

## **On the importance of an integrated national approach in addressing the impact of climate change**

*Leading Comment by Auditor General of Estonia, Mr Janar Holm  
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Over the years, the National Audit Office of Estonia (NAOE) has conducted various audits which have been directly or indirectly related to the adaptation of climate change and mitigation of its effects.

Estonia has no shortage of ambitious climate goals, which are formulated and specified in different strategies. However, as wordy as they are, these strategies are also general and quite vague, which does not facilitate the achievement of strategic goals and does not actually help solve complex problems in the climate field. The core issue is that all too often these ambitious strategies are not accompanied by sufficiently detailed action plans and are not supported by comprehensive and systematic national climate framework legislation.

Some common features have emerged in the climate-related audits conducted by the NAOE over the years.

### **1) The first problem: there is no integrated national approach and action plan for adapting to the impact of climate change and mitigating its effects.**

When auditing diverse topics from the perspective of climate change (be it biodiversity, land use, infrastructure, transport or energy), often one of the main conclusions is that the climate measures implemented and planned by the government and its ministries are too fragmented and do not constitute a systematic approach. Policy decisions are sometimes made not based on what is most effective and cost-efficient from the perspective of achieving climate goals, but rather more narrowly on sectoral (ministerial) choices, preferences and opportunities.

As I mentioned before, there is no shortage of climate-related national policy documents in Estonia. Strategic documents do exist – each more grandiose and solemnly worded than the last. But this situation is both deceptive and distracting. Unfortunately, there has been no clear agreement on or formulation of how these ambitious climate goals are to be achieved. There is a lack of concrete action plans with milestones, performance indicators and comprehensive measures. For example, the expected contribution of economic sectors to the fulfilment of greenhouse gas emission reduction goals has not been determined. In practice, this leads to a situation where society (including decision-makers and entrepreneurs) does not understand how fast each economic sector should move or how much it should reduce its emissions.

One of the most difficult challenges has been to achieve comprehensive cooperation between ministries and governmental bodies. Without cooperation, the implementation of coherent national measures is unfeasible. Since the effects of climate change are manifest in many different areas (e.g. health, rescue capacity, land use, the economy, the natural environment, food security and the bioeconomy), cooperation between and the contribution of various economic sectors are needed to improve resistance and adaptability to climate change and to reduce vulnerability to its adverse effects. The NAOE has emphasized the need to nominate the institutions responsible for the fulfilment of the goals. We have also seen the need to develop comprehensive and systematic national climate framework legislation and to consolidate the planning of resources needed to achieve climate policy goals.

### **2) The second problem: Inadequate collection and insufficient use of data. Potential for collecting and using the data needed for making knowledge-based policy choices and ensuring the cost-effective use of resources is going untapped.**

It is on-trend to talk about data societies and data-based state governance, but based on the experience of Estonia it must be admitted that climate-related data are far from being used sufficiently to make climate policy decisions, or to develop appropriate measures to address the problems in the most effective and efficient manner.

To implement appropriate and effective climate policy measures, it is necessary to regularly collect sufficient and accurate environmental data, comparable over the years. Only then can we understand and explain the extent of specific problems and establish meaningful links with economic and social domains. Cost-effective policy choices hinge on complex data analysis, wherein there is an excellent opportunity to apply the capabilities of artificial intelligence, which is developing at an astounding rate.

In conclusion, in order to help us take action to successfully combat climate change and its impact, I see it as the role of an SAI to assess whether the state has a suitable strategic framework for climate goals and whether national climate framework legislation establishes a clear pathway to achieving these goals in practice. It is also important to emphasize the need to leverage the power of data in planning and execution of state's climate policies.