

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on the ‘White Paper — Adapting to climate change: Towards a European framework for action’

(2010/C 79/03)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- stresses the need for local and regional authorities to be recognised as pivotal actors in the struggle against the harmful effects of climate change, since they are ready to assume the co-responsibility and already are taking action to adapt communities to the consequences;
- recognises that climate change will have a direct effect on both the supply of and demand for energy, e.g. heat waves and droughts will affect electricity production while severe storms and flooding will cause interruptions in energy supplies and therefore welcomes the fact that the effects of climate change are being taken into account in the strategic energy reviews;
- advocates the creation of a Climate Change Monitoring Platform properly supported by the Commission, drawing on the successful model of the Covenant of Mayors. The platform could assist local and regional authorities in developing and exchanging local climate knowledge;
- agrees that financial constraints constitute the main barrier to adaptation. Currently, the financial means provided by the EU and the Member States are insufficient, and it is therefore necessary to allocate more resources to the sub-national level, to be specifically targeted at adaptation to climate change;
- believes that the forthcoming EU Budget review and indeed the next Financial Perspectives post 2013 must make climate change challenges a priority. Since adaptation measures are in many cases essentially local efforts, it is essential to ensure that EU support is made available to local and regional authorities.

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Reference document

White Paper on Adapting to climate change: Towards a European framework for action

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I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

1. welcomes the White Paper on adapting to climate change and its appendices which are sound and well thought through. The Committee of the Regions notes that there is a consensus in the academic community, including the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, that climate change is happening and accelerating and that much of it is caused by continuing and increasing emissions of greenhouse gases from human activities. The challenge is therefore to organise all relevant actors in a comprehensive and sustainable climate protection effort that combines prevention, mitigation and adaptation measures;

2. endorses the comprehensive approach of the European Commission, which incorporates different sector requirements and recognises the need for adaptation to be horizontally integrated into key EU policy areas;

3. highlights the fact that different geographical regions in the EU are affected in diverse ways. A European framework for action must take this into account. This means that any measures should have the greatest possible flexibility and should strictly comply with the subsidiarity principle. Only then can sufficient account be taken of regional differences in order to reduce the economic, environmental and social impact;

4. draws attention to the fact that climate change does not distinguish between geographical, organisational or administrative boundaries, and therefore urges that a horizontal joined-up approach be taken at local, regional and national bodies that share common features such as stretches of water, estuaries, coastal and river flood plains, islands and outermost regions, whereas, from a vertical perspective, adaptation effort requires bottom-up action and recommends that joint actions on adaptive measures be undertaken by all relevant levels of government, outlining the respective actions, financial responsibilities and time scales to achieve the proposed goals, and allowing for an integrated response and shared responsibility for the outcome;

5. underlines the importance of ensuring that the various initiatives are not counterproductive or duplicated at other levels of authority. Timely involvement of local and regional authorities could ensure that the proposals complement each other as

municipalities, cities and regions can offer information on the experiences and solutions that have already been developed at sub-national level;

6. points out that an ambitious and effective climate policy can prevent the escalation of social inequalities as a consequence of climate change. The aim is to jumpstart a green 'New Deal' by means of measures that, for instance, increase research into climate-friendly energy solutions, strengthen employment in green sectors and develop green and help the workforce in affected sectors to develop flexible skills. A shortage of appropriate training and flexible skills is a major barrier to adaptation, both in local and regional government and the private sector. The design and construction industry and local authority planning and building control departments will require significant long-term investment and training to develop these skills and incorporate them into their work. A green 'New Deal' could also help to prevent undesirable climate-related migration. The climate change challenge can thus be transformed into an opportunity to provide sustainable green economic growth as a remedy to combat the financial crisis and it is therefore important that links with future priorities of the post-2010 EU Jobs and Growth Strategy be established;

Climate change impact on sector policies

7. recalls the need to employ a combination of policy instruments, including local strategic planning. It is highly important that aspects of climate change be incorporated directly into local planning tools in order to ensure that climate impact is taken into account;

8. agrees with the view that many areas of life, particularly infrastructure (buildings, transport, trunk and local road networks, energy, sewerage, flood protection and water supply), ecosystems, agriculture and forestry are particularly affected by climate change and that there is therefore a need for both sector-specific and cross-sectoral tools to address these areas. It is important that a cross-sectoral policy approach to adapting to climate change be pursued, but this must not frustrate the original goals of individual policies;

9. endorses the view that the development of guidelines and mechanisms to monitor the impact on human health of climate change could contribute to the improvement of instruments to manage for example cross-border climate-related diseases, which will affect citizens in diverse ways;

10. underlines that the comprehensive and integrated approach that is needed to ensure robust measures are introduced to adapt to climate change requires public control over the choice of measures within the various sectors. This would also lead to environmental and economic synergies and spin-off effects between the sectors;

11. supports the view that climate change will have a direct impact on agriculture, forestry and the countryside in general, and stresses that measure for adapting to climate change adopted by rural communities, farms and forestry businesses will have an increasingly important part to play. In order to bring about early adaptation, thereby minimising the impact on this sector, research into climate and farming needs to be driven forward and applied to the features of agriculture in each region. Measures to combat and adapt to climate change are often associated with reduced yields and increased costs. A cost-benefit analysis of individual measures must therefore be carried out. Furthermore, the costs associated with measures to combat and adapt to climate change must be reasonable. The agricultural sector will have a direct role in ensuring that rural areas cope with the challenges of climate change on issues such as water storage and conservation, crop management, woodland creation and management, except in regions with a share of forest that exceeds 50 %, arable reversion to grassland, organic farming and wetland management, etc. Rural and agricultural land that is close to urban areas and agglomerations may also acquire strategic importance based on its ability to provide secure water retention areas during extreme weather or floods;

12. recognises that climate change will have an effect on forests and their surrounding ecosystems. Climate effects can impact on timber production and impinge on outdoor recreational activities, water quality, biodiversity and rates of carbon storage. In the context of the EU Forest Action Plan, a debate should be launched to establish the effects of adaptation to climate change on forests, including any need to take action in this regard;

13. endorses the view that climate change will be an added stress factor for the fisheries sector (including inland fisheries), affecting marine (and other) ecosystems that are already vulnerable to overfishing and stock depletion;

14. recognises that climate change will have a direct effect on both the supply of and demand for energy, e.g. heat waves and droughts will affect electricity production while severe storms and flooding will cause interruptions in energy supplies and therefore welcomes the fact that the effects of climate change are being taken into account in the strategic energy reviews. In particular, the CO₂ balance should be improved and the use and efficiency of alternative sources enhanced;

15. draws attention to the fact that tourism will be both positively and negatively affected, which will break old patterns of travelling;

16. is surprised that the Commission's White Paper does not mention the need to define sector-specific targets for reducing

emissions in the air transport and maritime sectors. The best way to prevent expenditure on adaptation to negative impacts of climate change is to prevent emissions;

17. points out that changing weather patterns will affect coastal management. Efforts must be made to ensure that the Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM) recommendations are fully respected, and to ensure that the follow up proposal to the ICZM recommendations and accompanying impact assessment (due to start in 2009) sufficiently incorporates the role of coastal management into adaptation measures, while taking account of the principle of subsidiarity, for example via the use of Local Coastal Partnerships made up of local communities and relevant stakeholders, whereby adaptation measures are fully incorporated into coastal management from the bottom up;

18. points out that climate change is taking place more quickly in mountainous areas and that these areas are in many respects more vulnerable to the effects of climate change;

19. endorses the view that animal and plant health will also be severely affected and that there will be increasing inward migration and spread of non-native diseases and parasites in animal and plant stocks. Land ecosystems will change significantly with an increasing loss of indigenous biodiversity and through inward migration. Measures taken with a view to adapting to climate change may also have an increasing and unexpected impact on biodiversity. The Habitat Directive is an essential tool which should be used proactively within its remit to secure a favourable conservation status for Natura 2000 sites and to develop such sites further;

20. notes that climate change has a major impact not only on animal and plant health, but also on human health and living conditions;

21. stresses that a comprehensive plan for coastal areas needs to be drawn up to deal with the anticipated rises in sea levels and increases in storms leading to floods, and that therefore the resources need to be found to implement and administer such a plan;

22. endorses the view that water resources will be affected, in both quantity and quality, with a significant environmental, human and economic impact. The EU will experience both flooding and drought. A combination of flooding and limited drainage capacity of existing sewage systems could cause reduced mobility due to overflowing onto roads and damage to housing and other infrastructure. It is therefore unfortunate that the Commission has not made specific mention of sewerage as a pivotal tool. This system is particularly affected and adaptation of the existing sewage systems will be very costly. Although this matter comes under the remit and responsibility of the local and regional levels, sub-national authorities will be unable to bear the financial burden involved on their own;

23. recognises that a number of EU directives will affect the state of the EU's water resources. In the directives, binding deadlines are an integral part of implementation. The Water Framework Directive operates with a deadline of 2015 by which time all water authorities must achieve a good ecological status. The first River Basin Management Plans (RBMP) are to be completed on the 22nd December 2009 at the latest, and it is therefore important that the guidelines and a set of tools be developed by the end of 2009 to ensure that the RBMP take account of the current knowledge of the local impact of climate change and continually adapt to new findings of climate modelling and research. The Flooding Directive operates with three deadlines. In the years 2011, 2013 and 2015, preliminary flood risk assessment, flood hazard maps and flood risk management plans have to be carried out. The Water Scarcity and Droughts Strategy will introduce drought management plans. These defined targets will in large part be implemented and driven by municipalities and regions throughout Europe. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance that the right tools and adequate levels of resources be provided in due time by the Union and the Member States to the local and regional tiers of government;

24. asserts that the regions will endeavour as far as possible, on the basis of current scientific knowledge and measures deemed socially achievable, to factor climate change into the first-generation River Basin Management Plans (RBMP) and to take into account the latest findings of climate research when drawing up management plans of the second-generation after 2015. To that end, it is extremely important to develop guidelines and tools that, while underpinned by state-of-the-art scientific knowledge, are also practicable for regional authorities;

25. argues for the need to ensure that existing EU water management legislation (the Water Framework Directive, Groundwater Directive, Floods Directive, Water Scarcity and Droughts Strategy, etc.) is fully consistent, and that future EU climate change adaptation proposals and goals are kept in line with this existing legislation. The implementation of European water management legislation will have a significant impact on the way that water planning is carried out in Europe's municipalities, cities and regions;

26. recognises that in the financing of the adaptation of water management, local and regional authorities will need to undertake groundwater protection in order to ensure sustainable water distribution. Some of the funding can be achieved by establishing a financial mechanism, in accordance with the Water Framework Directive, which will ensure that in addressing the impact of climate change on the water cycle due account is taken of water consumers' consumption levels;

27. supports the Commission's inclusion of 'no-regret' actions and measures in order to increase the resilience of ecosystems and infrastructure;

28. points out that any solutions to sector-specific problems which are found can help create sustainable green growth and additional jobs through innovation and research;

Commission proposal for EU framework: objectives and actions

29. welcomes the Commission's two-phase approach. However, notes that the task ahead requires that all levels of government work closely together in all phases. It is not acceptable for local and regional authorities to be involved in the first phase only. It must be recognised that municipalities, cities and regions are key actors in adapting to climate change. The overall adaptation strategy at EU-level should be detailed enough, so that the strategy can be applied at the regional level throughout the EU, while taking into account the diversity of regions, climate conditions and economic structures;

30. demands that the available scientific evidence be accessible before 2012. Local, regional and national authorities have budgetary patterns that are different from that of the EU, and many local and regional authorities already work with adaptation. They need to know the climate scenarios they have to adapt to. The local, regional and national authorities will collect data, prepare the adaptation strategies and start the work on adaptation before 2012. The EU should support this development, firstly by providing scientific scenarios, which are detailed enough for all the regions of the EU, before 2012 and secondly by supporting the ongoing work financially when adaptation to climate change is incorporated into the budget;

31. welcomes the establishment of an EU-wide Clearing House Mechanism, which should be based upon national platforms that would allow the exchange of information on climate change impact, vulnerability and best practice, and emphasises the need for it to be accessible for local and regional authorities to contribute to and benefit from, by means of local and/or regional climate change observatories and other bodies, Interactivity that would allow local and regional authorities, through their climate change observatories and other bodies, to actively involve the relevant sectors and to seek timely expertise and experience for example in response to severe weather events from other authorities, would be of significant value and should be incorporated. The mechanism should focus on providing user friendly models, data and instruments and on facilitating exchanges of experience and information;

32. advocates the creation of a Climate Change Monitoring Platform properly supported by the Commission, drawing on the successful model of the Covenant of Mayors. The platform could assist local and regional authorities in developing and exchanging local climate knowledge. This would be of direct benefit to them as well as being a mechanism that could feed into the EU Clearing House Mechanism;

33. calls on the EU and Member States to make full use of local and regional authorities proximity and better understanding of local climate impacts by providing them with sufficient leadership and resourcing that could enable them to implement local adaptation initiatives;

Financial instruments

34. agrees that financial constraints constitute the main barrier to adaptation. Currently, the financial means provided by the EU and the Member States are insufficient. It is therefore necessary to allocate more resources to the sub-national level, to be specifically targeted at adaptation to climate change, and to coordinate these resources with those for use in natural disaster prevention;

35. welcomes the fact that the European Economic Recovery Plan takes account of mitigation and adaptation to climate change into economic revitalisation measures; regrets, however, that no European green recovery plan has been proposed and that the topic of the environment has been relegated to within the various national action plans, in an uncoordinated manner, despite it being time to pave the way towards a green, sustainable, low-carbon economy as a way out of the current financial and economic crisis;

36. backs the Commission's idea that, from 2013, Member States should earmark at least 50 % of the revenue generated through the auctioning of emission rights to tackle the climate issue through adaptation, and feels that use of available funding for adaptation purposes must also be contingent on specific local and regional conditions. Local and regional authorities will need a substantial amount of financial resources and, especially in the short run, the percentage of funds earmarked for the projects at local and regional level should be considerably increased;

37. acknowledges the need to explore how to secure private involvement, by making use of the advantages offered by voluntary (or ecological) agreements, through financial mechanisms. However, given the structural and long term relevance of the challenges posed by climate change, public sector support might be necessary, especially in terms of addressing the gaps and market failures not properly addressed by the private sector;

38. agrees that specialised Market Based Instruments (MBIs) and public-private partnerships should also be considered as financial instruments to address climate change. Involvement of the private sector, through MBIs and public-private partnerships, in adapting to climate change can create the right economic incentives to incorporate adaptation measures into their behaviour;

39. points out the need to ensure that integrated policies, which are currently being developed at EU level, are used as a vehicle to

address horizontal and cross-policy challenges such as those posed by climate change. In doing so, overlaps, inconsistencies and gaps between different policies and between governance levels, including the sub national levels, will be fully addressed;

40. believes that the forthcoming EU Budget review and indeed the next Financial Perspectives post 2013 must make climate change challenges a priority, both to take into account the reinforcement of the World Environment Fund and Kyoto Adaptation Fund set to be decided at the Copenhagen COP 15 summit in December 2009 and to finance specific European measures decided upon in the context of the EU's future sustainable development strategy.. Further, it has to be fully recognised that sustainable economic prosperity and efforts to adapt to climate change go hand in hand despite the upfront cost that climate change adaptation might generate in the short to medium term. Since adaptation measures are in many cases essentially local efforts, it is essential to ensure that EU support is made available to local and regional authorities;

41. endorses the view, that while EU funding mechanisms and networks such as the TENs, the Structural Funds or the EAFRD should mainstream climate change and adaptation issues in individual policy areas, particularly on issues such as increasing resilience of production systems and physical infrastructure; the original purpose of such policies and funds should not be undermined by the need to combat climate change and therefore specific measures and EU funds for that purpose would have to be envisaged particularly to avoid the dispersal of Community funds in this area; therefore, calls upon the European Commission to look into the 'green earmarking' of existing Structural Funds based on the earmarking model used for the Lisbon Strategy, or to create a European environmental adaptation fund that would finance training, retraining or back-to-work programmes for workers in sectors likely to be affected by sustainable development, or to support the creation of businesses attuned to environmental needs;

Partnership with local and regional authorities

42. supports the creation of an Impacts and Adaptation Steering Group (IASG) since the process of developing an EU strategy as well as national strategies must be managed to ensure that the effort is coordinated both in regard to policy sectors and levels of authority. However, it is important to ensure the mandate and budget of the steering group are determined before the group is set up, and therefore calls on the Commission to do so as soon as possible;

43. emphasises the need for local and regional authorities to be a part of IASG, since local and regional authorities are responsible for planning, steering and implementing many of the sectors concerned. Local and regional authorities therefore possess valuable knowledge and could contribute considerably to building the knowledge base on both impacts and possible solutions. The IASG should take on a bottom-up approach and clearly define areas of responsibility on the basis of the principle of subsidiarity;

44. calls for the establishment of Climate Change Task Forces at national level that fully involve local and regional authorities. The action plans for adapting to climate change that are drawn up at local and regional level should provide the basis for the work in these task forces. Their work should link directly with the work of the IASG. These task forces could be organised around the need for research, socioeconomic impacts, local and regional authorities, the general public and private companies;

45. emphasises the need to educate the public as adapting to climate change will involve changes to lifestyles. Citizens need to understand why adaptation measures are necessary, why the costs of some services may increase, how they can help and what is being done to minimise the risks to themselves. Such communication and behavioural changes will require a carefully constructed and targeted approach, supported by appropriate measures. The Committee therefore calls for the EU, Member States and regional and local authorities to work together with the media to develop a pan-European information campaign on causes and effects of climate change and changes these effects will bring. It should be made clear that climate change will cause a growing scarcity of resources which is why there is a need to focus on changing everyday behaviour. Local and regional authorities stress the need of proper funding resourcing of such campaigns, as well as having due consideration of the need of localising messages in different Member States, nations and regions;

46. points out that local and regional authorities also play an important role beyond the borders of the EU. Municipalities, cities and regions can play a constructive role in transferring expertise to developing countries that face the greatest adaptation challenges;

Recommendations to the EU Presidency

47. demands that the Commission and the EU Presidency secure political commitment to the timely development and implementation of the European adaptation strategy in collaboration with local and regional authorities;

48. requests that the Commission and the EU Presidency involve the local and regional authorities in the process of drafting and implementing the EU's framework for action by involving them in the workings of the IASG. Overall long-term strategies should be developed through broad cooperation between the governmental levels if successful implementation is to be ensured. Local and regional authorities possess hands-on knowledge regarding the impact of climate challenges, since they are on the front line. Furthermore, in the event of emergencies caused by climate change, citizens will appeal to local and regional governments in the first instance. This clearly justifies their involvement;

49. stresses the need for local and regional authorities to be recognised as pivotal actors in the struggle against the harmful effects of climate change, since they are ready to assume the co-responsibility and already are taking action to adapt communities to the consequences;

50. calls for more attention to be paid to solutions and instruments for urban areas (particularly those located on the coast and near major rivers) and infrastructure, such as dikes and sewage systems, which are fundamental to reducing the vulnerability of the infrastructure;

51. calls for realistic cross-border climate risk scenarios, detailed enough for all the regions in the EU, to be developed in cooperation between local, regional, national and EU level. The data, models, methods and climate scenarios should be made freely available as soon as possible so that the risk areas can be defined and countermeasures established;

52. stresses the need for the right financial incentives for action. Local and regional authorities should be supported in their efforts to develop proactive solutions that will reduce the vulnerability of local communities;

53. underlines that local and regional authorities should receive additional financial support to mitigate losses and meet the additional costs of adaptation since meeting the varied challenges of climate change will impose significant new financial burdens on local authorities.

Brussels, 7 October 2009

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of the Committee of the Regions*
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