

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on ‘The role of regional and local authorities in promoting sustainable water management’

(2011/C 259/03)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- calls for EU policy guidelines to be strengthened and new EU regulatory instruments to be adopted that set out clear, precise efficiency targets for each water dependent area of activity, to be defined at river-basin level by each Member State;
- asks for the Commission’s Water Efficiency in Building initiative to be integrated with the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive, whilst leaving the possibility to target selectively geographical areas with water shortages;
- calls for legislation which defines uniform, Europe-wide levels of quality which will ensure appropriate recovery and reuse of water resources for each different sector of activity, while taking account the different characteristics of the Member States;
- urges regional and local authorities to see conscious risk management as the most effective instrument to respond to extreme events. Future investments aimed at curbing their effects should be channelled primarily into building green infrastructure;
- highlights the pivotal role regional and local authorities have in collecting environmental data and proposes that the current European Drought Observatory be converted into a European water observatory;
- proposes, not least in relation to the requirements ensuing from implementation of Directive 2000/60/EC, that sustainable water management should have a specific, verifiable target for 2020: 1) a 20 % increase in water-saving in all sectors of use; 2) a 20 % increase in the number of water courses being renaturalised, *inter alia* in order to reduce flood risk; 3) a 20 % increase in the volume of water re-used and/or recycled in farming and industry; to that end, calls for direct involvement of the Covenant of Mayors.

Rapporteur	Mr VENDOLA (IT/PES) President of the Puglia Region
Reference document	Hungarian Presidency letter of 29 October 2010

I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

General points

1. welcomes the fact that the Hungarian Presidency-in-office of the EU has consulted it on *The role of regional and local authorities in promoting sustainable water management*, and hopes to be more widely involved in the future in policy and planning decisions related to sustainable water management as the body representing the institutions that are best placed to implement them and to protect natural resources in general, given the role of these institutions in defining sustainable development models;

2. endorses the UN Resolution of 28 July 2010, which states that water is a universal, inalienable human right that is a natural, logical extension of the right to life: 'recognises the right to safe and clean drinking water and sanitation as a human right that is essential for the full enjoyment of life and all human rights' ⁽¹⁾;

3. believes that water resources, as a limited asset of humankind that is essential to the survival of living beings and natural ecosystems, should not be made subject to market principles or competition rules, and that it is the conscious responsibility of every human being to respect and protect this asset for future generations;

4. recognises the eco-ethical dimension of water and, therefore, the need for respect for the intrinsic right of every moral community, whether living or not, to have their water needs met, and believes to be essential the definition of participatory models for water management – which is a key public service of general interest – that ensure full sustainability and consistent integration with all other policies having sustainable development as an objective;

5. notes that local and regional authorities are responsible for the management of public spaces. This means that they have responsibility for policy areas that are relevant for sustainable water management, including spatial planning, infrastructure, mobility policy, licensing, agriculture and landscape

management, adaptation to climate change, flood protection and tourism. Local and regional authorities are also responsible for synergies between these policy areas, and they thus, by definition, work in an integrated way, taking into account a territorial planning context, that also implies an adequate social and economic development of the regions. Many of them, in several European countries, are responsible of the public supply of water resources and of management of the wastewater, too. It is therefore vital for local and regional authorities to be closely involved in future European water policy;

6. agrees that there is a need for the EU to launch a new European period of action on water, calling for local and regional authorities to be directly involved in redefining, coordinating and harmonising existing directives and strategies (*Water Framework Directive (WFD)*, *Groundwater Directive*, *Floods Directive (FD)*, *Water Scarcity and Droughts Strategy*) and those being drawn up (*EU climate change adaptation proposals and goals*), as from the drafting period for the *Blueprint to Safeguard European Waters*, so as to ensure wide public participation;

7. believes that greater pressure from human action on water resources, the effects thereof and the factors exacerbating them (disappearance of ecosystems, loss of biodiversity, reduced soil water retention capacity, soil degradation, climate change, etc.) call for management and protection measures to be adopted that involve the entire spectrum of EU policies, concerning water, energy, agriculture, transport, waste, tourism, and fighting and adapting to climate change, moving from a sectoral to a joined-up approach;

8. calls on the Member States, with the support of regional and local authorities, to draw up a clear water pricing policy with due regard for national and local prerogatives, taking into account differences in geography and climate together with the related social and environmental aspects. This policy should be based not just on the polluter pays principle, which already features in the WFD (2000/60), but also, where appropriate and with progressive pricing, on the over-user pays principle, as this is the way to restore lost environmental availability. A measure of this kind, which, if flanked by an appropriate environmental education campaign, leads users to be more aware of their water, also with regard to the use of highly polluting products (such as medicine, cosmetic and pesticide residues etc), and could give rise to generally more efficient and effective water management, not least from a financial perspective;

⁽¹⁾ UN Resolution A/RES/64/292 of 28.7.2010.

9. recognises that scientific knowledge and technological innovation play a key role in defining cutting-edge water cycle management practices, which are a pre-requisite for planning new infrastructure measures. At the same time, research and innovation can be significant drivers of growth and jobs in green industry;

10. believes that the water issue needs to be situated in a broader context: it covers not only water scarcity and floods, but also other known water-related threats resulting from climate change, such as precipitation intensity and rising sea levels as well as hitherto unknown ones;

The water cycle as the focus of climate change adaptation policies

11. points out that to date, in the climate change debate, water has yet to be defined as a fundamental part of the ecosystem whose preservation and protection is a prerequisite for all measures to fight and adapt to climate change, and confirms the desire of regional and local authorities to play a responsible, proactive part in defining and implementing mitigation measures ⁽²⁾;

12. is aware that the effects of climate change on water budget will have significant social and economic implications for the EU as a whole, with more severe, frequent extreme events. An integrated, mutually-supportive approach is needed to curb this, involving the entire spectrum of Community policies, over and above the geographical, economic and social aspects of the entity or sector concerned. To this end, European, national and regional scientific cooperation needs to be stepped up in order to investigate the cause and effect relationship that makes climate events (floods and drought) in Europe so extreme;

13. is aware of the different effects that climate change produces in terms of water resources within the regions of the EU. This results in significant differences between the regions in the European Union in terms of the problems they experience with water, with regard to quantity (excess or scarcity) and the times of the year when problems arise (spring floods or summer droughts). Adaptation measures, that have to take into account the different geographical, economic and social characteristics of the EU regions, should be flexible and launched with rigorous implementation of the subsidiarity principle ⁽³⁾;

14. is aware that climate change will alter and shape water availability in Europe's regions, although to varying degrees, and

will as a consequence generate more disputes between the various users and, quite probably, an increase in migration, particularly in the outermost regions, which are located in very vulnerable areas;

15. considers, when assessing the EU's endeavours in global policies to fight climate change caused by human action, that proper management of water resources is an essential, effective instrument when it comes to continuing to reduce CO₂ production and promoting sustainable growth models that encourage the efficient use of natural and energy resources;

16. believes that identifying reliable procedures for estimating water availability is a key rational process in the proper definition of European water and environment policies, being aware of the need to integrate results from Europe-wide climate models and results from regional and local water models;

17. calls on the EU and the Member States to increase production of green power, making every useful endeavour to set up hydroelectric plants with zero CO₂ emissions, where the morphological, economic and environmental conditions, in particular aquatic ecology, and the requirements of the Water Framework Directive and the navigability of the bodies of water allow;

18. calls on the EU and the Member States to take the necessary steps to limit thermal pollution of water and to reduce as far as possible the use of water as a coolant in industrial and energy plants, especially where this causes problems either with the availability of water, or with biodiversity or public health;

19. believes, with reference to measures to temper the effects of water crises, that only where demand more or less matches availability can new investment in a region's water infrastructure be considered an adaptation measure, in that various new technological or management options appropriate to the local conditions can help increase availability without the need to resort to further abstraction;

20. is aware of the role that regional and local authorities have to play to raise awareness of the key nature of the water cycle in the determination of water management strategies, with a view to identifying effective, consensual solutions for climate change adaptation and encouraging exchange of expertise among the various local entities;

⁽²⁾ CoR Opinion on the White Paper – Adapting to climate change: Towards a European framework for action, CdR 72/2009 fin.

⁽³⁾ White Paper – Adapting to climate change: Towards a European framework for action, COM(2009) 147 final.

A balance between water supply and demand that respects environmental needs and is in line with the WFD

21. believes that planning of initiatives to improve water resource management must of necessity be a process with multiple goals which takes into account the variety of stakeholders directly or indirectly concerned and be based on the principles of the public nature of water resources, fairness, environmental quality, public health, water's social role, and security for society;

22. is aware that an appropriate use of water resources that respects the environmental ethic can be achieved by implementing best practices for water abstraction, distribution and use, where available and economically feasible, using a robust, flexible management model to strike a balance in the medium term between environmental demands and the demands of economic and social development;

23. calls for EU policy guidelines to be strengthened and new EU regulatory instruments to be adopted for the sector that set out clear, precise efficiency targets for each area of activity (domestic, industrial, agricultural, fish farming, aquaculture, tourism and hydroelectric power), to be defined at river-basin level by each Member State;

24. believes that water use planning in the form of River Basin Management Plans (RBMP), even with different priorities in terms of timing in line with the individual situations of the Member States, is part of an indispensable process whereby regional and local authorities can generate synergies in a spirit of mutual support and sustainability, in line with the WFD, achieving the greatest possible number of environmental functions without sacrificing long-term replenishment capacity or diminishing accessibility for legitimate uses and uses needing protection;

25. believes that water transfer between river basins, with priority given to transfer within Member States, must be seen as part of an overall regional management strategy to be drafted in line with hydrological, hydrogeological, environmental and socioeconomic sustainability and as seeking to ensure fair distribution of a limited commodity and must be the subject of in-depth impact assessments;

26. considers, with a view to drawing up appropriate strategies to adapt to the growing demand for water and specific regional situations, that familiarity with water systems in their entirety is essential, from the hydrological cycles of natural water bodies to assessing the efficiency of extraction, transportation and usage systems;

27. calls for new investment programmes to be introduced as part of the EU Multi-annual Financial Perspectives (2013-2020), which, by giving preference to long-term

measures, allow Member States to adopt new water infrastructure development plans only once they have adopted and implemented a structured programme of water-management measures; furthermore, desalination processes, which are energy-intensive, should be considered as an option in circumstances where their benefits outweigh their high environmental impact. The Committee recommends that a multilevel governance structure be used here, in order to optimise the involvement of local and regional authorities in the development of national programmes;

28. agrees that achieving water efficiency should be a priority in water-saving measures (water hierarchy⁽⁴⁾) and welcomes the Commission's *Water Efficiency in Building* initiative, which should be integrated with the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive⁽⁵⁾ in order to promote urban centres and building based on environmental sustainability principles. It must be possible to target the requirements for water efficiency in buildings selectively at geographical areas with water shortages;

29. undertakes to facilitate the use of non-conventional water resources by promoting a culture of reuse and recycling in all areas, taking account of the various characteristics and objectives of the Member States in this regard, with the creation and customisation by regional and local authorities of financial and tax instruments to support sustainable production activities and also to reduce, where necessary, use of groundwater;

30. believes it is necessary to include in the new common agricultural policy (CAP) cross-compliance principles for disseminating effective water management procedures which require cropping systems and irrigation practices to be developed that are in harmony with the region's water availability;

31. proposes that part of the funds available in the new CAP be used to encourage water-saving in agriculture, with the adoption of financial and tax instruments encouraging the cultivation of crops with high water efficiency (more crop per drop), and to promote measures for the conservation and environmental regeneration of arable land so as to facilitate woodland and wetland conservation and limit soil degradation and erosion, thus curbing desertification and saltwater intrusion into coastal groundwater;

32. believes it is no longer possible to put off adoption of legislation which, in embracing efficiency and effectiveness goals in water use to be achieved through recovery and reuse, defines uniform, Europe-wide levels of quality which will ensure appropriate reuse for each different sector of activity, in all cases; this would ensure an approach to recovery and reuse of water

⁽⁴⁾ Communication on water scarcity and droughts in the European Union - COM(2007) 414 final.

⁽⁵⁾ Directive 2010/31/EU of 19 May 2010 on the energy performance of buildings.

resources which would be fully in line with the objectives, while taking account of the fact that the different characteristics of the Member States mean that not all of them are required to take the same action;

Management of extreme events, including using new kinds of measure

33. urges regional and local authorities to see conscious risk management as the most effective instrument to be used to respond to extreme events, moving beyond the culture that sees optimising crisis management as the goal to be pursued (from crisis management to risk management);

34. calls on Member States and regional and local authorities, each according to their own prerogatives and remits, in line with Article 7 of the Floods Directive (2007/60), to encourage better coordination between civil protection operational technical structures and those of environment departments and/or agencies concerned with hydraulic risk prevention and management, with a view to exchanging and sharing knowledge and skills; also urges local and regional authorities as much as possible to initiate cross-border cooperation projects (between Member States, and between Member States and non-EU countries), in accordance with Article 8 of the Floods Directive (FD) (2007/60), with respect to international river basins;

35. believes that water policy must be based on three elements – storage, containment and drainage – that aim to reduce peaks in the water cycle. This enables surplus water to be discharged naturally, while ensuring that enough remains available for times when water is scarce;

36. believes it is essential to give priority to measures aiming to prevent and curb the effects of extreme events through enhancement and recovery of the natural environment, aware that this kind of measure, which preserves biodiversity and restores natural river hydraulics, is also extremely effective in containing the growing problem of soil sealing and in tempering the effects of climate change;

37. believes that one such preventative measure would be to make more space for the water system. This could include the creation of new bodies of open water, but also the introduction of multiple land use, whereby water is given a place in combination with another type of land use, such as residential, employment, mobility, recreation or nature. Local and regional authorities have a key role to play here;

38. calls on the EU and the Member States to give the European Union Solidarity Fund due importance as an essential economic and social support instrument for extreme

events, adapting access rules and management procedures to ensure that it can be fully exploited;

The role of regional and local authorities as regards governance and strengthening international cooperation

39. believes, in line with the WFD and the FD, that the river-basin planning method, using the river basin as the basic unit for environmental, regional and economic analysis, is the right approach to ensure a uniform level of protection of water resources throughout the EU;

40. believes that local and regional authorities, which express the demands and needs of local communities, should, in the context of River Basin Management Plans and participatory, consensual water resource management, play a planning, operational and monitoring role, leaving the European Union and the Member States, each according to their prerogatives, the task of defining policy guidelines and management priorities;

41. stresses the role of regional and local authorities in the process of monitoring the state of implementation of European water policy, in that only direct, participatory involvement of local authorities guarantees the success of protection and preservation measures giving rise to a sense of belonging to the region and conscious respect for the natural resources it contains;

42. calls for the use of existing or imminent legal and financial instruments (*River Basin Management Plans, rural development and cohesion programmes, Structural Funds, etc.*) that provide direction for river-basin district 'governance', assessing every related aspect (quality and quantity of water, navigation and transportation, energy) from an integrated, interdependent perspective, including the joint management of transboundary water resources;

43. believes the recent EU Strategy for the Danube Region, which is a transnational cooperation and water management model that can be replicated, to be in line with the WFD and fully sustainable in socioenvironmental terms, and calls for regional and local authorities to be directly involved in its implementation;

44. highlights the pivotal role regional and local authorities have in collecting environmental data⁽⁶⁾ (to which the GMES programme should make a key contribution) and proposes that the current European Drought Observatory be converted into a European water observatory, with a wider remit that includes validating and ensuring the uniformity of available information on the condition of European water resources;

⁽⁶⁾ CoR Opinion on The role of local and regional authorities in future environmental policy, CdR 164/2010 fin.

45. believes that, in order to give ecosystem services a social and economic dimension and effectively introduce an EU environment strategy that goes *beyond GDP*, coherent, transparent, reliable information and indicators on the condition of the environment and water resources must be guaranteed (7);

Conclusions

46. hopes, with reference to the Resource Efficiency Europe flagship initiative, through the work of its Europe 2020 Monitoring Platform, to be able to contribute, as regards defining both the approach and operational instruments, to the European Commission's action in the area of water resources, energy and waste, aware that the related environmental aspects are very closely interconnected;

47. recalls that policies connected with water quality affect the quantities available and their possible uses and therefore asks that this aspect not be neglected. In this context, it is helpful to take action at the earliest possible stage, in particular as regards product policy, so that the impact of products on water quality can be examined through lifecycle analysis and environmental impact assessments;

48. undertakes to make every endeavour to ensure that future investment, both European and national, aimed at curbing the effects of extreme events (floods and drought), including those caused by climate change, is channelled primarily into building *green infrastructure* (controlled flood plains, natural water retention basins, upland conservation and reforestation measures, recovery of protected areas and wetlands, slope maintenance and stabilisation, etc.) in order to protect the region from floods while also preserving biodiversity, recovering natural resources and providing new

tourism and job opportunities. Where green infrastructure measures are unsuitable, or where local circumstances make them impossible, *grey infrastructure* measures (artificial barriers, overflow channels, embankments, etc.) will be necessary to protect the land, people and economy from floods;

49. calls for the encouragement under the EU Framework Research Programme of science and technology transfer measures to foster the development of new technologies that can not only boost European competitiveness but also secure efficiency and innovation in water resource management;

50. reiterates its comments on the possibility of local and regional authorities having direct use of financial resources coming from greenhouse gas emission limits to fund local programmes to fight climate change (8), undertaking to use a share of these resources to launch initiatives to raise individuals' awareness of the intrinsic value of water, both by introducing a water footprint for products and by encouraging the eco-management of water-intensive production processes (EMAS) and launching information and environment education campaigns starting as early as nursery school;

51. proposes, not least in relation to the requirements ensuing from implementation of Directive 2000/60/EC, that sustainable water management should have a specific, verifiable target for 2020: 1) a 20 % increase in water-saving in all sectors of use; 2) a 20 % increase in the number of water courses being renaturalised, *inter alia* in order to reduce flood risk; 3) a 20 % increase in the volume of water re-used and/or recycled in farming and industry; to that end, calls for direct involvement of the Covenant of Mayors.

Brussels, 30 June 2011.

The President
of the Committee of the Regions
Mercedes BRESSO

(7) European Commission Third Follow up Report to the Communication on water scarcity and droughts in the European Union, COM(2011) 133 final.

(8) CdR 164/2010 fin.