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10 ways cities can tackle energy security and energy poverty

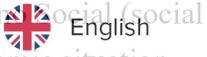
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This article is oriented toward issues faced in the Global North. [10 ways to boost urban renewable energy access](#) looks at related challenges for Global South cities.

In response to the twin crises of energy security and energy poverty, a group of cities met in May 2022 to discuss measures that could help to protect those most vulnerable to fossil-fuel price volatility and to reduce cities' exposure to it. Here, we outline ten actions they identified that can help cities to reduce energy poverty over the next five years, while planning for a rapid and complete [fossil-fuel phase out](#).

- 1. Target support at residents who are vulnerable to energy poverty.** Develop a multi-year fuel poverty action plan – like the one developed by [London](#). Provide direct financial support to low-income households by reducing social-housing rent or local taxes. Help vulnerable households known to local service providers to access any national schemes. Cities with municipally owned utilities can ban disconnections and provide vulnerable households with temporary cost and debt relief, as Barcelona has done (see box). Otherwise, lobby and partner with private utilities and national governments to create similar measures, and seek devolved power to identify further vulnerable people.

Barcelona's measures to protect energy-poor households



Support provided by Barcelona Energía, the city's municipal retailer, includes the Bon Social (social English discount) that reduces people's energy bills by 25% to 40%, depending on their economic situation, and a law that bans energy providers from cutting off the electricity of vulnerable people when they default on bills.¹ Vulnerable households are also exempt from paying the municipal domestic sewage tax.²

- 2. Retrofit public buildings and social housing, and transition them to renewable energy.** To reduce energy bills and promote energy independence, accelerate plans to decarbonise municipally owned buildings through retrofits and the production or purchase of local renewable energy, and help to catalyse local retrofit markets. Consider using subsequent energy cost savings to fund measures to reduce energy consumption by low-income households. Seoul does this through its Energy Welfare Public-Private Partnership Programme, where savings by municipal buildings and universities are used to pay for home energy-efficiency upgrades, as well as training programmes.³ New public buildings and social or affordable housing projects should be designed to minimise energy consumption and be powered by renewable energy sources. Milan's zero-carbon social-housing project is one example.⁴
- 3. Ensure all residents can access trusted energy advice.** Provide guidance to populations at risk of energy poverty about energy-efficiency measures that can be implemented cheaply and easily, and how to access available support. Convene partners and community groups to strengthen advisory services – such as London's Cost of Living hub – and reach at-risk groups by integrating advice into frontline services, such as health and social care.
- 4. Reduce wasteful energy use through campaigns.** Help to alleviate pressure on energy markets and bring down costs by promoting demand-side measures, such as indoor temperature limits, and the maintenance of heating and cooling equipment. Reducing average indoor temperatures in buildings (from over 22°C today) would decrease total European gas demand by 10 billion cubic metres for each degree of reduction – helping to bring down costs for all.⁵ Lead with municipal buildings, while encouraging businesses and wealthier residents to follow suit – ensuring vulnerable residents don't self-deny essential energy use. Amsterdam, for example, is lowering the base temperature by 3°C in its office buildings, using 15% less gas. The city is also working with commercial buildings to turn off the lights when empty.⁶ Also advocate for progressive energy tariffs that offer low-cost options for essential needs, and which reward energy savings above a certain threshold.

Japan's emergency energy savings campaign



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After the Fukushima nuclear disaster, Japan ran an extensive *Setsuden* (power-saving) campaign. By 2014, it had reduced its electricity consumption by 12% in industry, 10% in households and 4% in services compared with 2010.⁷ The measures included public campaigns to change private behaviour, mandate large buildings to decrease energy use, and changes in work schedules to reduce peak demand. It also led to the development of more efficient appliances.

- 5. Retrofit the ‘leakiest’ commercial and residential buildings as quickly as possible.** Target low-performing buildings with ambitious retrofit programmes, mechanisms that minimise upfront costs and reduce long-term financial burdens, and support for vulnerable residents. If your city has the powers to do so, force landlords to improve rental homes and make it easier for renters to complain. Require commercial buildings with the highest energy use to frontload retrofits and equipment upgrades, and investigate opportunities to legally restrict emissions, such as through air quality powers. *How to set energy efficiency requirements for existing buildings* explains more.
- 6. Accelerate the deployment of clean, affordable heating systems to phase out fossil fuels.** If the city has the powers to do so, ban new gas boilers as quickly as possible in new homes or when upgrading heating equipment. Informed by heat maps, accelerate the deployment of heat pumps and district energy connections. This will require programmes such as early scrappage schemes to accelerate natural replacement, as well as a scaled-up supply chain and installation capacity for heat pumps.
- 7. Unleash the untapped potential of decentralised power and demand-side flexibility.** Short-term grants covering 20% of installation costs of renewables deployment could double the pace of investment.⁸ Accelerate the deployment of decentralised energy through measures such as solar mandates on new buildings and renovations and financial incentives. Ensure low-income populations benefit through zero-upfront-cost installations or community energy programmes. Also develop plans to increase demand-side flexibility through smart control systems, storage solutions and the integration of smart electric-vehicle charging to smooth urban energy demand curves.
- 8. Reduce oil demand through affordable, sustainable urban mobility options.** Focus transport investment on public transit, walking and cycling. Consider freezing or reducing public transport fares, especially for those on low incomes, and restoring public transit services to full pre-pandemic levels. For more on how to change transport in your city, read *How to drive a modal shift from private vehicles to public transport, walking and cycling*. For more on reducing oil demand more generally, read the International Energy Agency resource *A 10-point plan to cut oil use*.
- 9. Advocate for immediate investment in good green job creation.** Energy-efficiency retrofits represent the single biggest job-creation opportunity for climate action in Europe and the most important action to protect residents from rising bills. In Italian cities, for example, nearly 600,000

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jobs could be created by 2030 by implementing deep efficiency and electrification projects in existing buildings, with an additional 274,000 jobs from the retrofit and electrification of new buildings.⁹

- 10. Act with a collective voice and pool resources to tackle the emergency.** Collaborations with other cities, partners and national governments are essential to measure collective fossil-fuel reliance and energy poverty levels, define critical actions in response and set up platforms for collective action, such as the joint procurement of renewable materials like heat pumps and solar photovoltaic panels. Cities should use their convening power to bring together civil-society organisations, businesses, unions and regional governments to accelerate progress towards inclusive energy policies. These coalitions should also clearly set out to national and international governments what is needed to accelerate their efforts. For more guidance and good examples, read our articles on creating demand for large-scale clean energy generation, partnering with neighbouring cities on planning, procurement and more, and advancing climate action through city diplomacy.



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