



# EMPTY BUILDINGS, GREAT POTENTIAL: ADAPTING NON-RESIDENTIAL VACANCIES FOR SOCIAL HOUSING IN POLAND

## 2025 Study Overview

This study, conducted for Habitat for Humanity Poland by the Institute of Urban and Regional Development and the Institute for Structural Research (2025), explores how unused non-residential buildings in Polish municipalities could be repurposed into affordable housing. It provides mapping and a thorough analysis of non-residential vacancies (e.g., schools, factories, offices, warehouses) and their potential for adaptive reuse to address housing shortages sustainably, respecting the climate and supporting those most vulnerables.

### Context and Rationale

Poland continues to face a shortage of affordable homes, while thousands of existing buildings—many publicly owned—remain empty or underused. Adapting these “sleeping assets” offers a faster, greener, and more socially beneficial path to expanding housing stock than new construction, aligning with circular economy and climate goals.

### Key Issues

- **Scale:** based on national datasets (BDOT, CEEB, SEIZBIL), there are over 117,000 empty or derelict non-residential buildings across Poland - about 2.5% of the total building stock.
- **Common vacant non-residential types** include industrial, service, and agricultural buildings, but also schools, cinemas, and religious sites.
- **Urban Case Studies** (Warsaw, Dąbrowa Górnicza, Rumia)
  - In Warsaw, around 1,600 non-residential buildings are unused; many already have heating and utility access, easing potential conversion.
  - In Dąbrowa Górnicza, post-industrial properties dominate; despite strong infrastructure, re-use faces high remediation costs.
  - Rumia shows a dynamic local market with short vacancy periods, linked to high housing demand.
- **Administrative & Legal Barriers**
  - Fragmented data systems and lack of unified national monitoring.
  - Complex ownership structures and heritage restrictions hinder conversion.
  - Lack of integrated strategies linking housing, social policy, urban planning, and environmental objectives at both national and local levels



- Promising Mechanisms
  - Social Rental Agencies (Społeczne Agencje Najmu) as intermediaries managing renovated stock.
  - Integration of CEEB and BDOT data for local mapping tools.
  - Funding examples: Polish Development Bank's Subsidy Fund, EU renovation grants, local revitalisation funds.

### **Key findings and recommendations:**

- Recognize and map vacancy potential and use data-driven planning: create a digitalized national platform with legal, ownership, and technical details to track vacant buildings and identify viable conversion projects.
- High adaptive potential of public/social infrastructure – schools, offices, hospitals, and dormitories are especially suitable for conversion due to their layouts and urban locations.
- Promote adaptive reuse in legal and financial frameworks as a climate-friendly alternative to new construction.
- Simplify procedures for reclassification and renovation, especially for heritage buildings.
- Encourage cross-sector partnerships: municipalities, NGOs, and private actors can co-develop affordable housing models.
- Combine housing and social functions: integrating housing with social services strengthens community life and ensures developments meet diverse local needs
- Prioritize central locations: adapting vacant properties for affordable housing in city centers revitalizes historic areas, improves urban aesthetics, and supports services. It also helps preserve residential and social functions in areas under pressure from high rents and commercial uses.
- Community engagement as a success factor – involving local residents in reuse processes improves acceptance, ensures social value, and prevents negative urban outcomes such as service gaps or unsuitable land use

The research demonstrates that adaptive reuse of existing non-residential buildings is both a housing and sustainability opportunity. With appropriate support-policy alignment, funding tools, and technical assistance-municipalities can transform neglected spaces into safe, affordable homes. Continued intersectoral engagement can catalyze the shift from isolated pilots to a systemic model of circular, inclusive housing development in Poland.