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Urban programming case study: Bulgaria, Hungary and Lithuania

ComActivate

Model of intervention: Tackling Climate Change through Adequate Housing

Country Overview

ComActivate is a three-year, EU-funded project initiated in November 2023, consisting of 10 partners led by Habitat for Humanity International. The project addresses urban housing issues across four municipalities in three EU countries: Burgas (Bulgaria), Józsefváros in Budapest (Hungary), and Kaišiadorys and Elektrenai (Lithuania). These municipalities face significant challenges related to the EU's climate neutrality goals and urban development aspirations. Key issues include poor energy efficiency in residential buildings and outdated heating and cooling systems, particularly in Multi-Family Apartment Buildings (MFABs). Renovations are hindered by social, technical, legislative, and financial barriers, leading to energy poverty. In Bulgaria, only 4.2% of MFABs have been renovated; in Lithuania, just 4,500 out of approximately 35,000. Hungary's renovation rate is only 1%. In 2021, energy poverty affected 5.4% of Hungarian, 22.5% of Lithuanian, and 23% of Bulgarian households. To meet the EU's 2050 climate goals, a faster renovation rate is needed, given that buildings account for 40% of the EU's energy consumption and 36% of its greenhouse gas emissions.

Detailed Overview of Project Area/Problem

Residents in Burgas, Jozsefvaros, and Kaisiadorys face major challenges due to the poor state of their Multi-Family Apartment Buildings (MFABs). In Burgas, inadequate refurbishment planning, and limited resources leave many MFABs untouched, failing to engage vulnerable residents. Jozsefvaros suffers from severe energy poverty, with a mere 1% annual renovation rate. Homes here are poorly insulated, leading to high energy costs and discomfort. In Kaisiadorys, only 4% of MFABs have been renovated, with the area ranking 53rd out of 60 municipalities in Lithuania. Homeowners face difficulties upgrading their energy efficiency, as few national support schemes are available, and technical barriers hinder progress. The challenges are compounded by the complexity of decision-making within Homeowner Associations (HOAs), where limited expertise and regulatory constraints prevent effective renovations.

Project Intervention

ComActivate develops, demonstrates, and advocates for solutions aimed at reducing energy poverty, enhancing energy security, and aligning MFAB building emissions with climate targets. The project institutionalizes Resource Centres (RCs) or One-Stop-Shops (OSS) to provide support for energy-poor communities. It also creates Neighbourhood Energy Sufficiency Roadmaps (NESRs) to integrate renewable energy at the local level. Additionally, the project strengthens the capacity of Homeowner Associations to undertake energy-efficient renovations. ComActivate establishes multi-stakeholder policy and investment dialogues at both national and EU levels, ensuring that sustainable energy practices are prioritized. Through these interventions, the project addresses the energy and climate needs of vulnerable communities.

Effect on Target Groups/Communities

ComActivate primarily targets vulnerable energy-poor households in MFABs—often elderly individuals, low-income retirees, and single-parent households—and Homeowner Associations (HOAs). These households are energy poor, meaning they struggle to afford adequate heating, cooling, and electricity. Energy poverty forces them to live in uncomfortable conditions, affecting their health, safety, and quality of life. In Jozsefvaros, 34% of residents reported

water damage, and 25-26% had difficulties paying for gas or electricity. This financial strain leaves little income for essentials such as food, healthcare, or education, contributing to high levels of stress and reduced well-being.
ComActivate engages these communities by facilitating homeowner meetings, providing technical advice, and supporting discussions within HOAs. The project's OSS provides comprehensive financial and technical assistance, particularly for energy-poor households. This holistic approach ensures that residents not only benefit from improved energy efficiency but also experience a better quality of life due to reduced energy costs, improved living conditions, and greater financial stability.

Project Innovation

ComActivate introduces several innovations in tackling energy poverty and urban housing inefficiency. The project develops 3D neighborhood models to assess current energy use, potential savings, and renewable energy generation capacity for MFABs. This allows the creation of Neighbourhood Energy Sufficiency Roadmaps (NESRs) for energy-poor neighborhoods, providing a comprehensive framework for addressing energy inefficiency. By mapping neighborhoods and examining their energy-saving potential, the project challenges traditional approaches that focus on individual buildings. Instead, it promotes community-wide energy solutions, integrating both energy efficiency and renewable energy generation. This model addresses the root causes of energy poverty and aligns with EU climate targets, offering a scalable and replicable approach for other EU cities and beyond.

Global relevance of community-level impact

ComActivate's interventions directly address severe energy poverty, low renovation rates in MFABs, and the lack of renewable energy solutions. By institutionalizing Resource Centres (RCs) and developing NESRs, the project enhances municipal capacity to address these issues. Multistakeholder dialogues promote collaborative policy and investment solutions at both national and EU levels, leading to more effective and sustainable urban development practices.
SDG 7: The project aligns with several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including SDG7 (Affordable and Clean Energy) by improving access to energy-efficient and renewable energy solutions. It also supports SDG11 **SDG 11:** (Sustainable Cities and Communities) by facilitating the renovation of MFABs, contributing to urban resilience and sustainability.
SDG 13: Additionally, by reducing greenhouse gas emissions from buildings, ComActivate contributes to SDG13 (Climate Action). The holistic approach of improving entire neighborhoods ensures a scalable solution to energy poverty, enhancing the resilience of urban communities globally.

Moving Forward

Neighborhood-Level Interventions: Establish one-stop shops for the retrofitting of multi-family apartment buildings (MFABs) and initiate urban greening programs, including tree planting, to address heat stress and improve water efficiency. These interventions will enhance overall neighborhood resilience, making urban areas more sustainable and livable.
Funding Programs: Develop microfinance and subsidy programs to support households in implementing resilience and energy efficiency measures. These financial mechanisms should be designed to make energy-efficient and climate-resilient upgrades accessible to low-income households and communities.
Capacity Building: Educate residents on climate adaptation strategies and sustainable practices, including disaster risk reduction, participatory hazard mapping, and community-led adaptation strategies. This will empower communities to actively engage in and benefit from resilience-building efforts.
Policy and Advocacy: Advocate for policies that promote climate resilience and provide funding for adaptation projects. Engaging with policymakers at the EU, national, and local levels can help integrate these initiatives into public policy and secure necessary support and resources.

Visual Documentation