

Level(s) Specimen Specialised Article

For Public Authorities and Decision-Makers



Level(s) – a sustainable buildings framework for all

Europe at the forefront of the green transition

The EU aims to lead by example on the issues of sustainability, circularity, and zero carbon emissions. Further fuelled by the health and economic effects of the COVID-19 crisis, **2020 is proving to be “the” year for Europe’s green transition.**

The EU Green Deal, launched in December 2019, set out the EU’s climate-neutral ambitions. The new Circular Economy Action Plan, launched in March 2020, sets the agenda for sustainable growth, making the EU economy greener while maintaining its competitiveness and securing new rights for consumers.

In the meantime, the European Commission has launched the Renovation Wave, its strategy for decarbonisation and clean energy systems, and is preparing roadmaps for further sustainability actions like the EU Climate Law and the Sustainable Europe Investment Plan. **And, now, it has officially launched Level(s).**

Any project to create sustainable buildings involves an analysis in depth of all built environment project stages and across the building chain. Architects, designers, manufacturers, engineers, builders, investors, property developers, property managers (not to mention future tenants) – all of them have their own sustainability needs and challenges. All of them have their own contribution to a building’s carbon footprint, and we cannot modernise or improve buildings without the full participation of all actors in the built environment. With that in mind, **Level(s) is the first-ever European Commission framework for improving the sustainability of buildings, living by the values of flexibility, resource efficiency, and circularity.**

Carbon-neutrality is one of the biggest keywords in EU environmental policy. It is therefore no wonder that buildings and the construction sector are mentioned in the EU Green Deal as one of its areas of action. The Circular Economy Action Plan takes this one step further by mentioning Level(s) as a framework for construction and buildings to increase sustainability, with important implications for areas such as Green Public Procurement.

Level(s) also underpins several actions in another important new European Commission initiative, the Renovation Wave. A refurbished and improved building stock in the EU will have to be based on life cycle thinking and circularity principles and this is where Level(s) can support these actions.

Renovation of both public and private buildings is an essential measure in this context, and has been singled out in the European Green Deal as a key initiative to drive energy and resource efficiency in the sector and deliver on objectives.

“The concept behind the Level(s) framework started to take form once the building sector became a key area of action for the European Commission in terms of resource efficiency and circular economy”, recounts **Kestutis Sadauskas, Director for ENV.B – Circular Economy and Green Growth at the European Commission’s Directorate-General for the Environment (DG ENV)**. *“We realised that, to truly achieve sustainable transformation in the building sector, we need a common language that not only could be used across the building chain, but also help with data comparison across different countries.”*

So how is the Level(s) framework different from other certification schemes or assessment tools?

To start with, Level(s) is not a certification scheme. It does not come with benchmarks. It sets out a methodology for how to work with a limited number of indicators, which together represent the key aspects of a building’s sustainability performance over the life cycle. In this way, it provides a common language, to inspire other initiatives to align themselves with. Level(s) was designed to encourage users to think about the whole life cycle of a building, providing a basis for quantifying, analysing and understanding the life cycle. It goes beyond a building’s service life and value by including elements that happen before and after this stage, also providing indicators for recovery, reuse, and recycling of materials. When using Level(s), the user is sovereign: they choose how to implement Level(s), adapting it to their needs, pace, and understanding of the framework.

A Level(s) journey can start by implementing standard data as an entry point, and later working with more specific data items that even better represent the building project, as familiarity with the framework increases.

Level(s) can be used also for a project not undergoing certification, but which simply wants to start the sustainability journey and wants to reflect on objectives linked to sustainability performance from the beginning of a project and throughout, to understand the impacts of different design options.

Moreover, having been directly involved in the development of the Level(s) methodology, many existing certification schemes are currently looking at how to align themselves with the common language that the Level(s) indicators provide. In this way, Level(s) is also likely to impact certification of buildings.

“The end goal is that, by using Level(s), users are investing in a cost-effective framework that helps them future-proof their building projects in line with circular economy, whole life carbon performance and other green policy goals”, explains Kestutis Sadauskas. *“We know from the Level(s) testing phase that the building sector sees the common language and metrics, and the fact that different stages of the building chain came together to find a common solution, as an important added value of this framework. In a way, we are not just harmonising data and metrics: we are also harmonising the built environment’s vision of a sustainable future.”*

All in all, Level(s) is perfectly placed to help the building sector transition into a sustainable future.

Developing Level(s) – testing phase testimonials from public authorities and decision-makers

The Level(s) framework started being developed back in 2015 by the European Commission. It started as a great collaboration between a large number of building professionals, and it benefitted from pan-EU knowledge and expertise. The publication of the Level(s) beta version in 2017 marked the beginning of the framework’s testing phase. Between 2017 and 2019, the Level(s) indicators were tested by more

than 130 projects (both residential and non-residential, in new built and renovation) in 21 EU member states.

Among the Level(s) testing and reporting audiences were public authorities and decision-making bodies – who were particularly keen to assess Level(s)' added value to sustainability, circularity and quality of life as a tried-and-tested European Commission framework.

The German Sustainable Building Council (DGNB) was deeply involved in the Level(s) development and testing phase. From a theoretical side, the DGNB provided input on the development of the framework by discussing it with the European Commission and with other stakeholders. From a practical standpoint, they also supported users applying Level(s) indicators and methods to their practices and projects. The DGNB also incorporated Level(s) into their own certification scheme.

A good example of this was the Level(s) pilot testing on the KIEXC training centre in Škofja Loka (Slovenia) through the DGNB certification. Resulting from a collaboration between Knauf Insulation and the Slovenian Ministry of the Environment and Spatial Planning, the KIEXC training centre was the first building in Slovenia to receive the DGNB platinum certification.

*“Level(s) reassured our choice of methods and indicators”, stated **Anna Braune, Director of Research and Development at the German Sustainable Building Council (DGNB)**. “Public authorities can use Level(s) in their procurement practices. This framework offers the potential to influence decision-makers and policy-makers to do the right thing and look beyond energy.”*

In Sweden, Boverket – The Swedish National Board of Housing, Building and Planning spread the word about the Level(s) testing phase and encouraged companies to sign up for the pilot test activities. *“The Swedish industry has a lot of initiatives and activities going on when it comes to sustainable buildings. For instance, we are currently introducing new legislation regarding the climate declaration of new buildings in Sweden, and it is important to follow the European work in this area and to use the same language and methods as much as possible.”*, explains **Kristina Einarsson, Environment and Climate Expert at Boverket**.

The Level(s) framework was also tested in Southern Europe, often through Interreg projects and within the context of the Common European Sustainable Built Environment Assessment (CESBA).

“In the context of the CESBA MED: Sustainable Cities project, I coordinated the test of levels on 18 public buildings in cooperation with regional and municipal authorities in Italy, France, Spain, Greece, Croatia, and Malta.”, recounts **Andrea Moro, President of the International Initiative for a Sustainable Built Environment Italia (iiSBE Italia)**. *“The final recommendation, emerging from these tests, was to make the calculation of indicators as simple as possible to provide easy access to the necessary data for the characterisation of indicators. Overall, this experience showed us that Level(s) can play a key role in facilitating the integration of sustainability indicators in policies and policy instruments, increasing their success and real impact.”*

“With Level(s) helping to define metrics and methods, people can now talk about the targets instead of discussing the “best” calculation or assessment methods.”, adds Anna Braune. *“We must define specific targets for the indicators, but sooner or later Level(s) will be so widespread that it will lead to cities, states, and regions “competing” to see who has the most ambitious targets.”*

The results and findings from the Level(s) testing phase have been crucial in developing the final version of the Level(s) framework, which will ensure a streamlined assessment and reporting process. It will also facilitate a quicker generation of comparable data, thanks to its provisions for knowledge-sharing across countries, companies, and throughout all stages of a building project.

“It has been fantastic to witness the enthusiasm of the building sector, with companies and authorities from start to end of the building chain, in testing and promoting Level(s) as a reliable, future-proofed

framework”, remarks Kestutis Sadauskas. “It bodes well for a sustainable future in the building sector, and for the adoption of Level(s) across Europe now that the final version of the framework has been launched”.

Getting involved

Following the launch of the Level(s) framework, it is important to spread the word and facilitate access to this framework for all building sector actors, big or small. So what is the best place to start for those public authorities and decision-makers wishing to engage with Level(s)?

The DGNB believes that widespread adoption of Level(s) will be primarily motivated by their desire and commitment to contribute to a greener future. *“First, public authorities and decision-makers must say ‘Yes, we want to decarbonize our building activities over whole life cycle and promote low carbon buildings today. Yes, we want to contribute to the shift towards a real circular economy, and we will do this by securing healthy and comfortable spaces, resilient and adaptable for future climate, without excessive future costs at low risks”, says Anna Braune. “Once they commit to these objectives, they have to use Level(s) – or tools which incorporate Level(s) indicators – on their own activities, and include it as a basic requirement for permits or funding attribution for all cities, regions, and countries.”*

For Boverket, a strong commitment to harmonisation of metrics and language will be key to involving their stakeholders. *“It is important that we try to harmonize the work on sustainable buildings across Europe, for example through the development of new regulation.”, remarks Kristina Einarsson. “Level(s) is a very good framework to provide this harmonisation, and a valuable source of information”.*

“To deliver a high-impact instrument to raise the sustainability of buildings, it is fundamental to set reliable, verifiable and measurable targets. In this way, a clear point of reference is defined for all the stakeholders and you can guarantee the achievement of expected results.”, concludes Andrea Moro. “Level(s) provides a trustworthy set of indicators, which were created through a transnational cooperative involving the main actors in the construction sector. By adopting Level(s), public authorities are guaranteed to have European Commission tested, high-quality indicators in policies and policy instruments”.

Public authorities and decision-makers can also learn more about Level(s) through the upcoming Level(s) Stakeholder Briefing Sessions. This fully digital series of events was developed to better inform building sector entities about the benefits of Level(s), and to help new users as they begin their Level(s) journey.

The Level(s) framework was officially launched on 15 October 2020. To know more or get involved in this European Commission led framework for sustainable buildings – including the upcoming Level(s) Stakeholder Briefing Sessions - visit https://ec.europa.eu/environment/eussd/buildings_new.htm or contact Ms Josefina Lindblom, leading the work on Level(s) at DG ENV, at ENV-LEVELS-TESTING@ec.europa.eu.