

Case study 4: Incentivising wooden construction / Promoting sustainable use of wood in buildings (France: national-level policy, Hamburg: city-level policies)

Description of the policy instrument

In the buildings sector, wooden construction is often cited as a promising way to reduce both embodied and operational emissions. Compared to carbon-intensive building materials, wood provides better insulation, causes fewer emissions and acts as a carbon sink. While the EU does not have an overarching policy in place to incentivise its use, several EU countries have developed their own, often for the purpose of supporting their domestic forestry economies.¹⁷² A United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) and Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) report¹⁷³ highlights policy examples focusing on the proportion of wood in buildings. For example, France's plan for the use of timber in the buildings sector aims to lift the barriers (technical, normative, regulatory and structural) to the development of bio-sourced materials in the buildings sector (p.76).

As part of the new 'RE2020' environmental regulations, from early 2022 France required whole-life carbon calculations for all new housing projects with an emphasis on the use of wood in construction. France has also mandated that all new public buildings must contain 50 per cent natural materials such as timber, hemp or straw. The measure came into effect in 2022 and applies to all new buildings, including those under construction for the 2024 Paris Olympics.^{174,175}

Besides national-level policies, there are some promising city-level initiatives driven by local governments. In the city of Hamburg, several regulations have been adapted to simplify the use of wood in construction projects. Since 2017, using wood in construction has also been supported financially. For residential buildings, every kilogram of wood used is rewarded with a grant of 30 cents, while non-residential buildings can receive 80 cents per kilogram of wood.¹⁷⁶ The fact that these per-kilogram figures can grow significantly in the case of multi-floor buildings, particularly those with sizeable wooden parts, makes it a strong incentive for builders to replace conventional construction materials with wood.¹⁷⁷

Why did it work or not work?

✓ A key beneficial contextual factor for the measures to incentivise the use of timber in construction in France is that it is well embedded within the broader political context¹⁷⁸ and aligns with France's Sustainable Cities plan, launched in 2009, alongside president Macron's drive for the country to be carbon neutral by 2050.

In Hamburg, the regulations align with other plans to promote wood as a sustainable construction material. An ambitious city-level climate plan,¹⁷⁹ and the 'Wood Construction Strategy', currently being developed by the Hamburg Parliament, both focus on identifying the pre-conditions for sustainably sourced wood use in construction.

Key learnings

While there is a promising trend to recognise the potential for climate change mitigation through the use of bio-based construction materials, such as wood, across the EU, large-scale deployment of advanced bio-based construction technologies remains unrealistic without a solid legal framework.¹⁸⁰

