

Negotiating Change: Sustainability in Brandenburg



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In the RIFS podcast *Wandel verhandeln. Nachhaltig in Brandenburg* (“Negotiating Change: Sustainability in Brandenburg”), we explored how sustainability strategies are being implemented in Brandenburg.

From an affordable and ecological heat supply to new forms of peatland management: the state of Brandenburg and its cities and municipalities are taking action to boost the sustainability of their operations in a variety of areas. Inevitably, different interests collide in this process. How do stakeholders successfully negotiate to find solutions that are mutually acceptable? What challenges do they face, and what positive outcomes have already emerged?

This policy paper summarises our findings on how municipalities and projects in Brandenburg can chart a path to sustainability that is right for them and how the state of Brandenburg can support them.

Key findings

Enable participation from the start

Residents must be afforded opportunities to communicate their knowledge and priorities at an early stage so that solutions ideally suited to the local area can be identified. Policymakers can use digital tools and communication platforms as well as traditional methods to engage in closer dialogue with citizens and involve them in political decision-making.



Allow time to build trust

Building trust takes time. Reaching major objectives often requires many small steps.



Tangible benefits bolster acceptance

Actions on sustainability enjoy greater acceptance when people experience tangible benefits in their daily lives. Positive experiences of change are created when people participate financially in the energy transition — through lower energy prices, for example, or the levies paid to local authorities by renewable energy operators.



Engage constructively with opposition

Questions of identity — of lifestyles and world views — are often also relevant. But identities are always open to change — they are a process with an open outcome. Politicians shouldn't set sustainability targets too low because of concerns that identities could present obstacles.



Sustain and strengthen funding measures

The state of Brandenburg should continue to fund action on sustainability, for example by supporting change agents such as sustainability officers in local authorities, supporting digital innovations in rural development, and extending the “Brandenburg Package” adopted to mitigate the effects of inflation and the war in Ukraine on the delivery of climate solutions at the local government level. Funding allocation must be more precisely targeted while also allowing for greater flexibility.



Harness networks to support change

Care should be taken to fund action areas that are significant for creating awareness of sustainability issues and keeping them in the public eye — even when these areas are only of subsidiary importance in the state's sustainability strategy. Cultural institutions, for instance, can support productions and events in ways that uphold sustainability principles while also playing their key role in nurturing discourse about transformative change. They need resources to develop stronger networks and to work on and experiment with these topics.



A selection of transformation projects in Brandenburg



- 1 Hans Otto Theatre
Potsdam
Business owners on Linden Strasse
GFZ Helmholtz Centre for Geosciences
RBB
- 2 Kantoffel CSA
- 3 Havelknolle CSA
- 4 Neuruppin municipal utilities
- 5 Hennigsdorf municipal utilities
- 6 Prenzlau municipal utilities
- 7 Gut & Bösel organic farm
- 8 Uckerland
- 9 Zukunftsschusterei Bad Belzig & Wiesenburg/Mark
Bad Belzig municipal authorities
Stockhoff Agrar
- 10 Agrarbetrieb Rehfeld
- 11 Brüssow municipal authorities
Enertrag SE
- 12 Mühlenfließ
- 13 Treuenbrietzen



Embracing transformation despite challenges

The results of the recent state election in Brandenburg reveal a decline in citizens' confidence in the problem-solving capacities of the political parties committed to democracy.

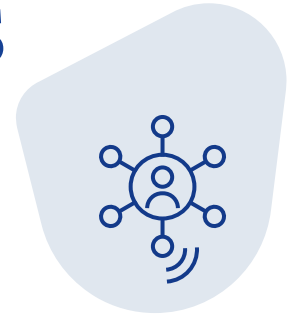
Some people are unhappy because they see government actions as not going far enough, others already feel overburdened by the same actions. Dissatisfaction has emerged especially in areas where the balance between costs and benefits strikes the population as unfair – in villages, for instance, that produce a lot of renewable electricity but still pay high power prices.

Despite these problems with implementation, the energy transition continues to enjoy strong support from the population⁽¹⁾. In east Germany, 54.4 per cent of those surveyed favour expanding wind power, 20.7 per cent are undecided, and only 24.9 per cent reject the expansion of wind power. Solar energy is even more popular: 77.9 per cent of people in east Germany favour its expansion. But local authorities say they need more support from higher political levels.

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Networks as drivers of change



Learning from other local authorities and forging links between stakeholders at all levels are crucial to the success of transformation projects. The state of Brandenburg should support networking, for example by encouraging local authorities to cooperate with stakeholders.

The Brandenburg Sustainability Platform, a communication forum and vibrant network for diverse sustainability initiatives in the state of Brandenburg, is a prime example of how this can be achieved. Up to now, it has been funded by the Ministry of Agriculture, Environment and Climate Protection and coordinated by the Research Institute for Sustainability (RIFS). With more than 180 members, its reach is considerable. The platform fosters opportunities for initiatives to exchange ideas with like-minded people in their own locality or their own thematic focus areas and to learn from each other. This enables them to recognise the specific opportunities and challenges they face and to communicate their concerns to relevant contacts in the spheres of research, business, local government, and the state government.

The Energieportal Brandenburg, an online platform, provides comprehensive information on the topic of energy. It aims to support citizens, companies and local authorities with the delivery of sustainable energy solutions. Other organisations are working on more narrowly defined sustainability issues – like the “toMOORow” initiative dedicated to creating new peatland habitats by rewetting. Ten business partners have formed a pioneering alliance within the framework of this initiative to pursue the aim of establishing value chains for paludiculture products.

Our interviewees in the Smart City Model Project towns of Bad Belzig and Wiesenburg (Mark) cited the founding of the “Coconat” as the reason for the regional success of the digital transformation. This “workation retreat” has brought many fresh ideas and people with an affinity for digital technology to the region.

As well as producing and supplying regional, seasonal and healthy food, community-supported agriculture initiatives (SoLawi in German, short for ‘solidarity agriculture’) can create spaces for encounters, networking, and education on sustainability. The idea here is that producers and consumers join forces and share responsibility for agricultural production. Producers receive the financial and planning security they need to run farms with good working conditions and to adhere to ecological standards. Consumers receive harvest shares and are invited to take part in group activities.

When public institutions such as day-care centres, schools or nursing homes cooperate with a SoLawi farm, this not only enables sustainable catering but also fosters awareness of healthy eating and sustainable agriculture.

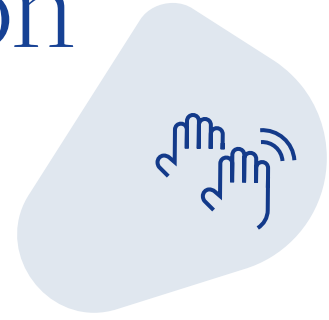
In the cultural sector, an increasingly important force in shaping perceptions of sustainability, networks for exchange on ecological challenges are only just emerging, driven by change agents and occasionally supported by the federal government (Green Culture, Program Zero). Promoting transformative change and protecting resources are key concerns in Brandenburg's cultural policy strategy. Achieving progress in these areas will require, above all, stronger support for efforts to link efforts across cultural institutions, as well as sufficient time and resources for the necessary work and experimentation.

The examples show that professional networking creates synergy effects that can contribute to responding flexibly to the regional challenges involved in the transformation. The state of Brandenburg should support this kind of networking, for instance by fostering cooperation between administrators and network stakeholders.

Lindow (Mark) — “The Town of Three Lakes” — is located in the district of Ostprignitz-Ruppin in Brandenburg.



Enable participation from the start



In a democratic society, sustainability and climate mitigation need the support of local people on the ground. They must be able to play a role in deciding on the right path for their community.

Involving residents at an early stage is important, since nobody likes being presented with a *fait accompli*; it is difficult to inspire people when little scope to influence developments remains. When local authorities take the views and needs of residents seriously, value their knowledge, and incorporate it into the decision-making process, it becomes more likely that the solutions found will enjoy the backing of the wider community.

It is important that the methods chosen to facilitate participation are a good match for the specific case. Sometimes providing information and teasing out specific options for action need to be the primary focus; in other cases, creativity and developing visions can be foregrounded. Participation and negotiation require forums where people with different values and attitudes can get to know each other and exchange ideas — SoLawi farms, for example. Spaces for such encounters have become increasingly scarce in rural regions.

Taking a flexible approach that supports multiple participation models is bound to pay off sooner or later, both because many local projects open up new sources of income, as the example below with energy transition projects shows, and because democratic culture is strengthened locally when citizens can play a more active role.

“Digital tools and communication platforms are well-suited for more closely involving people in political decision-making processes—and, more generally, for fostering exchange and dialogue.”

Tangible benefits bolster acceptance



The local impacts of the energy transition, such as changes to the appearance of the landscape, are mainly borne by the population in rural areas.

Since 2019, the Wind Turbine Levy Act (BbgWindAbgG for short) in Brandenburg has ensured that local authorities benefit financially from the expansion of wind energy. Operators of wind energy systems are obliged to pay an annual levy of ten thousand euros that is shared proportionately between affected local authority areas. In addition to this mandatory special levy in Brandenburg, Section 6 of the Renewable Energy Sources Act (EEG 2023) also deems a voluntary payment by operators of wind and solar energy systems to affected local authorities appropriate and sets it at 0.2 cents per kilowatt hour.

The underlying idea is that offering financial incentives to local authorities will foster broader acceptance of the energy transition and, ultimately, accelerate its implementation. A recent survey⁽²⁾ of mayors in east Germany has in fact shown that financial revenue for local authorities is the most important incentive for implementing the energy transition at the local level.

The case of Stadtwerke Hennigsdorf offers an example for how this can work. This local authority utility company in Hennigsdorf, close to Berlin, produces heat at seven locations from biomass, waste heat, solar thermal technology, and gas. Around 60 per cent of the company's district heating is already generated from renewable sources, and the aim is to bring this figure up to 100 per cent by 2045. A crowdfunding initiative for the storage system has enabled residents to share in the economic benefits of the project. They can invest in the project and receive a share of their investment back each year at an interest rate above the market rate.

Such examples should be highlighted throughout Brandenburg. While it is only very rarely possible for other local authorities to copy existing projects directly, seeing what is being achieved can nevertheless motivate them to seek solutions that meet their own specific requirements

“The underlying idea is that offering financial incentives to local authorities will foster broader acceptance of the energy transition and, ultimately, accelerate its implementation.”

Embrace the potential of digitalisation



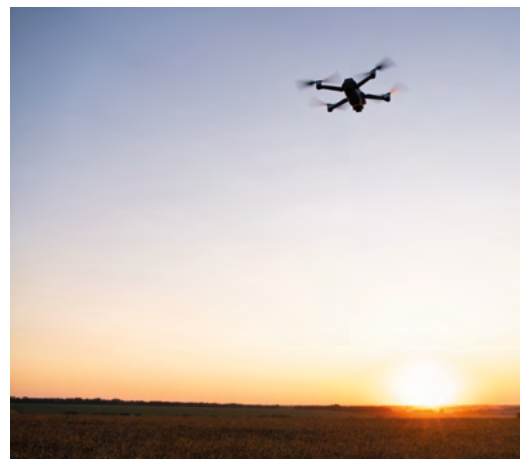
Deploying digital technology appears to promise efficiency and innovation, but it does not automatically advance the cause of sustainability. Two use cases in our project show how the digital transformation can be linked with regional socio-ecological transformation processes.

Citizen participation, including opportunities to participate via an app, is important in the intercommunal Bad Belzig and Wiesenburg (Mark) Smart City Model Project. Using digital monitoring to track factors of ecological relevance like soil moisture also links digital tech with sustainability. Data that is useful for planning and decision-making can be made available in this way, especially environmental, energy, and mobility data.

Advanced smart farming approaches and many digital innovations are in use at Agrarbetrieb Rehfeld, a farm near Kyritz in the Ostprignitz region. Digital assistance systems are, for example, in use to guide vehicles. This means that the huge machinery can cover ground with minimal overlaps and adhere strictly to land boundaries. This also has benefits for tillage management: water loss is reduced, and yields increase. Modern drone technology enables digital field analyses that can address problems such as ascertaining the optimal time for harvesting. Positive examples like Agrarbetrieb Rehfeld are sure to be of interest to other farmers and should be promoted by the state of Brandenburg.

The Bad Belzig and Wiesenburg (Mark) Smart City Model Project was initially funded by Medienanstalt Berlin-Brandenburg, the state media authority, and subsequently (since 2021, as the first Smart City Model Project in Brandenburg to receive such funding) by the Federal Ministry for Housing, Urban Development and Building (BMWSB).

“Smart farming” refers to the use of modern information and communication technologies in agriculture.



Allow time to build trust



Although local authorities throughout Brandenburg have had highly varied experiences with the sustainability transformation, all involved are quick to agree on one point — the importance of transparency and open communication with the public and interest groups.

Appropriate venues and formats for communication and suitable participation tools are needed to support the process of transformation and to counter obstructive populist stances.

In our podcast, representatives from the Smart City Model Project towns of Bad Belzig and Wiesenburg (Mark) and from pioneering Brandenburg local authorities advancing the energy transition and the heat transition, Hennigsdorf and Treuenbrietzen, all emphasised the importance of transparent communication — precisely because some time often elapses before the benefits of investing in a sustainable energy supply or in the digital monitoring of ecological data become noticeable.

People need time to develop trust in the transformation process. That means that starting with small steps is often the best option. Once initial successes have been achieved, a faster pace and more ambitious plans become possible.

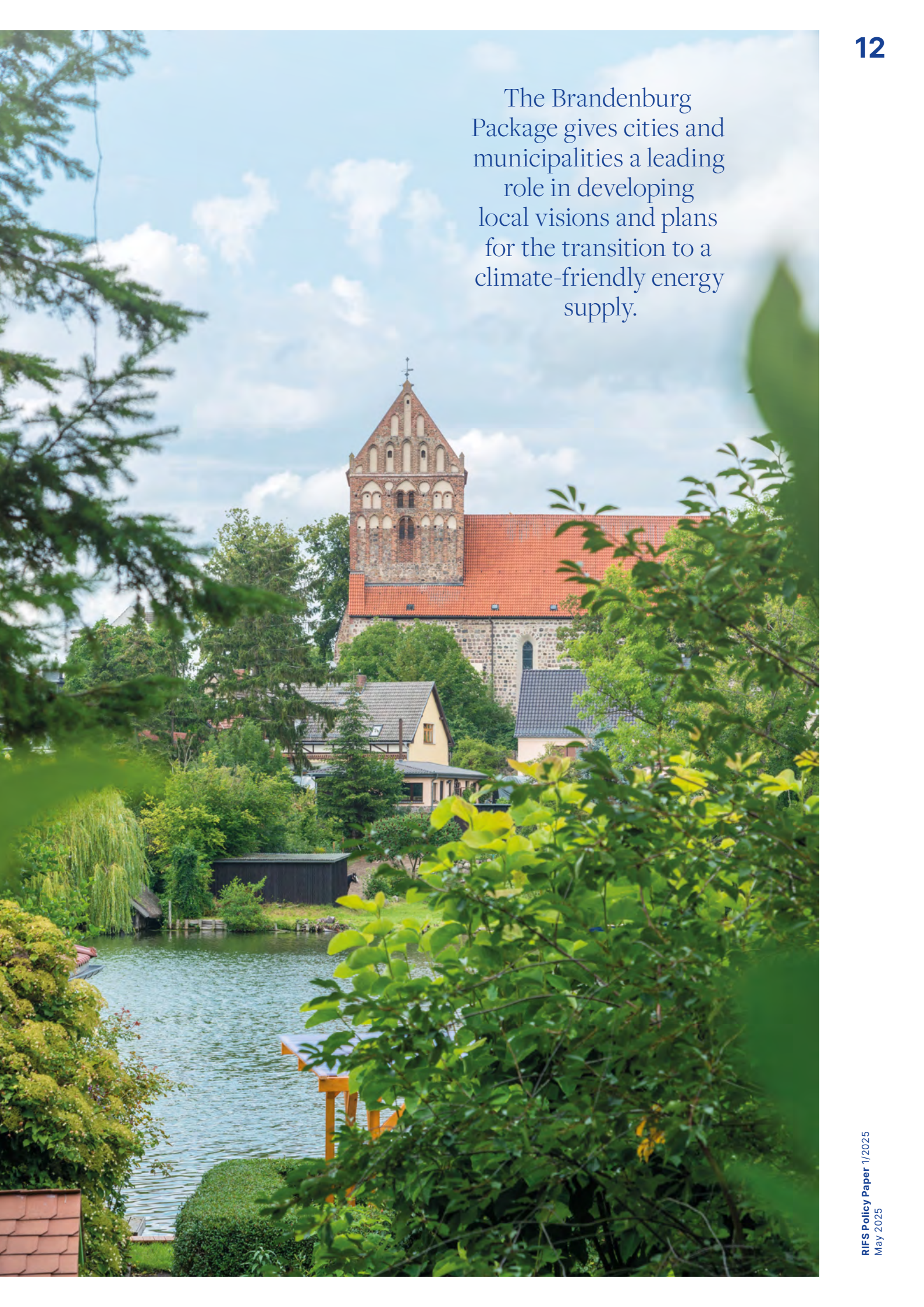
Sustainability policy cannot be reduced to its financial benefits — ideological attitudes also play a role. Surveys⁽³⁾ show that supporters of the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) and the Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance (BSW) hold opinions that differ fundamentally from the views of people who sympathise with other parties: they doubt scientific findings on anthropogenic climate change, and they see climate mitigation action as pointless. Their focus is on maintaining a lifestyle that includes a business-as-usual reliance on fossil fuels.

However, this data should not tempt policymakers to set low sustainability targets right from the outset. While identity shapes people's attitudes towards change, identity itself is also shaped by changes to the environment. The modal share of cycling is a good example, with the biggest gains in bicycle use occurring when cycling infrastructure is expanded. Educational measures can also make a useful contribution.

The importance of transformative change in general and the specific projects in which it is realised needs to be communicated transparently and regularly.

“While identity shapes people’s attitudes to change, identity itself is also shaped by changes to the environment.”

The Brandenburg Package gives cities and municipalities a leading role in developing local visions and plans for the transition to a climate-friendly energy supply.



Brandenburg's new state government should continue to pursue sustainability



Brandenburg's local authorities have ambitious climate mitigation objectives. To ensure that they do not have to shoulder the financial burdens alone, the Brandenburg Ministry of Finance and European Affairs launched the so-called 'Brandenburg Package' in 2024.

This policy gives local authorities a leading role in creating visions and plans for clean energy transitions at the local level. The state invested 21 million euros (2023) and 35.5 million euros (2024) in supporting the transformation and climate mitigation action of local authorities.

70 per cent of the funds have been disbursed at the level of municipalities and 30 per cent at the level of rural districts. The allocation of funding is also based on population figures. It is anticipated that the new state government will continue this successful programme. The existing positive list of sample projects eligible for funding should be extended to include participation projects.

The implementation and continuing development of the Climate Plan, which describes the state's roadmap to achieving climate neutrality by 2045, represents another lever the state government can employ. Action Area 8, which encompasses climate mitigation at the local authority level, should be made more specific. Strengthening the role of local authority climate mitigation officers would represent one step in this direction. As change agents, they are especially important for achieving transformative change and they need more resources and recognition, but also a stronger role in local authority planning processes.

WANDEL VERHANDELN.

NACHHALTIG IN BRANDENBURG

DER REPORTAGE-PODCAST



Technology and communication: Two sides of the same coin

The RIFS podcast “Wandel verhandeln. Nachhaltig in Brandenburg” (“Negotiating Change: Sustainability in Brandenburg”) illustrates very different facets of the sustainability transformation. They include new processes such as rewetting peatlands, new rules for parking cars, new technologies for heat and power generation, new approaches to the regional food supply, and new ideas for climate-friendly theatre. Although these examples are highly diverse, they all show that participation processes and transparent communication of advantages and disadvantages are absolutely vital for delivering each of these endeavours successfully. Especially in these times of tight budgets, keeping this necessity in mind to ensure the medium-term and long-term success of the sustainability transformation is of crucial importance.

Listen to the podcast here:
www.soundcloud.com/rifs_potsdam/sets/wandel-verhandeln-nachhaltig



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Research Institute for Sustainability (RIFS) at GFZ

The Research Institute for Sustainability (RIFS) conducts research with the goal of understanding, advancing, and guiding processes of societal change towards sustainable development in Germany and abroad. The Institute is embedded within the GFZ Helmholtz Centre for Geosciences and is thus part of the Helmholtz Association. Its research approach is transdisciplinary, transformative, and co-creative: RIFS cooperates with partners in science, political and administrative institutions, the business community, and civil society to understand the problems of sustainable development, identify appropriate solutions, and support their implementation in cooperation with relevant actors and affected communities. Its central research topics include the energy transition, climate change and socio-technical transformations, as well as sustainable governance and participation. A strong network of national and international partners and a Fellow Programme support the work of the Institute.

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