



REDUCING  
HOUSING  
INEQUALITIES

# Urban planning strategies to reduce housing inequalities: the evidence from Poland

Katarzyna Leśniewska-Napierała, Tomasz Mikołajczyk

University of Lodz



Co-funded by  
the European Union



UK Research  
and Innovation



State Secretariat for Education,  
Research and Innovation SERI

The ReHousIn project is co-funded by the European Union. The UCL's work on this project is funded by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) under the UK government's Horizon Europe funding guarantee. The ETH work on this project is funded by the Swiss State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI) under the Swiss government's Horizon Europe funding guarantee. Views and opinions expressed are those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union, European Research Executive Agency (REA) and other granting authorities. Neither the European Union nor the granting authorities can be held responsible for them.

# Introduction: Housing Inequalities in Poland

- Rooted in historical developments, uneven urbanisation, and spatial growth.
- Fragmented housing system marked by disparities in:
  - ✓ Tenure structures
  - ✓ Affordability
  - ✓ Spatial segregation
- Reflect and reinforces broader social inequalities.
- Housing as a key lens for analyzing living conditions and wealth distribution.

# Urban Planning Strategies for Reducing Housing Inequalities

| RETROFITTING  | NATURE-BASED SOLUTIONS   | DENSIFICATION  |
|---|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Retrofitting refers to energy-related renovations of existing housing stock, including insulation, heating upgrades, and renewable energy integration.</li><li>• In Polish context, it has potential to reduce energy poverty and improve living conditions, but it also poses risks of gentrification and displacement, especially without tenant protections.</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• NBS include green roofs, street trees, community gardens, and blue-green infrastructure.</li><li>• They aim to improve urban liveability and climate resilience.</li><li>• They can lead to “green gentrification” if poorly managed, with unclear responsibilities for maintenance and fragmented land ownership.</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Densification involves building within existing urban areas to avoid sprawl and to make more efficient use of infrastructure and space.</li><li>• While it can increase housing supply and support compact city goals, it risks reducing green space and exacerbating social tensions.</li><li>• Its equity outcomes depend on how inclusive, participatory and regulated the planning process is.</li></ul> |

# Research Aim

Investigate how strategies like retrofitting, densification and nature-based solutions are implemented in Polish cities and to what extent they contribute to reducing housing inequalities.

## Research Questions

1. How are retrofitting, densification and NBS strategies currently being implemented in Poland?
2. What are the main barriers and challenges to implementing each of these strategies in the local context?
3. To what extent can these strategies contribute to reducing housing inequalities – and to what extent can they deepen them?



# Case studies

## Warsaw, Powiśle



## Warsaw, Stara Praga



## Pabianice



## Radomsko



# Focus Group Methodology

## ✓ Policy Makers

- National, regional, and local levels
- Included representatives from variously sized Polish cities
- Provided insights into institutional frameworks, regulations, and policy implementation

## ✓ Market Actors

- Construction and development companies
- Offered views on market dynamics, investment strategies, and intervention feasibility
- Included staff from local social housing associations

## ✓ Community & Cooperative Representatives

- Housing cooperatives and local community members
- Brought grassroots perspectives on housing needs

## ✓ Academia & NGOs

- Contributed expert knowledge and research-based analysis
- Offered critical and diverse viewpoints

# Challenges and opportunities in implementing retrofitting projects

- ✓ Fears of rent increases and exclusion of current residents after building modernization

*“There is a lack of concern for tenants who must be relocated during the renovation of tenement houses. After the work is completed, rents increase, and residents can no longer afford them. As a result, we are dealing with gentrification”*

- ✓ Retrofitting perceived as a technical action, omitting the analysis of social effects
- ✓ Need for social participation and education on pro-climate solutions



# Institutional constraints and management challenges

- ✓ Lack of regulations protecting residents from eviction after modernization (especially in municipal housing)
- ✓ Lack of coherence between housing policy and spatial planning
- ✓ Limited access to financing for housing communities and tenants
- ✓ The unclear legal status of buildings (e.g. old tenement houses, ownership disputes) blocks investments

*"Due to legal conflicts, we are unable to renovate many properties. Sometimes we must operate somewhat on the edge of the law to speed up certain processes"*



# Densification strategies:

## Efficiency gains and social considerations

- ✓ Goals and acceptability vary significantly across stakeholder groups and city size (differences in large cities and small and medium-sized ones).
- ✓ Conflict between intensification of development and preservation of green areas and social infrastructure.
- ✓ Too intensive development with a lack of public services („pato-development”).
- ✓ Local governments’ fears of social tensions in denser districts.

# Managing urban density

## ✓ Institutional barriers:

- the lack of a coherent housing policy at the local level,
- insufficient financial resources,
- the weakness of tools to support the public interest (no mechanisms requiring that part of the apartments be allocated for social purposes).

## ✓ Lack of integrated approach to planning – point actions, often without links to higher-level documents.

## ✓ Demand for simplifying investment procedures (developer lobbying).

# Key findings from densification

- ✓ Densification offers the potential for spatial efficiency and housing supply – but in practice it often clashes with social cohesion and the preservation of green spaces.
- ✓ Without integrated planning and accessibility safeguards, densification can reinforce inequalities rather than reduce them.

# NBS: Urban Development Dilemmas in Polish Cities

- ✓ Growing tension between parking needs, new housing, and greenery.
- ✓ Poorly planned parking causes residential chaos.
- ✓ Housing crisis pushes for fast development – often at the cost of green areas.
- ✓ Call for integrated urban planning:
  - Underground parking,
  - Vertical housing,
  - Green spaces at every stage.

# Managing Nature-Based Solutions

- ✓ General support for blue-green infrastructure (green corridors, retention ponds, wetlands).
- ✓ Land ownership is fragmented: Municipal, private, state agencies.
- ✓ Bureaucratic obstacles and slow implementation.

Key quote:

***“We have the concept, the money, and the need – but not the land”.***



# Managing Nature-Based Solutions

- ✓ Lack of clarity on who maintains NBS (municipality, housing cooperatives, private owners?).
- ✓ EU-funded projects often lack follow-up care.
- ✓ Neglect leads to deterioration.
- ✓ Participants of focus group call for:
  - Clear legal responsibilities
  - Consistent funding
  - Public awareness campaigns

# Recommendations

## Urgent Need for a Coherent National Policy

- Integrate housing, spatial planning, and climate resilience at all levels.

## Protect Vulnerable Groups in Retrofitting

- Prevent evictions and rent hikes; introduce inclusive co-financing for low-income tenants.

## Mainstream Nature-Based Solutions

- Define legal responsibilities; establish national guidelines and promote roles like *city gardeners*.

## Strengthen Institutional Coordination

- Align ministries, voivodeships, and municipalities; link retrofitting with revitalization and adaptation strategies.

## Smart Urban Densification

- Use tools like underground parking, vertical housing, and green roofs to preserve green spaces and resilience.

## Promote Civic Engagement

- Support participatory planning, co-management, and environmental education.



REDUCING  
HOUSING  
INEQUALITIES

# Thank you!

katarzyna.lesniewska@geo.uni.lodz.pl

tomasz.mikolajczyk@geo.uni.lodz.pl



Co-funded by  
the European Union

## Learn more:

[www.ReHousIn.eu](http://www.ReHousIn.eu)



[ReHousIn - Reducing Housing Inequalities](#)