

Where leading countries stand in the transition to renewable heating, road transport and electricity

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The sluggish rate of progress made in the energy transition is putting the goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions to zero by the middle of the century at risk. A comparison of four European countries shows that Denmark and Norway are making significant strides in transitioning to renewable heating and electricity. Norway is also advancing quickly in the road transport sector. The UK and Germany continue to face several challenges.

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To achieve climate neutrality, interim targets are crucial. In the electricity supply sector, for example, the energy transition must be completed by 2035. "Beyond emissions data, we need early warning indicators track infrastructure development and ensure political measures supporting acceleration," says Christof Schiller, governance expert at the Bertelsmann Stiftung and head of the Sustainable Governance Indicators (SGI).

A study by the Research Institute for Sustainability – Helmholtz Centre Potsdam (RIFS) and the Bertelsmann Stiftung applies this approach to the electricity, road transport, and heating sectors. It shows how close countries are to climate neutrality, where they face challenges, and how progress can be accelerated. Each sector sees at least one country making significant headway: Denmark and Norway lead in green electricity and heating, with Norway nearly completing its e-mobility shift. Germany and the UK, however, still lag behind. Decarbonization by mid-century is achievable, but only if policy targets, regulations, and infrastructure are better aligned.

Accelerating Germany's renewable electricity transition demands clear targets for expanding grids, boosting storage, and better aligning transmission goals. The UK requires similar targets, plus a plan to phase out gas production. Denmark, with its clear targets, could fully transition to green electricity by 2029. Norway has already decarbonized its electricity supply.

Germany's high electric vehicle costs and lack of charging stations hinder short-term e-mobility growth. The decline in combustion engine vehicles is currently not enough to ensure zero emissions by 2045. Denmark and the UK also need more consistent strategies, while Norway is set to reach 100% electric vehicle sales next year, thanks to early financial incentives. "Norway's progress in e-mobility is based on the early actions taken to provide financial incentives for emission-free vehicles," says Thorsten Hellmann, an economics expert at the Bertelsmann Stiftung.

In the heating sector, Germany must double heat pump installations to meet 2030 goals, while the UK lags further behind. Denmark excels in emission-free heating, having banned oil and gas boilers in 2013, and Norway expects full heat pump coverage by 2030.

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