

Green, clean and keen to converge? A convergence analysis of environmental quality of life in the EU

Introduction

The growing need for environmental action has increased the number of pan-European targets and policies. These affect European citizens in their professional and private lives. This report monitors the environmental performance of the EU27 and looks at where the largest disparities between the Member States lie. Disparities occur because Member States have different environmental profiles, meaning that greening processes have not been happening at the same pace across Member States and across indicators.

The green transition entails more than improving eye-catching indicators that create news headlines, such as greenhouse gas emissions and use of renewable energy. Therefore, this report delves deeper into the environmental issues that most affect citizens' everyday lives. For example, it discusses the liveability of cities and residential areas, energy poverty and inadequate housing.

This work grew out of cooperation between Eurofound and the European Environment Agency. To our knowledge, this is one of the first reports analysing environmental convergence in Europe. Another report resulting from that collaboration, *The transition to a climate-neutral economy: Exploring the socioeconomic impacts*, was published in June 2023.

Policy context

The EU has set itself the ambitious goal of becoming carbon neutral by 2050. To achieve this, it aims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, increase renewable energy use and improve recycling. The green transition would benefit European citizens' quality of life by addressing various types of pollution, such as air, noise, water, waste and soil pollution. It would also result in better regulation of energy markets, enabling access to clean energy for all.

These goals can be achieved only with the support of dedicated political initiatives. The European Green Deal has signalled a shift towards a carbon-neutral EU with a modern, resource-efficient and competitive economy. It sets out principles for a successful transition and calls on

Member States to act swiftly, as the next 10 years will be critical in preserving the current fragile state of natural resources in Europe.

Key findings

- Disparities between the Member States have narrowed, and performance has improved in many environmental indicators over the past two decades. This suggests that EU-level environmental targets and policy are contributing to better national performance. It also suggests that cooperation between Member States – for example involving the export of clean electricity – facilitates the realisation of EU-level ambitions.
- The speed of progress towards achieving quantitative EU-wide targets has varied across the Member States. In addition, the energy crisis, food-supply issues and economic turbulence caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine have strained commitments to the green transition.
- Geographical trends are evident in performance on several indicators. Northern and some western Member States (such as Sweden) tend to lead on indicators linked to energy efficiency and green energy systems, whereas many eastern European countries, and Malta, tend to lag behind. On a positive note, initially poor-performing Member States have been catching up with better performers for most indicators. No Member State excels in all indicators, indicating the heterogeneity of climate, transport and energy policies.
- Performance improved across all headline (macro-level) indicators analysed, signalling the importance of policy targets. There has been a reduction in disparities in respect of greenhouse gas emissions and in years of life lost due to particulate matter (PM2.5) air pollution. The reduction of disparities with regard to renewable energy and circular material use has been hindered by the exceptional performance of Sweden and the Netherlands. They have performed so well that they have outstripped other countries, leading to a rise in disparities.

- Improved performance on residential-level (meso-level) indicators shows that local settlements have become more liveable, but inequalities based on income remain. Member States' performance has improved, disparities in citizens' perceptions of pollution and grime in their environment have reduced, and municipal recycling rates have increased. In addition, noise pollution has reduced overall, but disparities across countries have remained steady or even increased. This is especially true for populations at risk of poverty.
- Household-level (micro-level) indicators, which measure energy poverty and housing quality, are closely tied to socioeconomic variables. Consequently, the economic downturn of 2008–2013 had a significant negative impact on these indicators, but the subsequent recovery signals that some economies are sufficiently resilient. However, in some instances there are great inequalities between the haves and the have-nots.
- Improvements in income and educational levels are related to improved environmental indicators. Reductions in poverty correlate with reductions in energy poverty and in exposure to environmental hazards such as air and noise pollution.
- In line with the Renovation Wave strategy, urban design should provide adequate and affordable homes in areas free of environmental hazards for low-income populations, especially in densely populated areas. Financial support measures, such as subsidies, could incentivise citizens to improve their housing and should be better targeted at vulnerable consumers. National interventions to improve social housing should also be promoted. These measures would reduce the threat of energy poverty.
- More widespread and affordable public transport systems could increase mobility and reduce emissions. The Zero Pollution Action Plan encompasses measures to reduce transport emissions, while the Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy aims to improve public transport systems. People living in rural areas, senior citizens and people with underlying health conditions need connectivity the most, and transport policies should be designed with them in mind.
- Local and national authorities pursuing greening could follow established practices suggested by Member States or the EU. High-level solutions as well as everyday fixes are needed. For example, Slovenia aligned its waste management policies with EU directives and saw rapid improvements.
- The EU and its Member States need to work closely together to improve the EU's environmental performance. Clear communication from the EU and national governments should help the public to adopt more sustainable behaviours. Cooperation between the Member States could foster the circular economy. Regulations concerning cross-country waste recycling need to be updated so that materials transported are not heavily taxed. For example, recycling out-of-use wind turbines is much more costly if during their transportation they are taxed as wind turbines instead of waste. However, stricter controls on cross-country waste disposal should be applied to avoid hazardous waste travelling to countries with poor environmental-protection laws.

Policy pointers

- For many indicators, the EU should stay the course, sticking with the greening objectives it has set out. In recent years, the EU has made progress on headline indicators, for example reducing greenhouse gas emissions and increasing renewable energy use.
- The EU should diversify its energy and material dependencies and increase its autonomy through measures promoting the use of renewable energy and the circular economy. Such measures would increase energy resilience and cushion the effects of future energy and material crises, and would protect low-income citizens in particular.
- Residential- and household-level environmental goals may need more stringent or timely policy measures than those currently in place. Interventions should focus on three areas where divergence has been detected: housing, energy poverty and public transport.

Further information

The report *Green, clean and keen to converge? A convergence analysis of environmental quality of life in the EU* is available at <https://eurofound.link/ef23022>

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