

Currently, the transformation in Poland is being carried out in a scattered and uncoordinated manner, and the lack of public trust is a major challenge. Better long-term planning, effective stakeholder relations and improved communication are needed to make the transformation a real modernisation process.

MAP DRAWING

Universal Lessons for the Future of Change
Management in Poland

Małgorzata Majewska, Michał Wierzbowski



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Authors::

Małgorzata Majewska, Michał Wierzbowski



Fundacja Warszawski Instytut Studiów Ekonomicznych i Europejskich
ul. Królewska 2/26
00-065 Warszawa
www.wise-europa.eu

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MAP DRAWING

Universal Lessons for the Future of Change Management in Poland

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Introduction

The process of transforming coal regions in Poland is a kind of testing laboratory for all its participants. As a society, we do not have much experience in conscious transformation, implemented in a complex environment with a multitude of stakeholders and a diversity of needs. Experience is also lacking in the very structures of the state – government, central and local administrations – that have the most tools and resources to effectively lead this process.

The example of Łódź and the landscape after the collapse of the textile industry in the 1990s showed that restructuring without strategy and proper management leads to long-term social and economic problems. These mistakes should be avoided by basing the transformation on coordinated action that will ensure new jobs and economic stability for the regions..

At the same time, other areas that will require radical transformations are already visible on the national horizon, such as heavy industry, transport, automotive and agriculture. And it is from the transformation of the coal regions that lessons can and must be learned that will facilitate strategic planning and the equitable implementation of other transformation processes.

In this publication, we present seven selected problematic aspects of the current transformation of coal regions and the universal lessons for other sectors that flow from them. It is inspired by a series of workshops we conducted, in which a broad spectrum of stakeholders participated – representatives of central, regional and local administrations, local communities, representatives of miners, academia and business, as well as representatives of the think tank sector and other civil society actors..

1. Fair transition: the Polish raison d'état

When the issue of transforming coal regions comes up in the public space, the primary implication and most commonly discussed instrument for financing this process is the Fair Transformation Fund (FST). In order to prevent the widening of regional disparities, the modernisation of the local economy is essential. This is why the FST supports investments in areas such as digital connectivity, clean energy technologies, emission reduction, regeneration of industrial sites or retraining of workers and technical assistance¹. Under the FST, "Poland has been allocated EUR 3.85 billion for the period 2021–2027 to support five regions exposed to the negative effects of the energy transition. (...) For two sub-regions (Zgorzelec County in Lower Silesia Province and Lublin Province), the European Commission did not approve TPSTs [Territorial Fair Transformation Plans] because they did not include plans to stop fossil fuel extraction and close mines, which was a condition for receiving support" (Chyrowicz-Doroszewska, 2024, pp. 6–7).

However, FST funds are clearly insufficient in view of the scale of the challenges, and in the current financial perspective 2021–2027 not all Polish coal regions receive them. There are repeated opinions among regional representatives that at the European level the Polish voice is not coordinated and is not sufficiently heard. On the national level, instead of a systemic approach, we have a race for funds. Regions and actors that are administratively better prepared or quicker to apply for funds grab most of the available support, while others – despite equally legitimate needs – remain without funding. Moreover, long-term strategies or concrete action plans are entangled in current politics.

Universal lesson 1:

The need to take the equitable transformation of regions and sectors beyond the current political discourse. The transparent implementation of transformation processes and their adequate financing from European and national funds should be the Polish *raison d'état*. Moreover, it should be development- and modernisation-oriented to maximise the search for new pillars of development for the regions. We need strategies that are independent of the political option in power and the electoral calendar.

¹ Cf. information available on the European Parliament website: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/pl/sheet/214/fundusz-na-rzecz-sprawiedliwej-transformacji>.

2. Green (co)financing

The transformation of coal regions is not one of the possible courses of action, but an economic necessity. There is a huge decline in the profitability of coal mining in Europe and Poland. Since, in the more ambitious scenario, coal mining subsidies alone will amount to between PLN 31 billion and PLN 83 billion by 2040 alone (Pandera & Adamczewski, 2024, p. 1), then – irrespective of the aspiration to meet EU climate targets – even from an economic perspective alone we are unable to compete with Indonesia, South Africa or Australia.

The process of transitioning away from fossil fuel extraction should be recapitalised using green financing instruments such as green bonds. It is worth having a debate about the amount of money, e.g. from the sale of CO₂ allowances or from the excess liquidity of the banking sector, to be used for transformational projects.

A roadmap for the development of a sustainable finance market in Poland – a project of the Ministry of Finance, carried out with the European Commission's Directorate-General for the Promotion of Structural Reforms (DG REFORM)² – which was developed in conjunction with the think tank WiseEuropa, can serve as a signpost here.

Universal lesson 2:

Transition finance needs to be managed appropriately. While deep sectoral and regional transitions will always be a politically difficult topic, it is worth doing a review of the available financial instruments and considering their meaningful use.

3. Continuity and coherence of the transformation process

The transformation of coal regions does not end when the mines are closed. Its real impact on the life of the region is revealed gradually, often with a delay of up to 10–15 years. The closure of a mine does not mean the immediate collapse of the regional economy, as initially there are still cushioning mechanisms in place: severance payments, other benefits (social security) or savings by the mining community. In addition, services and local businesses last longer than the mine itself. However, in the long term, demand declines and the region begins to lose its economic function, leading to progressive socio-economic degradation.

² For more information about the document and the Polish Sustainable Finance Platform, see the Ministry of Finance website: <https://www.gov.pl/web/finanse/zrownowazonefinanse>

Currently, the debate about the future of mining is polarised. On the one hand there are those in favour of a rapid cessation of mining altogether, and on the other those who want to maintain the current status at all costs. Instead of a gradual phasing out and transformation of the infrastructure, mines are being closed abruptly or maintained against economic calculus, and the decisions taken are often driven by political and union pressure. Furthermore, according to the miners' representatives interviewed by the think tank WiseEuropa, the transformation should not be based on extreme demands – a realistic approach that also pays attention to the changing realities of the raw materials market is necessary.

A pragmatic approach is needed, taking into account both economic, social and environmental issues, as well as the country's energy security (including raw material sovereignty). This is why the creation of strategies or plans is called for, but also ensuring mechanisms that guarantee continuity and consistency in their implementation, independent of the current political situation.

“Only a coherent governance model – combining central coordination with the involvement of local authorities, the public and business – will avoid fragmented initiatives and wasted resources. Stable, clearly focused leadership will ensure that the efforts of the various stakeholders reinforce each other instead of wearing each other out” (Wierzbowski, 2025, p. 7).

Universal lesson 3:

What is needed is consistency over a number of years – based on a good and well-thought-out plan with a precise division of roles between the centre and the regions. The key to any transformation process is a better life for Poles. It is necessary to show people what benefits they will be able to gain from the measures taken.

4. Support for local labour markets

Concerns about identity disruption, cultural habits and a lack of mobility in coal regions create serious challenges in local labour markets. The mining profession is not just a way of earning a living – it is a whole set of values, a social fabric and a kind of culture around mining, because in their heyday, the mines were cultural and social centres, providing a range of ancillary services around the mine. Additionally, many generations have worked in coal mining, making it difficult to mentally and practically adapt to the new reality. For those leaving the mines, there is a lack of job prospects in professions related to or emerging from the transition. Various initiatives are emerging to change this state of affairs. An inspiring example is the “Wind – Opportunity Mine” programme, which has been running training cycles since 2023, enabling miners and other mining sector workers to become competent in operating and servicing onshore wind farm installations³.

³ For more information, visit the website of Spółka Restrukturyzacji Kopalń S.A.: <https://srk.com.pl/media/aktualnosci/WIATR-KOPALNIA-MOZLIWOSCI/idn:385> and <https://srk.com.pl/media/aktualnosci/id>

Unfortunately, this is still a drop in the ocean of needs. In addition to the good practices indicated, as the miners' representatives point out, retraining programmes are being developed that either do not take into account the specifics of the mining profession (many years of work in a large industrial workplace with all the associated specifics, many years of lack of exposure to the labour market, very specifically targeted skills that seem easily adaptable, which they are not), or are proposed by training companies with no experience in working with an occupational group with such a specific history and social structure, where in order to help you first need to understand them.

It should also be borne in mind that the transformation affects not only miners, but also administrative employees of mines and those employed in companies around mining and providing services to mining. The skills and experience of workers in, for example, logistics, infrastructure management or occupational safety can be successfully transferred to other sectors – but there are no mechanisms effectively supporting such transfers on a wider scale.

The need to transform the coal regions may be a very good starting point for the development of modern industries in Poland. However, building appropriately qualified human resources is only one side of the coin. Stakeholders indicate that the challenge is to convince the transformation decision-makers to carry out the changes boldly.

Universal lesson 4:

Effective labour market support requires retraining programmes to be tailored to the professional and cultural realities of mining sector workers. Training needs to be practical, embedded in the local context and developed in collaboration with those involved themselves. In parallel, the courage of decision-makers is needed to invest in tailor-made solutions – not only systemic, but also socially rooted.

5. Counteracting the loss of regional identity

When discussing the move away from coal mining, there is a very strong focus on issues related to the transformation of regional labour markets. There is a need to create jobs in other sectors besides mining or for the development of new competences through changes in the formal education system or non-formal education projects. At the same time, there is a risk that a very important socio-cultural aspect is marginalised or completely ignored in the public debate. As the results and analysis of the Just Transition Barometer show, “there is a need to recognise that coal and mines will always be an important part of Silesian heritage” and “the closure of mines in the Voivodeship may result in a loss of cultural identity” (Orłowska & Piekarz, 2024, pp. 5, 23).

The mining company or mine is not only a guarantor of employment, but a kind of “breadwinner”,⁴ responsible, among other things, for the maintenance of sports clubs, health centres and cultural centres and the organisation of the leisure activities of the inhabitants.

Universal lesson 5:

What is needed for the inhabitants of the transition regions is a comprehensive vision of local development, the final shape of which they will be able to influence. It is necessary to convince them that this is a viable vision, and to provide the tools for its effective implementation. Which will not happen without grassroots work among local communities, as distrust of politicians and centres promoting the transition is quite widespread.

6. Development of brownfield sites

A characteristic feature of the Polish transformation of coal regions is the wastage of infrastructural potential. There is a lack of a unified strategy for the development of post-mining areas.

Mine closures do not take into account their potential value for other sectors, and local governments often lack clear guidelines and sufficient resources to efficiently convert land for new economic uses. The infrastructure of mines – their extensive networks of underground tunnels and shafts – is not adapted for new uses, such as pumped storage power plants, energy storage or geothermal installations.

The shafts are backfilled, eliminating future possibilities for their use. In countries such as Germany or the UK, mines are being adapted to serve as research laboratories or experimental facilities for geothermal and raw material technologies – in Poland this model does not exist. Underground spaces could be used to test experimental cooling systems or modern ventilation systems, but there are no initiatives in this area.

In addition, the backfilling of the shaft is a gigantic handicap if, for reasons that are currently difficult to foresee, there is a need in the future to use what remains underground, regardless of the economic calculus and other considerations.

The closure of mines alone – if not supported by development plans for the area, including care for infrastructure, but also jobs, education or culture – will lead to depopulation and the disappearance of entire city neighbourhoods. We are witnessing a gradual depopulation of mining towns, with the outflow of population particularly affecting the younger and more mobile residents. Depopulation, in turn, leads to vacancies, a further decline in property values and reduced investment in public infrastructure.

⁴ Wording used in the expert debate entitled “Lessons learned from the transformation of coal regions in Poland” during the Polish Climate Congress (Warsaw, 26 March 2025).

Universal lesson 6:

An equitable regional transformation must include the comprehensive regeneration of brown-field sites, taking into account the voice and demands of the local community in designing urban spaces and giving them new functions.

7. Dialogue and information management

A fair transformation of coal regions requires better information management. Currently, there is a gap between the central government's narrative and the expectations of local communities. The government narrative focuses mainly on the energy transition, decarbonisation and financing instruments, while locally the most important issues are job retention and social issues. This reinforces the sense of insecurity among local residents and calls for change. Direct or indirect community participation has the effect of ensuring 'ownership' of the whole process and thus helps to mitigate social unrest or even resistance to ongoing or planned activities (Fal et al., 2024, p. 9).

In addition, stakeholders from the coal regions make it clear that a naïve definition of social roles persists in the administration. The discussion about transformation focuses on gaining the support of different groups (e.g. miners or environmental organisations) instead of consciously shaping the process. There is too much emphasis in the public space on the importance of the social contract, which is merely an agreement between the government and trade unions rather than a comprehensive document for all stakeholders.

Conducting a coherent transformation narrative and dialogue with local communities is also hampered by the low level of trust in politicians in Poland and fatigue with the way the process is being conducted. It is already taking a long time, stretching out over time and producing few results. Communities are beginning to see it as an endless promise with no real results. Stakeholders indicate outright that "we are fed up with plans brought in a briefcase from Warsaw"⁵.

Universal lesson 7:

It is difficult to build public acceptance if there are no clear, measurable and consistently communicated transformation goals. All stakeholders need to know where we are going and the long-term benefits of the proposed changes.

5 Stakeholder's statement in the expert debate entitled "Lessons learned from the transformation of coal regions in Poland".

Postscript 1.

Call for the involvement of NGOs

It is the task of NGOs to mobilise action and effectively implement important socio-economic goals, to always be one step ahead. In their analyses, various think tanks point out that Poland's transformation goals are too unambitious and that moving away from coal in the energy sector by 2049 is too far away. There are sets of concrete recommendations on how to manage this process and what actions to take.

At the same time, there is a lack of a platform for dialogue, allowing these proposals to be put forward and arguments to be exchanged in a substantive way with all stakeholders. There is no good space for negotiation in the search for compromise solutions in the debate between public institutions, industry representatives, trade unions, academia and NGOs. Such dialogue must, of course, be conducted skilfully, adapting both the message and the language of argumentation to the needs of different groups.

Today, the state is not acting as a mediator to build broad coalitions and agree on common transformation scenarios. Each party acts in isolation from the others, without the chance to develop a common vision for the future of the mining regions. Since experts, environmentalists, trade unionists or other opinion leaders are not involved in a coordinated way, they become reviewers of the process – usually in opposition to the government and public administration institutions.

In addition, a very important aspect of the transition, which is overlooked in the mainstream public debate – and in which NGOs can also play a key role – is the dialogue with young people from mining families raised in a mining culture. It is necessary to identify how young people see themselves, how they see the future of their families, and how they see the region and development opportunities. Taking young people's ideas into account (or not) will in the future influence their life decisions, their perception of the state and their willingness to develop solutions for their surroundings that contribute to local development.

Postscript 2.

From a bird's eye view

Any transformation process is very complex and must include adequate protective measures for the groups affected. However, if they are to be successful, there is a need for financial tools and instruments that are also acceptable to the general public. This is also an aspect of justice on a national level.

A consciously designed process of change in the Polish coal regions cannot be overprotective, as it will be difficult to find consensus and consistency in implementation. And then we run the risk of a “silent transformation”⁶, in which instead of one direction we have a series of different smaller vectors of action – partly contradictory, partly consensual – from which groups of people without sufficient clout will emerge disadvantaged.

The poorly implemented transformation of the coal and mining regions and the mistakes made will further exacerbate the lower confidence of citizens in the state and its institutions than in other EU countries.

⁶ Phrase used by an NGO representative at an online workshop for civil society organised by WiseEuropa (30 September 2024).

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WiseEuropa Foundation

WiseEuropa is an independent think-tank specialising in macroeconomics, as well as economic, European and foreign politics.

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On 20 March 2024, at the Polish Climate Congress, the WiseEuropa Foundation was awarded the title of Energy Transformation Leader 2024. The competition jury included representatives of the Polish Climate Congress, the Polish National Energy Conservation Agency and the National Center for Research and Development.



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