

CHANGES IN THE DEVELOPMENT PLANNING SYSTEM FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT UNITS AT THE MUNICIPAL LEVEL

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Abstract: The aim of this article was to highlight legislative changes in the process of municipal development planning, which will come into force on 1 July 2026. By introducing the obligation for services subordinate to single-person municipal executive bodies to draw up development strategies and for such documents to be adopted by municipal council resolutions, the amended regulations will force local government units to increase the level of integration of their planning documents with supra-local and provincial strategies. Strategies created earlier will have to be updated or redrafted in accordance with the requirements described in this article. There are 2,479 municipalities in Poland (as of 1 January 2025). This may entail a huge logistical and organisational effort for local governments, or it may become a catalyst for the consolidation of municipalities and counties in the joint creation of supra-local strategies. It may also lead to a lack of consistency in the development management system in relations between the municipality and the region.

Keywords: development planning, commune development strategy, local government, spatial policy, functional and spatial structure.

1. INTRODUCTION

At the time of writing this article, local government units at the municipal level were required to have a development strategy. According to the researchers who studied the topic, even entities with significant potential (cities with district rights) attempting to create integrated planning documents obtained models of the functional and spatial structure of cities that were most often incomplete, with gaps particularly concerning various types of infrastructure, land use, and natural connections. Many planned strategic goals and activities were missing (Maleszyk, 2024, 46). This conclusion implies negative forecasts in the context of the fact that the Act of July 7, 2023, amending the Act on Spatial Planning and Development and certain other acts, introduced the requirement for all Polish municipalities to prepare such planning documents, of which there were 2,479 as of January 1, 2025, according to the "Database of Local Government Units" maintained by



the Ministry of Interior and Administration. The deadline for a radical change in the municipal development planning system is July 1, 2026. The mandatory nature of strategy development may cause organizational and logistical problems for some local governments. Before commencing its development, a diagnosis of the social, economic, spatial, and climatic-environmental situation must be available, taking into account functional areas, in accordance with Article 10a, Section 1 of the Act of December 6, 2006, on the Principles of Development Policy. The primary goal of the diagnosis is to identify the most important characteristics, resources, potentials, and problems of the municipality and its surroundings for the purposes of planning long-term development policy (Kowalewski, 2023, 26). Another provision of the cited legal act introduces the obligation to evaluate the "relevance, expected effectiveness, and efficiency of implementation." Ex-ante evaluation is performed before the intervention begins. Its role is to provide an assessment of the relevance of the assumptions, their coherence, and the planned method of strategy implementation. This assessment is intended to improve the quality of the planned intervention (Tutaj, 2022, 7). A municipal development strategy must be consistent with higher-level documents, i.e., supra-local and provincial, which in turn are aligned with the national level. It is worth noting in this context that, pursuant to Article 10e, Section 1a of the amended Act of 8 March 1990 on Local Government, "a municipality may not develop a municipal development strategy if the municipality's territory is covered by a supra-local development strategy." The legislature has enabled local government units to undertake initiatives aimed at jointly developing supra-local strategies for areas within individual municipalities or counties. To this end, the option of establishing inter-municipal or district-municipal associations, associations, or inter-municipal agreements has been provided for.

2. METHODOLOGY

Well-established approaches to the classification of development concepts and theories assume that the multidimensionality of local development should be viewed in terms of the simultaneous activation of local spheres in social, economic, and environmental dimensions (Skica, 2020, 26). Therefore, when constructing realistic development plans, the economic potential of a municipality should be taken into account, as a stable tax base allows for a more effective response to challenges, while subsidy-dependent units are characterized by limited flexibility and low resistance to external influences (Żurawska-Bartosik, 2025, 69).

The Committee on Spatial Development of the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN) noted that by moving spatial policy from a study to a strategy, the legislator abolished the requirement for the competences of those preparing the studies, and spatial policy should be prepared by specialists with appropriate qualifications. Therefore, problems will only affect local governments after 1 July 2026. Until then, municipal authorities may be unaware of this (Sztando, Nowak, 2024, 12). If city managers begin to treat strategic documents as referenceable support, rather than merely a means of obtaining external funding, this could provide a response to identified local problems (Kowalewski, 2024, 176). Furthermore, research into the relationships between provincial and local strategy models and their impact on the entire spatial planning system may be crucial for both theoreticians and practitioners (Kafka, 2025, 287).

This article was prepared based on an analysis of legal acts, planning documents, and academic literature addressing the topic of planning, implementation, and reporting on

development policy, particularly development strategies developed by local government units.

It is also worth emphasizing the importance of interdisciplinary research in development planning. Technological advances may require the use of artificial intelligence (Noworól, 2024, 23; Sá et al., 2023; Deja et al. 2021; Haley, 2025; Roba & Moulay, 2024) in the preparation of planning documents and the conduct of related public consultations. This will mean the need to carry out nationwide dedicated educational activities, because without shaping open attitudes and the ability to acquire new competences, both technological and social, residents will not only not be able to fully benefit from modern solutions, but will also be exposed to the loss of social ties and the resulting loss of social capital, which is the basis for the development of every city (Kuzior, Sobotka, 2019, 116).

3. RESULTS

After July 1, 2026, planning documents defining the development principles of local government units will be subject to amended legal regulations. Municipalities that have already commissioned development strategies before this date will need to adapt the documents to statutory requirements and have them adopted by the appropriate authority. This adaptation can be achieved either by updating them or by preparing the strategy from scratch – in both cases, in accordance with the statutory procedure, so that they can serve as strategic documents for the integrated national development management system (SRG, 2021, 10).

The Act of March 8, 1990, on Local Government, in Article 10e, paragraph 3, precisely describes the process of developing a municipal development strategy. First, the strategic development goals of the municipality must be defined in social, economic, spatial, and climatic-environmental dimensions. The next step is to select the courses of action that will enable their implementation, specifying more precisely the indicators for measuring the achieved results. The strategy must include a model of the municipality's functional and spatial structure, as specified in Article 10e, Section 3, Item 4 of the aforementioned Local Government Act, which describes the target arrangement of elements such as the settlement network structure forming a coherent whole in a given area, the system of natural connections, the main corridors and elements of transport networks, and the main elements of technical and social infrastructure.

The next section outlines recommendations for shaping spatial policy. This includes the principles of protecting the natural environment and respecting resources (the Act lists "air, nature, and landscape"), cultural heritage, and monuments and contemporary cultural assets. Spatial policy also includes specifying the directions of changes in the land development structure, identifying needs for new development, the location of supermarkets and shopping malls, the location of energy-generating facilities with an installed capacity exceeding 500 kW, and projects that may significantly impact the environment. The next area encompasses the development of communication systems, technical and social infrastructure, and the location of so-called "renewable energy" ("RENEWABLE"). Key public-purpose investments and "production space" for agriculture and forestry, or the development of degraded areas requiring reclamation.

Further requirements for a proper municipal development strategy include "areas of strategic intervention identified in the voivodeship development strategy" and a list of areas of strategic intervention "key for a specific municipality," if identified. Strategy creators must also specify the scope of activities that the municipal government intends

to undertake in connection with the identification of these areas. The strategy must also specify guidelines for the preparation of implementing documents, as well as designate a financial framework and sources of financing.

The legislator also requires the appropriate adoption of the already prepared document. Article 10f. paragraph 1 of the aforementioned Act on Municipal Self-Government states that the municipal council adopts a resolution specifying the detailed procedure and timetable for developing the draft municipal development strategy. This also applies to the consultations provided for in Article 6. paragraph 3 of the Act of 6 December 2006 on the Principles of Development Policy, meaning not only with residents and local socio-economic partners, but also with neighboring municipalities and their associations, and the relevant director of the regional water management board of the State Water Management Company (Wody Polskie).

When a draft strategy is developed at the request of a single-member municipal body (commune head, mayor, or city president), it should be submitted to the voivodeship board for an opinion regarding the shaping and implementation of spatial policy. An opinion must be issued no later than 30 days later. Failure to issue an opinion will result in the municipal development strategy being deemed consistent with the voivodeship development strategy.

The next step lies with the municipal council, which should adopt the prepared and approved strategy by resolution. After adopting the municipal development strategy, significant changes in the key areas covered in the document, i.e., social, economic, spatial, or climatic and environmental, will require updating the strategy.

4. DISCUSSION

One of the priorities of municipal planning strategies is to create conditions for the sustainable development of the local government community. Under current Polish regulations, sustainable development is defined as "socio-economic development, which involves the integration of political, economic, and social activities, while maintaining natural balance and the sustainability of fundamental natural processes, in order to ensure the fulfillment of the basic needs of individual communities or citizens, both for the current generation and future generations." This definition is provided in Article 3, Section 50 of the Act of 27 April 2001 – Environmental Protection Law. While in the functional model, through the implementation of its own and delegated tasks, local government decides the extent to which individual spheres of human life, i.e., social, economic, and ecological, will be implemented, and whether the development of a given local government unit will be integrated and sustainable (Katola, 2011, 61), in practice, awareness of this impact is sometimes limited. The document "Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development," unanimously adopted by resolution of the General Assembly on September 25, 2015, in New York, sets out 17 sustainable development goals in item 79 (p. 38), encouraging member states to conduct regular and comprehensive reviews of progress achieved at the national and local levels. However, after analyzing Polish planning documents, researchers concluded that the cities' approach to sustainable development goals observed in reports was rather declarative in nature (Tomczyk, 2025, 289).

Sustainable development can be measured by ESG (Environmental, Social and Corporate Governance) criteria. Information regarding the first element, in the case of companies, is intended to enable stakeholders to assess the company's contribution to

the energy transition and the development of a circular economy. Primarily, this includes data on energy sources used, natural resource management, attitudes toward climate change, waste disposal, and environmental impact (Kostecka-Jurczyk, Marak, 2025, Csete & Baranyi, 2023; Halynskiy & Telizhenko, 2024; Lyeonov & Moroz, 2025). For both businesses and municipalities, a development strategy incorporating ESG factors is a long-term plan related to the mission and vision (the organization's purpose and long-term goals), taking into account stakeholder expectations and leading to the setting of operational goals related to sustainable development (Sikacz, 2024, 74). Research highlights the key role of startup incubators in promoting sustainable development and smart city programs by fostering innovation, enabling collaboration, and addressing urban challenges (Berniak-Woźny et al. 2025, Fresto, 2025, Zhou et al. 2025).

Based on the analyzed case study of the Zabrze commune, it was found that the consistent implementation of the assumptions of the planning documents translated into the implementation of subsequent investments and programs that improve the quality of life of residents and increase the attractiveness for entrepreneurs and the increasing number of tourists visiting the city (Kuzior, et al. 2025). Importantly, one of the key areas of mandatory disclosure for organizations in ESG reporting is stakeholder relationship management (Frączkiewicz-Wronka et al., 2024, 46). Therefore, it should be agreed that future research should focus on the implementation of the intended actions of cities described in their development strategies and the degree of their implementation within the assumed deadlines, as well as on the level of acceptance of these undertakings by city stakeholders (Kauf et al. 2025, 10).

5. CONCLUSION

For a significant portion of Poland's 2,479 municipalities, changes to development policy planning implemented from July 1, 2026, will require a review of existing planning documents or the updating of outdated or incomplete ones. Some local government units will likely opt for the creation of a new municipal development strategy that fully complies with legal requirements instead of updating it. It is possible that the legislative changes will allow for the consolidation of municipalities and counties in the joint creation of supra-local strategies. However, another scenario may come to fruition, taking into account the broader context of the national development management reform and including new voivodeship development strategies, which may be adopted after the adoption of municipal strategies, potentially disrupting the system's coherence. This state of affairs will result in a lack of vertical (region-municipality) and horizontal (between general plans and municipal/supra-local) coherence, a key requirement of the development management system reform (Salamon, Hołuj 2025, 131). Additionally, Article 131 of the Code of Administrative Procedure (Art. 131) provides for a lack of coherence between the vertical and horizontal lines of the development strategy, which is a key requirement of the development management system reform. Article 4, point 1 of the Act of 4 April 2025 amending the Act on Spatial Planning and Development and certain other acts specifies that when creating a general plan, the municipality's spatial policy, as defined "in the municipal development strategy or supra-local development strategy," must be taken into account, provided the municipality has such documents. Therefore, this provision allows a municipality to develop a general plan even though it will not have an adopted municipal development strategy or be covered by a supra-local development strategy.

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