

The logo for PATH2LC, with 'PATH' in green, '2' in orange, and 'LC' in blue.

LEARNING MUNICIPALITY
NETWORKS

D2.6 Guideline for setting up a Learning Municipality Network

11/08/2023



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CONSORTIUM PARTNERS

LOGO	PARTICIPANT	COUNTRY	TYPE
 research for future.	Institute for Resource Efficiency and Energy Strategies (IREES)	Germany	Scientific
	Fraunhofer Institute for Systems and Innovation Research ISI (Fraunhofer)	Germany	Scientific
 TECHNISCHE UNIVERSITÄT WIEN Vienna Austria	Technische Universität Wien (TU Wien)	Austria	Scientific
 ENERGY RESEARCH	Zentrum für Energiewirtschaft und Umwelt (e-think)	Austria	Scientific
 ENERGY CITIES	Energy Cities (ENC)	France	Scientific
 HESPUL	Hespul (HESP)	France	Communication
 Ufficio Comune per la Sostenibilità Ambientale	Ufficio Comune per la Sostenibilità Ambientale (UCSA)	Italy	Local network
 CITY NETWORK	Sustainable City Network (SCN)	Greece	Local network
 AGÊNCIA REGIONAL DE ENERGIA E AMBIENTE DO OESTE	Agência Regional de Energia e Ambiente do Oeste – OesteSustentável (Oeste)	Portugal	Local network
 CITIES NORTHERN NETHERLANDS	City Northern Netherlands represented by City of Leeuwarden (CNNL)	Netherlands	Local network
 Agence locale de la Transition Énergétique du Rhône	Agence Locale de la Transition Énergétique du Rhône (ALTE69)	France	Local network

THE PATH2LC PROJECT

In the PATH2LC project public authorities are working together within the framework of a holistic network approach (so called learning municipality networks) with the aim to achieve low-carbon municipalities.

The core of the project activities are the SE(C)APs (Sustainable Energy (and Climate) Action Plans) or similar climate protection plans developed by the municipalities. The PATH2LC project fosters the exchange of existing knowledge and experiences among municipalities, enhances coordination among different administrative bodies within the municipalities, improves cooperation with local stakeholders and civil society and equips stakeholders in public authorities with required planning and monitoring tools to develop and implement transition roadmaps for achieving the targets set in the SE(C)APs.

The holistic network approach intends to link stakeholders in public authorities among municipalities enabling peer-to-peer learning and to increase the engagement for the energy and climate transition. Policy makers and public authorities at local level are supported with scientific analysis and expertise in order to understand and implement their SE(C)AP measures. Five existing networks of municipalities in Italy, Greece, Portugal, the Netherlands and France are participating in the project.

A special interest of the project is to invite other municipalities to replicate the learning municipality network approach and take advantage of the knowledge base collected in the project.

Further information on www.path2lc.eu

Project information

Proposal number: 892560

Acronym: PATH2LC

Title: Public Authorities together with a holistic network approach on the way to low-carbon municipalities

Years of implementation: September 2020 - August 2023

Client: CINEA

Acknowledgement



This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 892560.

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CONTEXT

The overarching objective of the PATH2LC project is to support policy makers and public authorities at the local level in the transition process towards a low carbon society. Through a holistic network approach, stakeholders in public authorities are linked among municipalities in order to enable peer-to-peer learning and increase the engagement in energy and climate transition.

The holistic network approach is described as Learning Municipality Networks (LMN), where several municipalities of a region build a network and work and exchange on common topics. The topics are chosen from the field of the transition towards a low carbon society, more precisely, heating and cooling planning, energy use in buildings, renewable energy, stakeholder engagement and financing.

The methodology of the LMNs follows a specific concept that addresses challenges via facilitation of meetings, target setting and commitment, social control processes and mutual motivation. The core piece in these networks is a close cooperation through regular, well-organised and facilitated meetings. Twice a year, the participating municipalities meet to report on their activities in the chosen fields, exchange on their experiences and their plans. These one-day network meetings are facilitated by a network moderator to enable a lively exchange between the cities and municipalities.

The approach of Learning Municipality Networks follows a defined process: initiation of the network – identification of climate and energy related measures – setting a common target by all network participants – regular network meetings on predefined topics with relevant municipal stakeholders – monitoring of progress and success of the network – dissemination of results and experiences – trans-regional and international exchange with other municipalities. In this guideline, a step-by-step approach is described so that follower cities, who want to create such networks on their own, get a sort of manual to work with.

LEARNING MUNICIPALITY NETWORKS

Definition and origin

The concept of Learning Energy Efficiency Networks (LEEN) is an innovative approach based on a network management system for the operation of regional energy efficiency networks for medium-sized and large companies. Initially, it was developed in Switzerland during the late 1980s, when the first energy efficiency network was established. With the first pilot network in 2002, it was transferred to Germany and has since been improved, tested, and supplemented. The rationale behind this concept is that many companies want to reduce their energy costs through efficient, profitable, and environmentally friendly solutions. Networking has proven to be an effective instrument for the implementation of energy-efficient measures in companies. Together with other companies in energy efficiency networks, they succeed faster than alone. Success factors are the combined intelligence, the exchange of experience and the mutual motivation. Research has shown that companies participating in such an efficiency network doubled their progress in the respective field compared to those not participating (Bradke et al. 2015). It has also been shown that the network approach helps to overcome barriers to the implementation of energy efficiency measures, such as information deficits and financial barriers. Based on the success of the LEEN network approach, the PATH2LC project aimed to adapt and transfer this concept to municipalities.

A learning municipality network refers to a collaborative group of municipalities that unite to share knowledge and resources, and to learn from each other. The network aims to improve the performance and sustainability of local government by creating a culture of continuous learning and improvement. The primary purpose of a learning municipality network is to promote the exchange of ideas, experiences, and best practices related to local government. This may involve sharing of information on innovative programs and policies, identifying emerging trends and challenges, or collaborating on research and evaluation projects.



Learning municipality networks can be organized around specific themes or areas of focus, such as environmental sustainability, economic development, public health, or social justice. By bringing together a diverse group of stakeholders with different perspectives and expertise, the network can generate new insights and creative solutions to complex problems. Each municipality is unique and influenced by multiple factors, such as its size, location, organizational structure and so on. However, they may also face similar challenges such as rising costs for energy (e.g. for heating). Learning municipality networks are therefore an effective way for local governments and their partners to work together to encourage collaboration and knowledge-sharing, to build capacity, foster innovation and improve the quality of life for their residents.

Transferring the approach from companies to municipalities

Across Europe, there is already a substantial number of municipal networks that aim to achieve their climate goals with mutual support. Important international networks are the [Covenant of Mayors](#), the [Climate Alliance](#), the Local Governments for Sustainability ([ICLEI](#)) network or [Eurocities](#). Regarding climate action in municipalities and similar to the LMN approach implemented in the PATH2LC project, other projects are also seeking to strengthen the exchange between municipalities using a network approach. Projects at the EU level that also focus on climate and energy topics and involve networking and peer-to-peer learning between municipalities include the following: ENERgeewatch (<https://energee-watch.eu/>), CEESEN (<https://ceesen.org/en/>), ePLANET (<https://www.eplaneth2020.eu/>) and OwnYourSECAP (<https://www.ownyoursecap.eu/>). EU projects that also aim at capacity building among municipal actors within these fields but without a pronounced networking component are Prospect+ (<https://h2020prospect.eu/>), IN-PLAN (<https://fedarene.org/project/in-plan/>) and C-Track 50 (<https://www.c-track50.eu/>). Besides that, various national networks exist. Usually, they benefit from informal exchange and a common understanding of their overall target as well as from supporting instruments and materials. The networks are also helpful for effective communication of their activities.

Overall, municipal networks are thought to play an important role in fostering climate planning at the local level as well as influencing higher levels of government (Gore 2010; Pietrapertosa et al. 2021). In the field of climate change adaptation, Heikkinen et al. (2020) discovered that network membership is correlated with higher levels of activity. One characteristic of (transnational) municipal networks is that they tend to focus on soft mitigation measures (such as fostering knowledge exchange or capacity building) rather than on quantified mitigation targets (Bansard et al. 2017; Kern and Bulkeley 2009). The networks also function as facilitators of personal networking among local policymakers (Haupt 2019) and enable benchmarking, which has been shown to contribute to knowledge generation within municipal administrations (Askim et al. 2007).

In terms of knowledge exchange, study visits allow policymakers to learn from the experience of authorities in other municipalities. In this regard, a study by Haupt (2021) indicates that such visits are more successful if the municipalities are quite similar, e.g. of comparable size and with a similar institutional context. The study argues that learning from exchanges among municipalities with similar conditions is more suitable for large-scale implementation of peer-to-peer learning approaches than learning from frontrunners only. However, in many municipal networks, there is a clear split between a core group of the most active municipalities and the other, more passive municipalities (Kern and Bulkeley 2009). To facilitate learning processes, informal personal connections have shown to be important, as these are one of the main channels of peer-to-peer exchange (Ansell et al. 2017).

The missing piece in most of these networks is a very close cooperation in the form of regular and well-organised and moderated meetings, as given in the concept of so-called learning municipality networks (LMNs). The approach of Learning Municipality Networks follows a defined process, very similar to the concept for energy efficiency networks for companies. However, different to energy efficiency networks in companies (EENs), the target setting process in LMNs is not based on an energy audit, as done in companies. LMNs can opt to define “softer” targets, i.e. not necessarily/only defining how much savings (in terms of energy and CO₂) they want to achieve, but also to set targets focusing on the way they want to cooperate or processes they want to establish. The following is a guideline that explains all the necessary steps to set up an LMN. The step-by-step guideline includes helpful advice, along with lessons learned from our PATH2LC project.

HOW TO SET UP A LEARNING MUNICIPALITY NETWORK

Setting up a learning municipality network involves several steps. Please note that the situation in each municipality is different, since there are numerous factors involved: the size of the municipality, its current energy system and challenges, its financial situation and other unique factors, which might make changes in the approach necessary.

Important roles

Participating actors of a learning municipality network should be staff of public authorities of cities or municipalities. It is important to engage high-level officials within the administration. From each city at least 2-3 stakeholders should take an active part in the network.

Besides the participating municipalities, important stakeholders for the success of a learning network are:

- **Network manager/coordinator:** The network manager typically serves as the network initiator, responsible for bringing together all network participants. At the very beginning of the project the network managers should be trained about the concept and the rules of the network meetings. He/she must keep the network members motivated to participate actively. Therefore, the main tasks for the network manager are:
 - to organise meetings together with the moderator,
 - to engage the moderator or take over this task himself,
 - to draw up minutes of the meetings and
 - to be the contact person for network issues and a link to the rest of the project team.

Between the network meetings, the coordinator forwards relevant information (e.g. regarding topical conferences, new funding measures, etc.) to the municipal participants and is the link between the network meetings. He/she follows the development of the activities, deduces insights, ensures quality and motivates the participants to keep the track.

- **Moderator:** To promote an efficient exchange between the municipalities, network meetings must be moderated. At the start of the project, the moderators should receive training concerning the concept, the rules of the network meetings and learn various facilitation methods. The moderator can also be the network manager in one person. The moderator must align his/her work with the interests and needs of the participants of the network meetings. By skilfully steering the meetings, he/she ensures a relationship of trust between the participants that allows them to exchange experiences and to discuss potentials and risks. His/her task is to form a team out of the participants in order to work towards their common goal of e.g. increasing energy efficiency in their respective municipality. Regular communication is necessary for the success of the moderator in this task. In consultation with the network manager, the moderator drafts the basic structure of the network meetings, leads them, prepares and follows up and supports the experts in their contribution to the network's knowledge expansion.
- **Consulting expert:** The network needs to be accompanied by (external) experts that can provide more information on specific topics as well as deeper insights into barriers and drivers for the implementation of a specific measures. Topics can range from heating and cooling, to transportation and mobility, to stakeholder involvement and citizen engagement, or legal issues, and more. Expert input is usually given during network meetings, but it can also be organized as webinars or trainings aside from the regular network meetings.

In order to guarantee that the network is of high quality, the roles mentioned above and the training of the network managers and moderators are mandatory. The network manager and the moderator are often one and the same person, we then speak of the "network operator".

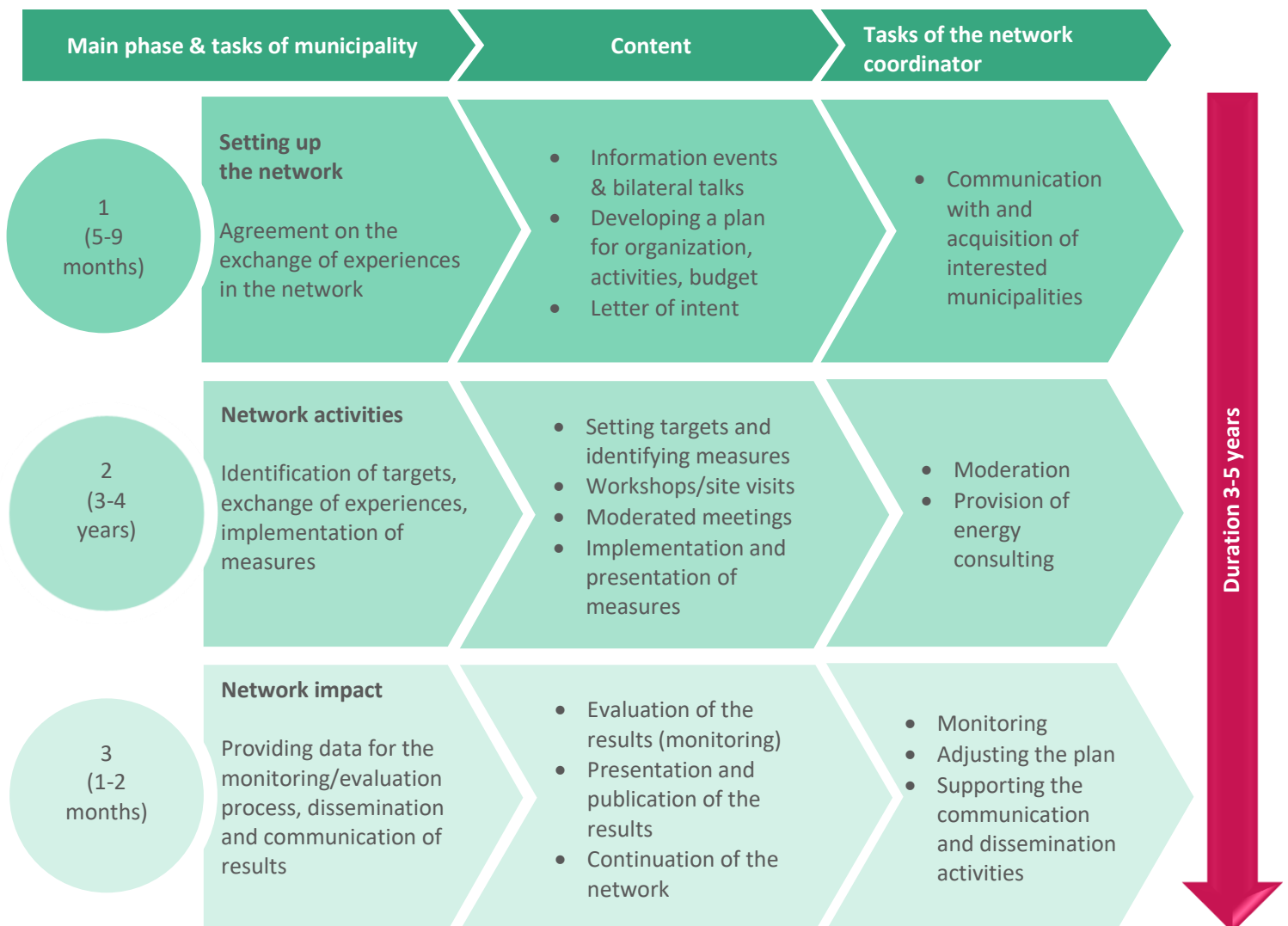


Step-by-step approach

Generally, a learning municipality network can be established by following three main phases with several interim stages. Figure 1 gives an overview of the three main phases, including the tasks of the network coordinator and the usual time needed for each phase. The three main phases are:

- I. Setting up the network: acquisition
- II. Network activities: network meetings
- III. Network impact: measure and disseminate results

Figure 1: The three main phases of the LMN concept



I. Setting up the network

1) Initiation of the network: acquisition of members

First of all, the **manager/coordinator and the moderator** of the network need to be identified. The different roles required for a learning municipality network were described above (see “Important roles”). In parallel, also **potential partners**, who can support the network, need to be identified. This might include technical experts, educational stakeholders such as higher education institutions, community organizations or businesses.

For a network to exist, there needs to be a number of active members. Recruiting member municipalities for the network who are interested in learning and sharing knowledge is therefore essential.

- Each network should consist of **at least 3 and not more than 8** cities or municipalities.

The **distances** of the participating municipalities should be limited, so that venues for meetings can be accessed within two hours. The size of the municipalities should be chosen with regards to low level decision-making structures and well-informed stakeholders about municipal processes. The regional component is important because the method only works if there is an active exchange that lives from showing and communicating on what has been done, how and with whom. As mentioned above, from each municipality at least 2-3 stakeholders should take an active part in the network. These stakeholders should be staff of the public authorities, ideally high-level officials within the administration.

Letters of intent, - legally unbinding signed forms between the network manager and the respective municipality - have proven to be a rather simple yet effective way to create identification with and commitment to the network. But how can potential members be recruited? You could organize information events in your municipality, approach municipalities directly in bilateral talks or make use of already existing networks in your region. Often, the challenges faced by municipalities are quite similar, so gaining momentum and interested members after initiating might be easier than thought.

2) Develop a plan and identify measures

The following step is to develop a detailed plan for the learning municipality network (if possible, in a collaborative process with your members) that includes the purpose, activities, budget, and timeline. Identify the resources required to implement the plan and how those resources will be obtained. A framework and structure for the network needs to be developed, including the meeting frequency, the format of the meetings (online or live, if live: decide on the venues), and the roles and responsibilities of the stakeholders.

Further, decide on the network’s scope and focus, in terms of which specific topics or issues will be addressed. The specific topics or issues to be addressed will depend on the challenges and situations faced by your region and participating municipalities. The issues to be addressed can also be determined by identifying the energy efficiency measures of every municipality in the network. This is usually done by a consulting expert. Such measures might already be specified in existing energy and climate actions plans (such as the SE(C)APs). Additional measures might be identified during the network process.

3) Establish communication channels

Establish communication channels for the network, such as an email list, a shared folder for documents and presentations, a website, or social media accounts. These channels will allow members to share information, collaborate on projects, and stay up to date on network activities. Select channels which are easily accessible and, at best, already used by your network members so they can give you feedback as well.

II. Network activities

1) Kick-off meeting and target setting

The network finally starts with the kick-off meeting. One objective of the kick-off meeting is to **set a common network target** which will be defined by all network members. This target could be anything from reducing CO₂ emissions over a certain number of implemented measures to the number of contacts between network members. The main purpose of this target is the commitment of the network members to the network. All network members and of course the network operator then can refer to the network target whenever necessary. It allows for a continuous monitoring of the network progress. The network target should serve as a motivator for network members and can also be communicated externally to increase commitment. This is done on a voluntary basis and the network members can decide whether to make the network's target public or not. However, publicly disclosing the network's target helps to show and raise the commitment of the network's participants.

It is important to ensure that the target(s):

- 1) ...are realistic: when it is obvious that numbers and targets are unrealistic, they may demotivate the members even before work begins. Therefore, make sure that the targets are realistic!
- 2) ...are shared by all stakeholders: only those targets that were agreed upon can be tackled in a concerted effort!
- 3) ...are re-visited: setting up the targets is not enough – there need to be regular follow ups. During step 3 (network impact), the progress must be compared to the initial targets and should be readjusted if needed.

In the network's kick-off meeting not only the network target is set, but also the network participants learn about the network process and identify the specific topics they want to talk about in the following meetings. The idea is to have a storyline of the meetings. The network operator either prepares the input for these topics or organizes external experts who can provide input to these topics, which will be presented at the following network meetings.

2) Organization of regular network meetings

There should be a continuous exchange of experiences during the duration of the project with 2-3 regional network meetings per year. It is the main task of the network manager together with the moderator to organise these regular network meetings, where up to three stakeholders from each member municipality are supposed to attend.

These network meetings are supposed to take place in one of the member municipalities as a one-day event. At these one-day network meetings, the moderator will encourage a lively exchange between the cities and municipalities. A network meeting contains the following elements:

- Expert input: expert input on a specific topic agreed on by all network members prior to the meeting.
- Exchange of experiences: exchange on the implementation process of measures including success factors and barriers.
- Site visit: a site visit focusing on implemented measures of the city, so that the participants can learn vividly about implementation examples as well as implementation barriers.

The host of the event is passed on from one municipality to another so that they can learn from each other. It is important that there is an exchange of experiences at eye-level: From each municipality 2-3 stakeholders (persons with a high level of responsibility) should take an active part in the network.

How to set up and plan the network meetings: The experience from accompanying network activities has shown that the process of conducting network meetings in a professional way is underestimated, and that there are skills necessary to conduct network meetings in a professional way. Facilitating meetings in a professional manner leads to:

- more commitment,
- more acceptance,
- a smooth implementation of measures and decisions made,

- time savings and
- higher chances of a follow-up.

To achieve these benefits, it is necessary to facilitate, prepare and evaluate network meetings. All network meetings should be documented by the network operator with minutes, which will be provided to all participants after the meeting. For a more detailed description of the importance and approach of facilitating network meetings, please have a look at the PATH2LC Deliverable 2.2 “Description of facilitators' kit and collection of helpful documents for broad audience” by Dr. Annette Roser (2022), [linked here](#).

3) Organization of events aside the network meetings

Workshops, seminars, training sessions or conferences may facilitate the collaboration and learning among network members. These events can be used to share best practices, highlight success stories, and identify areas for improvement. Through frequent events, the topic remains on the agenda of the network members and allows incremental changes towards the common goal. If possible, you should also include external speakers and several site visits for inspiration and practical expertise in a certain area of interest for the members.

III. Network impact

1) Monitoring

The monitoring helps making the success of activities and the achievement of the network targets measurable and visible. This is important for the municipalities, but also for the network as a whole. To measure the progress of the network over time, the implemented measures need to be tracked and the impact of the network activities needs to be evaluated. This will help to identify areas where the network is successful and where it possibly needs to improve. A frequent analysis of the current stage allows the network moderators to communicate with the municipalities and make necessary adjustments. The monitoring process is usually done by the consulting expert engaged in the network.

2) Adjust the plan

Adjust the plan as needed based on feedback from the network members and evaluation results. This will ensure that the network is always moving in the right direction and achieving its targets. It also allows to react to a change in needs concerning the scope and specific topics to be addressed or the structure and framework of the network. Overall, setting up a learning municipality network requires careful planning, active member engagement, and ongoing evaluation to guarantee success.

3) Communication and dissemination

As municipalities are role models for energy efficient and climate related activities it is important to spread the network's results, experiences, and especially the success stories. Communication about the network and dissemination of its activities are crucial for the visibility of the network, as well as for the visibility of the participating municipalities. Active communication and dissemination work stimulates ambition within the network, encouraging them to achieve the set targets and objectives. It slightly increases the pressure on the municipalities, while acting as a marketing tool. Regular communication and dissemination can be achieved via publications on social media channels, but also by means of press releases or publications on the partners' websites.

THE PATH2LC NETWORKS

The PATH2LC project brings together municipalities on regional and international level to support them in the process of implementing their existing SEAPs or SECAPs. Within the project we work together with five existing networks of municipalities in five countries (France, Greece, Italy, Netherlands, and Portugal), who are taking over the implementation part of the project. They are supported by scientific and dissemination partners. The tables below present an overview of the networks and municipalities and their climate action plans.



Country	Italy
Network coordinator	UCSA
Local administrations	Palma Campania, San Gennaro Vesuviano, San Giuseppe Vesuviano, Striano
Number of municipalities	4
SE(C)AP	SECAP (PAESC Vesuviano)
Focus	Energy and environmental issues
Description	Four municipalities in the Naples region have been working together for several years and now form the first LMN in Italy. The network is operated by the UCSA, a shared office for four City Councils with a focus on sustainability matters. Three of the municipalities have developed a joint SECAP. In addition to providing international exchange, the PATH2LC project contributed to further developing the knowledge and specific skills of local administrators regarding energy and environmental issues.



Country	Greece
Network coordinator	Sustainable City Network
Local administrations	Oichalia, Ierapetra, Korinth, Vari-Voula-Vouliagmeni, Messinis
Number of municipalities	5
SE(C)AP	SEAP
Focus	Capacity building for networking processes and for heating and cooling planning as well as updating the SEAPs
Description	Eight municipalities from a country-wide network participated in the PATH2LC project, managed by Sustainable City Network (SCN). Few municipalities published SEAP/SECAPs, some were updated, but not published. SECAPs have been mostly written by external consultants and municipalities do not have a deep understanding of their content, nor own their data.





Country	Portugal
Network coordinator	Oeste Sustentável
Local administrations	Alcobaça, Alenquer, Arruda dos Vinhos, Bombarral, Nazaré, Peniche, Caldas de Rainha, Torres Vedras, Óbidos
Number of municipalities	9
SE(C)AP	SEAP and SECAP
Focus	Disseminate the results and experiences of the first Learning Municipality Network in order to reproduce it
Description	Twelve municipalities from the west coast Portuguese region are organized in a network coordinated by the Regional Energy Agency Oeste Sustentável, which was strengthened by PATH2LC and its technical experts. In addition to a variety of measures that have already been implemented, the ambition and motivation to go even further remains high. A major goal of the network operator was to disseminate the results of the first LMN to reproduce it in the entire region.



Country	France
Network coordinator	Rhône Network (ALTE69)
Local administrations	CCMDL (Monts du Lyonnais), CCSB (Saône-Beaujolais), COR (Ouest Rhodanien), SOL (Ouest Lyonnais)
Number of municipal associations	4
SE(C)AP	SEAP and SECAP
Focus	Local energy policies and Energy planning
Description	The Rhône network includes 139 municipalities of four Inter-Municipalities of the French Rhône Department (69) and the ALTE 69 (Agence Locale de la Transition Énergétique du Rhône), a local Agency, covering the whole Rhône area that advises and supports local authorities throughout their policies and projects promoting the Energy transition. During the late 2010s, the 4 inter-municipalities participating in the PATH2LC project have decided to be more ambitious by planning to become 'Positive Energy Territories' by 2050: Namely, to halve their energy consumption by 2050 (compared to 2015 approx.), and to produce enough Renewable Energies to cover their remaining

energy needs. However, and still nowadays, political consensus about conducting ambitious and concrete measures is still not clear (municipal elections in 2020).



Country	Netherlands
Network coordinator	CNNL
Local administrations	Leeuwarden
Number of municipalities	18
SE(C)AP	SEAP and SECAP
Focus	Mandatory regional plans for scale sustainable energy production, regional heat plan, heat transition in the built environment and Energy Transition
Description	Leeuwarden together with other municipalities is working on the energy transition and already implemented many measures. The municipalities have ambitious targets in their SE(C)APs, e.g. carbon neutrality by 2035. The implementation process in the Dutch municipalities benefits from a Sustainable Program Manager, who leads the team and has direct contact with the mayor or the ‘wethouders’ (in English: municipal executive). All Dutch municipalities had to develop a plan for phasing out natural gas by the end of 2021, which mainly translates into a heat transition in the built environment.

Lessons learnt from PATH2LC

In order to evaluate the LMN approach, interviews were conducted with the network operators and municipal stakeholders involved in the PATH2LC project. Based on the overall evaluation of the network approach (see also Deliverable 4.10 – “Report on the perception and evaluation of the network approach” & Deliverable 4.11 – “Recommendations for the improvement of the LMN approach”) the benefits of the LMN approach were highlighted very positively by the municipalities. Perceived benefits were the exchange and collaboration with other European municipalities and with the municipalities in their network. This can lead to new ideas, enhance inspiration and the motivation to work on these topics and raise the perceived importance of energy issues. In addition, knowledge gains in the following areas were mentioned: energy topics in general, funding opportunities, the feasibility of certain projects, the Covenant of Mayors, and the process of developing a SE(C)AP.

When it came to the perceived effects of the LMN approach, the interviews showed that PATH2LC had positive effects in particular on the development or update of SE(C)APs as well as on the implementation of measures defined in those SE(C)APs. The LMN approach featured some overarching effects that exceed the specific objectives of the PATH2LC project. The main effect in this regard was that it strengthened networking among the municipalities within the networks, which was perceived as an improvement from the previously rather informal structure. Furthermore, it triggered cooperation across departments.

One important driving factor identified was the experience of the network operators. The motivation that arises from participating in a network with like-minded people was mentioned as another driver. It was further stated that the municipal representatives need to be willing to collaborate and share their knowledge with others instead of solely

expecting to receive support. This was also valid for the commitment of the mayors and the municipal administrations to the project. Additionally, it was identified that clear goals and communication about them are crucial factors. This means that the participants in the network must be clear about what they want to achieve.

At the same time, some barriers for the implementation of the Learning Municipality Network approach were perceived. These were derived from the interviews with network operators and municipalities:

- Lack of time and resources
- Administrative issues of municipalities
- Difficulties in involving external stakeholders
- Limited language skills
- Differences in size between municipalities
- Reluctance to share information between municipalities
- Covid restrictions in the first half of the project

A barrier to the implementation of the network approach mentioned very often in the interviews was a lack of time and resources. This is especially noticeable in smaller municipalities. A result of the lack of human resources was low participation rates in the network meetings. One strategy of the networks for dealing with this was to distribute people between meetings. The more vertical administrative structure in municipalities, and the changing contacts due to municipal elections can pose additional challenges for the implementation of the LMN approach. Also, differences in size between municipalities within the network were identified as a potential obstacle. Municipalities of varying sizes encounter varying difficulties and prioritise different topics on their agendas. Finally, the reluctance of some municipalities to share information with others was perceived as a challenge. In addition, Covid restrictions acted as another barrier: some interviewees felt that cooperation between municipalities would have been easier if there had been more in-person meetings.

General guidelines to further develop the LMN approach

From the evaluation of the PATH2LC learning municipality network approach (see Deliverable 4.11 – “Recommendations for the improvement of the LMN approach”), generalised guidelines on how to adapt and enhance the concept to maximise its impact were derived. These generalised guidelines provide valuable insights and these lessons learned should be taken into consideration, when setting up an LMN:

1) Identify the main contact person for the network in each municipality

This should be done right in the beginning as the (frequent) change of contact persons can act as a barrier to the implementation of the network approach. Ideally, the main contact person for the network is a civil servant and not an elected representative to prevent the change of contact persons due to municipal elections. A proxy should be defined to ensure a continuous exchange and flow of information when the main contact person is absent.

2) Consider the needs of municipalities in planning the network meetings and designing capacity-building measures

Drafting the agenda for network meetings in collaboration with the municipalities helps consider municipalities' needs. In addition, enough time should be foreseen for (informal) exchange with the other municipalities and best practice examples and practical content should be provided. Site visits can serve to demonstrate solutions applied in certain municipalities. Establishing informal sub-groups in the network meetings that work on the same topics is another possibility to design network meetings in an efficient and effective manner.

3) Provide additional possibilities for (informal) exchange between municipalities

Regular contact was deemed necessary for a network to function well and to continue to keep the network together, enabling informal exchanges and cooperation. Additional meetings and opportunities to stay in touch help with getting to know each other and being able to contact each other also outside of the regular meetings.

4) Provide easily accessible information material to the municipalities

If possible, the material should be provided in the local language. This is because language barriers may exist in some municipalities, i.e. many representatives may not be familiar with important terms from the field of energy or energy

policy in English.

5) Engage the community

Getting stakeholders on board who are not directly involved in the project and keeping them enthusiastic about the project throughout its entire duration can be challenging. To overcome this obstacle, it is important to provide information and communication targeted to relevant stakeholders, especially at the outset of the project.

6) Aim at consolidating the network approach

It is advisable to consider longer timeframes, beyond three years when implementing similar network approaches. Sustainable change often requires longer periods, especially in municipalities, and extended timeframes may allow for more comprehensive and impactful outcomes, leading to successful energy transition initiatives.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This work has been performed in the course of the Horizon 2020 project PATH2LC (project number 892560) funded by the European Commission, to which we convey our deepest appreciation for providing the funding to carry out the present investigation. We would like to express our sincere thanks to the work and review of Fraunhofer ISI (Uta Burghard, Sven Alsheimer and Markus Fritz) that has gone into this document, as well to e-think (Giulia Conforto) and Jacqueline Raterink (IREES) for the review of this guideline.



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