



A better future for all: Social solutions

## OPPORTUNITY IN DISGUISE

GRASSROOTS LEADERSHIP GUIDES POLAND'S EASTERN WIELKOPOLSKA

**Faced with the challenge of transforming its energy system, Polish policy makers have sought the involvement of different stakeholders as they create a new, shared identity for the region.**

“Every problem is an opportunity in disguise.” This statement from the second President of the US John Adams Jr. resonates with the Polish region of Eastern Wielkopolska and its ongoing quest to transform its energy system.

Eastern Wielkopolska includes the city of Konin and the counties of Konin, Koło, Słupca and Turek. Historically, the area’s economy has been heavily dependent on and dominated by the mining and energy sectors. Four years ago, the region embarked on a new vision for its development, guided by the goal of a just transition. This process was not imposed top-down. Instead, it arose from broad engagement with the community and through social dialogue between trade unions and the largest employer in the region – ZE PAK Group.

Eastern Wielkopolska’s just transition is first and foremost a social process. As coal mining lies at the heart of the region’s identity, a shift in the society’s collective mindset was required to create an entirely new, coal-free identity that remained authentic to its residents. Prioritising public dialogue and involving individuals from different backgrounds made it possible to understand distinct points of view. Stakeholders were encouraged to examine all the solutions offered and could add fresh concepts and suggestions. This collaborative approach enabled policy makers to see opportunities they had overlooked, and even change their minds on certain topics, while allowing information on the just transition to reach a wider audience.

Eastern Wielkopolska’s participation in the European Commission’s *Initiative for Coal Regions in Transition* has paved the way for the region’s own just transition. Alongside providing capacity-building and technical assistance, this programme created a space for a diverse group of stakeholders from Eastern Wielkopolska to exchange ideas on the region’s transformation.

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Meetings of the initiative were not only attended by local government representatives, but also by NGOs, trade unions, and private sector representatives such as ZE PAK Group, the owner of the local mines and power plants. The region's transformation also gained international attention, enabling local policy makers to connect to the World Bank (now acting as an advisor on the just transition process), NGOs such as the Polish Green Network and WWF, and experts from the European Investment Bank's JASPERS Initiative and PwC, amongst others.

Building on a base of effective public dialogue and community solidarity, grassroots leaders found opportunities to forge a new identity that utilised the existing strengths of the region including:

- a central location in Poland
- perfect conditions for green energy development
- power grid resources and the potential for convenient connections
- a highly qualified labour force
- a university.

Analysing these strengths has supported policy makers in developing a vision of how to open up new economic opportunities through specialisation in sectors such as e-mobility, renewable energy sources, and modern energy technologies including hydrogen production.

As part of efforts to evolve its clean energy capacity, the region has created the Wielkopolska Hydrogen Valley brand which provides a foundation for the region's new identity and underpins the *Territorial Just Transition Plan and Development Strategy of Eastern Wielkopolska*. Key objectives have been established for the region to achieve climate neutrality as early as 2040, while ensuring a high quality of life for its residents. These include ending coal-use in the energy sector and reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in the sector by 90% by 2030.

Ultimately, the success of Eastern Wielkopolska's just transition rests upon its ability to forge a new and greener identity underpinned by shared knowledge and understanding.

