

From Incentivizing to Enabling

A practitioner's guide to equitable climate action in cities

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The **INCLU:DE practitioner's guide** offers practical support for urban practitioners and policymakers to integrate social equity considerations into local climate action. Without careful design, climate measures can deepen existing inequalities, often benefiting wealthier households while leaving structurally disadvantaged communities behind. In a time of growing polarization, fostering a shared vision and a sense of collective ownership over the transition is more important than ever.

Based on insights from the [INCLU:DE project](#), the guide advocates for a fundamental shift in approach: Moving from merely *incentivizing* climate-friendly behaviours to actively *enabling* communities to shape and lead the transition. The guide is structured around overcoming three key challenges:



COMMUNITY INCLUSION CHALLENGES

Understanding structural barriers for disadvantaged groups



CONCEPTUAL CHALLENGES

Improving accessibility of climate programs through design



INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES

Ensuring that such approaches are mainstreamed across city administrations

The guide draws on good practice examples from the German cities of Bonn, Dortmund, Essen, Heidelberg, and Ludwigsburg as well as international frontrunners in the field of equitable climate action.



Chapter 1: Community Inclusion Challenges



Understanding the needs of diverse communities and addressing **accessibility barriers** they face is a key step to support inclusive participation in climate programs. Equity in climate action requires moving beyond 'one-size-fits-all' solutions to engage with the realities of specific underserved groups. Structurally disadvantaged communities often face multiple, overlapping barriers, including prohibitive upfront financial costs, and awareness gaps stemming from language barriers or lack of time and capacity.

To overcome such hurdles, the guide recommends that municipalities first strive to **understand the realities of their target groups** by collaborating with social service departments, using data-driven indicator approaches, and creating inclusive spaces for dialogue. **Effective outreach** is crucial and requires accessible, target-group-oriented communication using simple language and tangible examples to build long-term, trusting relationships as seen in Heidelberg's focus on the Hasenleiser district for its balcony solar program. Ultimately, cities can **act as enablers**, empowering communities to lead by offering funding and opening up decision-making. The City of Bonn is establishing local 'climate districts' to engage residents directly in their neighborhoods, while Bristol's Community Climate Action project exemplifies how delegating decision-making to a Community Leadership Panel can give residents a real voice.

Chapter 2: Conceptual Challenges



Equity can be embedded into climate measures by design. An **equity framework** can provide shared conceptual understanding and facilitate practical application in program and policy design, focusing on the key dimensions of:

- **Access:** Fair access to resources, services and infrastructures;
- **Participation:** Inclusive engagement, co-creation with local actors, and support for community efforts; and
- **Opportunity:** Promoting diversity in the workforce, offering training and support programs, and shaping a more inclusive local labor market.

A key example of this is Austin's Climate Equity Plan, which was developed collaboratively with community stakeholders to embed locally defined equity principles into all climate strategies.

Applying this framework means municipalities can make their climate programs more inclusive by **proactively addressing accessibility barriers**. Strategies include simplifying application processes, avoiding inequitable 'first-come, first-served' models that benefit those with more resources, and reducing financial hurdles for low-income households. For this target group, Ludwigsburg created a 'care-free package' for balcony solar installations, managing the entire process from purchase to installation (thereby removing upfront costs, and technical and administrative barriers). The City of Essen meanwhile revised its cargo bike subsidy to offer progressively higher support based on income.



Chapter 3: Institutional Challenges



Systemic barriers within municipal administrations can often hinder the strategic implementation of socially just climate action across city departments. Challenges include strained financial conditions and staff shortages, which limit the capacity for innovative, time-intensive equity work. Departmental silos can prevent the cross-cutting collaboration required to link climate and social objectives. Administrative complexities arise from adding equity components to programs. Finally, legal limitations, such as data protection rules or unclear regulations on social benefits, can unintentionally obstruct inclusive policies.

To tackle these institutional barriers, the guide proposes several promising approaches. These include obtaining strong **political support and strategic mandates** by integrating social equity into core municipal strategies like climate and urban development plans. It is also vital to foster inter-departmental collaboration through cross-departmental task forces and shared knowledge-building workshops, as exemplified by the City of Malmö, which uses a Climate Transition Team to build bridges between departments. Furthermore, building **strategic partnerships with civil society** and ensuring **clearer regulatory frameworks and funding support** at national and EU levels are key to enable and sustain local action. For example, Dortmund and Ludwigsburg plan to use the outcomes of their local projects in INCLU:DE to secure political support from their city councils, and Bonn's climate districts rely on strategic partnerships with trusted civil society actors to anchor climate action in community priorities.

CONCLUSION: A COMMITMENT TO EMPOWERMENT AND COLLABORATION

The **shift from an incentive-driven model to an empowerment logic** means moving beyond simply offering subsidies and instead creating the conditions for disadvantaged and underserved groups to actively participate in, benefit from, and shape the climate transition based on their own needs and realities. A key ingredient for this transformation is **ongoing collaboration**, with local residents, community organizations, diverse stakeholders, and across municipal departments. By building trust, institutionalizing feedback, and aligning climate and equity goals, cities can ensure that their climate programs lead to a future that is not only decarbonized but also fairer, healthier, and more liveable for all.



For more information on the INCLU:DE Project click [here](#).



To read the full practitioner's guide click [here](#).

