and ESF funding for these strategies was channelled through Regional Operational Programmes (ROPs), while the CF contributed via national OPs.
Furthermore, 39 Community-led Local Development (CLLD) strategies were approved and funded, primarily targeting rural areas. These strategies focused on social inclusion, healthy ageing, job creation, entrepreneurship, culture, heritage, and sustainable tourism. Urban CLLD strategies prioritised social inclusion, youth, and healthy ageing.

POPULATION	STATE TYPE
37.97 million	Decentralised

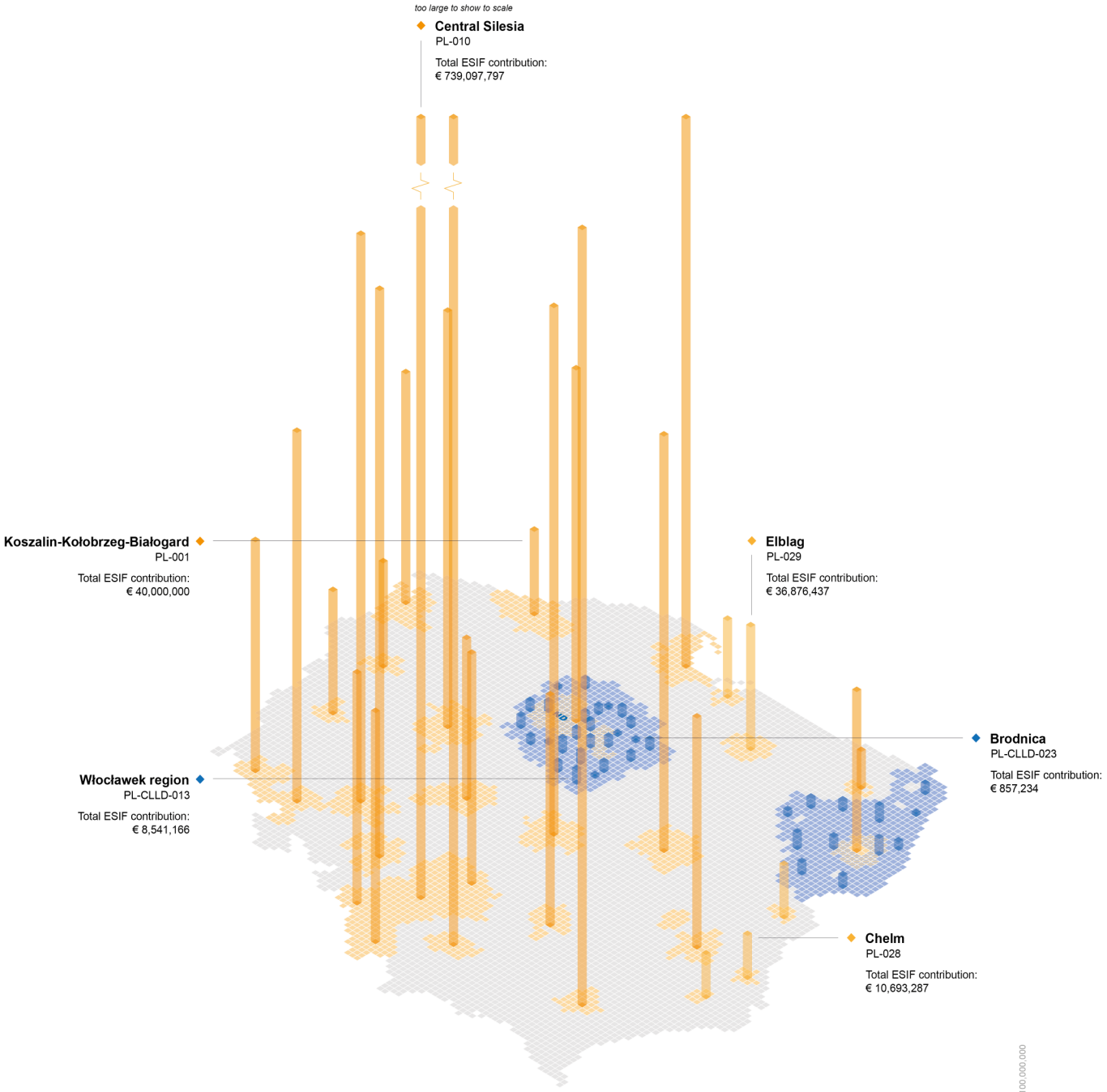
NATIONAL ESIF BUDGET	
EU Contribution (EUR)	€ 91,273,314,936
National Contribution (EUR)	€ 20,164,659,184
Total Contribution (EUR)	€ 91,273,314,936

Note: including all ESIF - ERDF, ESF, EAFRD, YEI, EMFF
Source: Cohesion Open Data Platform (European Commission, n.d.)

Territorial Delivery Mechanism type	No.	ESIF type	Share of ERDF /CF allocation[2]	Share of decided allocations spent (end 2022)
SUD (Art. 7) Operational Programme	0	-	-	-
SUD (Art. 7) Priority Axis	0	-	-	-
Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI; SUD)	24	ERDF, ESF, CF	9.1%	82%
Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI; non-SUD)	6	ERDF, ESF	ND	ND
Community-led Local Development (CLLD)	39	ERDF, ESF EAFRD, EMFF	0.1%	81%
TOTAL	**69**	**-**	**9.2%**	**-**

Source: allocations and spending based on Cohesion Open Data Platform (European Commission, n.d.), remaining items on STRAT-Board (JRC, n.d.).
Note: STRAT-Board data is self-reported by strategy holders. There may be inconsistencies between the data reported in STRAT-Board and other databases, such as the Cohesion Open Data Platform.

Figure 1. Geographical distribution of Territorial Delivery Mechanism (TDM) strategies



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Description

Geographical distribution of strategies per type of TDM, with an indication of the amounts of the respective ESIF contributions. For each type of TDM, strategies with the highest and the lowest amounts of funding are indicated.

Source: STRAT-Board (JRC, n.d.).
Note: There may be discrepancies between data from STRAT-Board and from other data bases.

Legend

= Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI; SUD)

= Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI; non-SUD)

= Community-led Local Development (CLLD)

ND = no financial data for strategy

Scale

€ 5,000,000
€ 10,000,000
€ 50,000,000
€ 100,000,000

GOVERNANCE CONTEXT

Poland's territorial governance is based on a unitary, decentralised system, with a three-tier self-government structure at sub-national levels. The country is divided into 16 voivodeships (województwa), each with its own government and assembly, responsible for regional development, infrastructure, and cultural affairs. Below the voivodeships are powiats (counties) and gminas (municipalities), both of which manage local administration and have elected authorities. There is a degree of regional autonomy, and regional boundaries correspond to the EU NUTS2 level. Additionally, there is partial decentralisation of the management of Cohesion Policy to the regional tier, alongside the delegation of regional development competences to voivodeships, making them relatively resourceful.

Spatial planning in Poland is organised at the national, regional, and local levels. At the national level, spatial policy is guided by the National Spatial Development Concept (Koncepcja Przestrzennego Zagospodarowania Kraju 2030), which sets long-term priorities for sustainable territorial development, integrating economic growth with environmental protection. Regional spatial planning is conducted by voivodeships, which develop regional spatial development plans to ensure coordinated development across counties and municipalities. Local spatial planning is the responsibility of the local governments, which prepare local plans to regulate land use, urban growth, and zoning.

The National Urban Policy (Krajowa Polityka Miejska 2030) outlines key objectives for urban development in Poland, such as supporting the competitiveness of cities, reducing social and spatial inequalities, promoting low-carbon development, and improving Poland's urban system, reflecting EU and international strategic documents concerning urban policy (e.g. Leipzig Charter, Urban Agenda for the EU, UN New Urban Agenda). The policy also provides for the continued implementation of Integrated Territorial Investments (ITI) as a means to promote inter-municipal cooperation on integrated approaches to sustainable urban development.

COHESION POLICY CONTEXT

Poland is one of the largest beneficiaries of Cohesion Policy, having received the highest allocation of European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) among EU Member States during the 2014-20 period. Six national operational programmes, managed by the Ministry of Investment and Economic Development, were implemented during this time. One of these programmes was dedicated to the macro-region of Eastern Poland, covering five less-developed regions. Other national Operational Programmes (OPs) focused on digitalisation, infrastructure and development, smart growth, and technical assistance for the implementation of Cohesion Policy. Additionally, as in the 2007-2013 period, each voivodeship had its own programme, managed by Marshal Offices (regional self-government authorities responsible for administering and coordinating regional policies, economic development, and public services). Regional authorities managed around 40% of EU Cohesion Policy funds in Poland during this period. For both national and regional programmes, Intermediate Bodies were designated for selected priority axes or measures.

FEATURES OF THE TERRITORIAL DELIVERY MECHANISMS

Sustainable Urban Development Integrated Territorial Investment

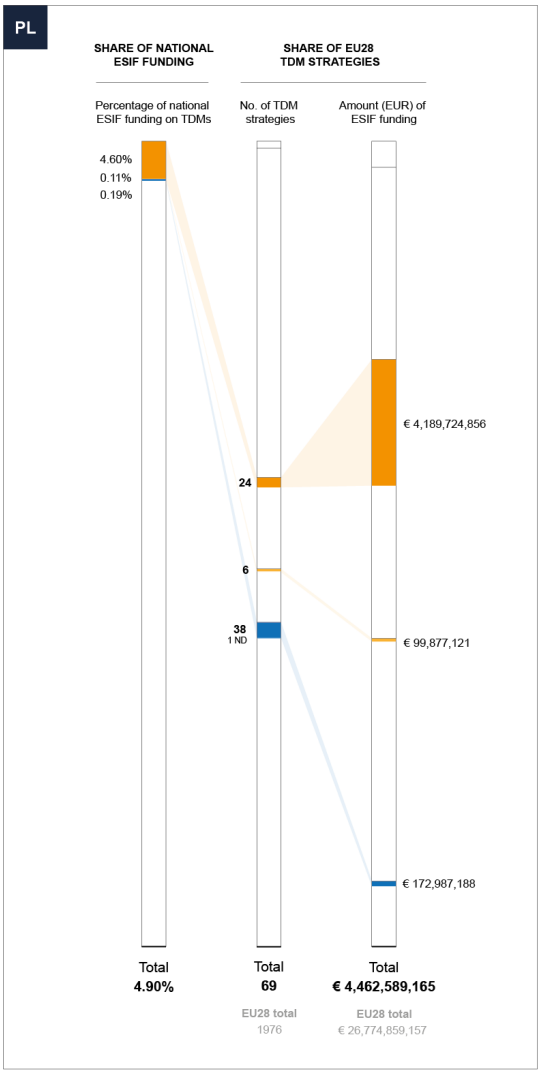
During the 2014-20 programming period, 30 Sustainable Urban Development (SUD) strategies were implemented in Poland through the Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI) instrument. These strategies combined funding from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the European Social Fund (ESF), and the Cohesion Fund (CF). Most strategies focused on regional capitals; however, in the northern Warmian-Masurian and eastern Lubelskie regions, SUD ITI strategies were also implemented in smaller towns. The strategies had dedicated funding allocations within the Regional Operational Programmes (ROPs) and included complementary projects within national Operational Programmes (OPs). Overall, Poland allocated a substantial share of its national ERDF and CF funding to these strategies (9.1%). Sixteen strategies had budgets exceeding €100 million, while eight others ranged between €25 million and €100 million—representing a significant investment.

The objectives of the ITI strategies were closely aligned with EU, national, regional, and local strategic frameworks. These projects aimed to counter suburbanisation and improve spatial planning, focusing on achieving synergy and sustainable impacts. One of the key added values of this instrument in Poland was its role in stimulating an inclusive stakeholder consultation process, helping design comprehensive ITI strategies that had broad support and local ownership. Furthermore, the SUD ITI strategies strengthened cooperation between municipalities, enhancing regional cohesion and collective problem-solving within functional areas. Projects often focused on metropolitan railway stations and the development of integrated transport systems, contributing to regional development and connectivity. A notable feature of SUD ITI implementation in Poland was the establishment of the ITI Office, which helped develop local administrative capacities and expertise in managing EU funds.

The strategies performed well in terms of financial implementation, with 82% of ERDF and CF funding spent by the end of 2022, surpassing the absorption rate of mainstream Cohesion Policy funds during the same period (73%).

However, challenges arose, particularly regarding the limited coordination between ERDF and ESF projects. The separate procedures for each funding stream and the lack of integration between the funds hindered smoother implementation. In the initial phases, many ITI strategies also lacked sufficient involvement from stakeholders outside the public administration sector, limiting broader community engagement.

Figure 2: Types of Territorial Delivery Mechanisms (TDMs) used, amount of strategies and the corresponding shares of ESIF* contributions



Source: STRAT-Board (JRC, n.d.). Notes: On the first vertical bar from the left, the percentage of all ESIF funding for that country allocated to TDM strategies is indicated with colour. The whole bar represents all ESIF funding for that country. On the second bar (middle), the number of each type of TDM strategy implemented in this country is indicated with the corresponding colour, with the whole bar representing all TDM strategies implemented across the EU28 (1976 strategies, as indicated in grey below the bar). On the bar on the right side, the amounts of ESIF funding for the TDM strategies are indicated with the corresponding colour. The bar represents the total allocation of ESIF for TDMs in the EU28. Please note that there may be inconsistencies between the data reported in STRAT-Board and Cohesion Open Data Platform.

Community-led Local Development

A much smaller share of the ERDF and CF resources was channelled through CLLD strategies. These were implemented only in two Polish regions: Kujawsko-Pomorskie and Podlaskie. The implementation of CLLD was marked by a significant delegation of decision-making responsibilities to Local Action Groups (LAGs). These groups were established beforehand for the purpose of the LEADER programme, which proved a major asset for the development and implementation of CLLD strategies.

The LAGs empowered local communities to develop and implement strategies tailored to their specific needs. Building on the LEADER experience, CLLD strategies were often drafted entirely by the LAG itself and used a wide range of participatory tools to engage local stakeholders and communities. Extensive community consultations were instrumental in shaping these strategies. Public meetings, surveys, and focus groups ensured that local development plans were grounded in the real needs of communities. Coordination by the Marshal's Office aligned local strategies with regional and national policies, ensuring consistency across governance levels. LAGs played a crucial role in supporting beneficiaries, offering training and assistance with project applications and implementation to ensure effective delivery.

Broad community involvement, achieved through various consultation methods, resulted in well-grounded and widely supported local development strategies. Initiatives such as business incubators and support for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) were key in fostering local economic development and job creation. The focus on supporting vulnerable groups and developing social enterprises ensured that the benefits of local development were inclusive, reaching those most in need. The Polish CLLD LAGs were also able to draw on LEADER networking (both national and EU-level) as well as on the national-level sub-committee on CLLD involving representatives of rural development and Cohesion Policy stakeholders.

A key strength of the CLLD approach was the integration of multiple EU funding sources, including ERDF, ESF, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF), which provided comprehensive support for a wide range of projects, from social inclusion initiatives to infrastructure development.

However, the implementation of CLLD in Poland also faced some challenges. Bureaucratic processes were often burdensome for beneficiaries, highlighting the need for simplified administrative procedures. Moreover, limited financial resources for certain projects, particularly those led by associations, underscored the need for increased and better-targeted funding in future programming periods. Finally, a limitation was a strong alignment with administrative boundaries and higher-level interference in the process of municipal LAG membership, which somewhat constrained the functional logic of the strategies and their bottom-up character.

* In order to reflect the contribution of various funds to TDMs, this graph includes all ESIF funds (ERDF, ESF, CF, EAFRD, EMFF).

Boosting accessibility and cross-municipal cooperation in the Wałbrzych Agglomeration

The implementation of the SUD ITI in Wałbrzych Agglomeration involved comprehensive infrastructural projects, such as the reconstruction of degraded railway lines and regional roads. The ITI Office in Wałbrzych has undertaken extensive responsibilities, including strategic and formal project assessments, calls for proposals, and project selection. The initiative accelerated economic development in a region facing socio-economic challenges. It also enhanced the prestige and operational capacity of Wałbrzych, addressing critical infrastructure needs and promoting regional integration. The value of delegating extensive competencies to the local ITI office was emphasised, as was the role of such projects in revitalising economically lagging areas in the agglomeration. This approach ensured that local needs and priorities were effectively addressed within the broader regional framework.

IN SUM

During the 2014-20 programming period, 9.2% of ERDF and CF resources were used for Territorial Delivery Mechanisms in Poland. Thanks to SUD ITI strategies, cooperation between urban authorities and regional managing authorities for ROPs was strengthened, while creating space for local priorities to be considered. Importantly, investments supported as part of SUD ITI strategies helped strengthen cooperation and integrated interventions and contributed to improved cross-level and inter-municipal cooperation, often kick-starting collaboration within Functional Urban Areas (FUAs). The ITI framework allowed for a dynamic approach to regional development, adapting to the specific needs of functional urban areas. Moreover, municipalities and associations of municipalities were given a more prominent role in the implementation of Cohesion Policy, and local stakeholders were also mobilised for the purpose of drafting strategies, albeit mainly from the public sector. CLLD strategies, while having much fewer resources, also produced substantial added value by engaging local stakeholders in strategy drafting. Both types of strategies, SUD ITI and CLLD, outperformed mainstream Cohesion Policy measures in financial implementation. One of the main caveats, though, was that in practice integration between different funding streams was limited due to differences in implementation systems. Additionally, capacity issues were encountered, especially among smaller municipalities. For CLLD, in particular, the limitations were relatively small funding and limited coverage of the national territory.

References

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