THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

— calls for explicit recognition by Rio+20 of urbanisation as one key emerging challenge the world needs to address, and for greater support for the exchange of experience and transfer of knowledge on sustainable urban development between subnational governments and local authorities on a global scale;

— calls upon Rio+20 to adopt a green economy roadmap, which however should include a specific section on green local economy that recognises the key role played by subnational governments and local authorities, and in particular promotes an international Covenant of Mayors and Regions and supports decentralised cooperation for development; a possible capacity development scheme should oblige beneficiary countries to closely involve their sub-national levels of governance in the process;

— requests that subnational governments and local authorities need to have a place in the institutional framework for sustainable development as relevant governmental actors with full recognition alongside national governments and UN entities. Rio+20 should adapt the existing structures of the so-called "Major Groups", for instance by creating a new and inclusive category of "governmental stakeholders", and mandate a future World Environment Organisation (or UNEP), or a future Sustainable Development Council to create a standing committee for subnational and local governments;

— requests Rio+20 to define the future governance frameworks necessary to further develop Local Agenda 21 and to support the promotion of environmental democracy globally, for example by supporting the introduction of other regional conventions like the UNECE Aarhus Convention, or initiating negotiations on a global Convention on Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration.
I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

A. General remarks

1. welcomes the decision of the UN General Assembly to convene a United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development at the highest possible level in June 2012 in Rio de Janeiro (UNCSD or "Rio+20" Summit), with the objective of securing renewed political commitment for sustainable development, assessing the progress to date and the remaining gaps in the implementation of the outcomes of the major previous summits on sustainable development, and addressing new and emerging challenges. It will do so in the context of two specific themes: a green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication and the institutional framework for sustainable development;

2. calls on all those involved in the Rio+20 conference and its follow-up to ensure the success of the conference and achieve real progress for sustainable development;

3. has emphasised on different occasions the importance of measures and changes to support and develop the work on sustainable development. The CoR is of the opinion that all players – global, within the European Union as well as national, subnational and local governments – have a shared responsibility in creating a sustainable society that is responsive to the natural resources available. The CoR’s members, cities and subnational governments, have an important role to play in this and are to a large extent the driving forces in the work devoted to bringing about sustainable development, not least due to their proximity to EU citizens;

4. therefore calls for explicit reference to and empowerment of subnational governments and local authorities (1) in all Rio+20 deliberations. Subnational governments and local authorities need to be actively involved in both in the preparation of, during the Summit and in its follow-up and implementation. Member States are encouraged to establish forums with subnational governments and local authorities for preparing for Rio+20;

5. calls upon the European Council and the European Commission to work out a clear and unified EU position for the UN conference and ensure that the political agreements reached in Rio de Janeiro will also lead to concrete action; declares, in this connection that public involvement, competence and power on a subnational and local level is a basic precondition for a sustainable society. In order to support this, the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality must be respected and developed between all layers of governance, from the global via the European Union's planning and decision-making process to the national and sub-national levels. Subnational governments and local authorities must be recognised as fully equal partners and the most appropriate level of government in the efforts for a sustainable development, both when preparing for the UN conference and when implementing its results;

6. calls for explicit recognition by the Rio+20 Summit of urbanisation as one key emerging challenge the world needs to address. Urbanisation is of particular relevance to subnational governments and local authorities, as they are at the forefront of dealing with the challenges and opportunities it poses. Since the beginning of this century the majority of the world's 7 billion people live in cities. World population may rise from the current 7 to 9 billion people by 2050 and some scenarios predict that 60 per cent of this population will live in cities by 2030. This trend is especially apparent in developing countries or countries in rapid transition. Sustainable urban development requires a holistic and integrated approach to managing economic, environmental and socio-cultural dimensions of development within a spatial and physical framework. The CoR recommends stronger efforts to develop and support sustainable urban development;

7. emphasises that 'sustainable development' is based on social, environmental and economic factors being in harmony and that combating poverty and social exclusion must be just as much a key concern of the Rio+20 conference as conserving resources, combating climate change and other goals of environmental policy;

8. would like to see greater efforts to produce, evaluate, present and disseminate good examples of sustainable urban development. There is a substantial demand for the exchange of experience and a transfer of knowledge, concerning both institutional factors and a holistic and integrated system approach in the planning and decision-making processes. Good urban governance, spatial planning, systems for land management, legislation and policies, financing, public and private cooperation, public participation, education, training and information are all areas in which there is a significant need for the exchange of experience and transfer of knowledge between subnational governments and local authorities on a global scale;

(1) The Opinion uses the term "subnational governments and local authorities", as it is used in the UN context (where regions are rather understood as world regions). Within the context of the EU, this means "local and regional authorities".
9. wishes to emphasise how important it is to focus on and develop the various forms of partnerships and the interaction between cities and their surroundings. A growing population in cities results in heavy demands on production and supply of goods, for example foodstuffs, as well as the accompanying management of waste products and refuse. A concrete example of the need for greater cooperation between cities and their surroundings is the management of biological waste, where functioning systems are needed for the return of plant nutrients to agricultural land in order for the biological ecocycle to work within a closed loop;

10. believes that education, training and dissemination of information are of crucial importance to increase public awareness. The development of learning programmes is especially important for the transition that is needed, including not only technical knowledge on specific aspects, but also on a holistic and integrated system approach;

11. wishes to point out that many of the challenges and concrete measures facing the international community in its work on creating sustainable development cannot solely be solved by new technology and increased financial investment. Measures are also needed to build knowledge in order to adapt and change people’s behaviour, consumption patterns, etc.;

12. stresses that both traditional and social media are particularly important in this regard. Measures should be taken to support the development of these media as tools for exchanging information, mobilising people, linking up initiatives and creating critical public groups, thus promoting a sustainable society;

13. underlines that one of the tools used in the efforts to achieve a sustainable society is the town twinning. Many twinning projects are already in place or are being established on a bilateral or multilateral thematic basis at the subnational and local and levels. A number of players are involved in this processes on both a national, subnational and local scale, within the European Union and internationally. Twinning is an especially effective tool when it has a focused thematic content, aims to be sustainable and involves not only national governments and local authorities, but also, and more important for its successful outcome, civil society organisations;

14. stresses that international, regional or national associations of sub-national levels of governance also have an important role to play in facilitating exchanges and giving subnational governments and local authorities a voice on the global scene. The CoR itself acts as an important institutional player in the EU context in this respect and believes that further efforts are required, to coordinate existing structures and networks and to improve the evaluation of innovative projects and dissemination of best practices;

B. Enabling the transition to a green economy

15. wishes to point out that sustainable development with the three dimensions economy, ecology and social constitutes the basis for growth, more job opportunities, a green economy, greater prosperity and a cleaner and healthier environment;

16. notes that the current economic system is outstripping the planet’s capacities when it comes to the sustainable use of resources and that, increasingly, the European Union is becoming an importer of fossil fuels and raw materials. Some of these are of strategic importance for the present and future of the EU but may run short in future decades. This makes an economic shift towards a mode of development that is more sustainable and more responsive to these resources imperative;

17. expressly stresses that the transition to a more sustainable pattern of development does not only represent a problem but, on the contrary, offers a whole series of opportunities particularly when environmental improvement and the generation of economic and social value added are considered in terms of potential synergy. The opportunities must be made use of through appropriate measures in the fields of economic policy, education and social change;

18. concludes that under the current financial conditions in the European Union and internationally, efforts should be made to achieve a sustainable economy and create sustainable employment conditions;

19. reiterates the importance of green jobs and of making an effort to promote such jobs, which are defined as decent work in all economic sectors that involve sustainability (both the emerging and traditional sectors), due to the opportunity they offer for progress on social cohesion. Training and capacity-building in the field of sustainability at all levels should therefore be viewed as essential aspects of ensuring the full development of these key sectors;

20. recommends that the Rio+20 Summit delivers a new alternative model to measure growth and welfare beyond GDP. This is necessary in order to re-orient the debates on policies and achieve fundamental change in the way 'progress' is understood. Indicators are needed that take into account climate change, biodiversity, resource efficiency and social inclusion;

21. is convinced that the EU in particular can play an important role at the UN conference if it can go there itself with a good example; its bargaining position would be strengthened if it set itself ambitious goals on the road towards a 'green economy', for example in the areas covered by the Europe 2020 Strategy Flagship Initiative 'A resource-efficient Europe';

22. supports the proposal of the European Commission that the Rio+20 Summit should adopt a green economy roadmap that sets targets and appropriate indicators, formulates both direct international action and a clear framework for global, regional (including at EU level), national and subnational initiatives, and includes a timeline for their implementation;
23. supports in this context the request of the EU for Rio+20 to establish a capacity development scheme to provide targeted, country specific advice to all interested countries on the transition to a green economy and on how to access the available funding. The CoR underlines that such a scheme should oblige countries to closely involve their subnational levels of governance in the process;

24. believes that the roadmap should include a specific section on Green Local Economy, which recognises the key role played by subnational governments and local authorities in the transition to a green economy. This section should in particular address the major challenges of urbanisation and green urban economy, promote an international Covenant of Mayors and Regions, and support decentralised cooperation for development by subnational governments and local authorities;

25. requests that the many successful cases of subnational governments and local governments promoting a green economy should be included in the Rio+20 green economy toolbox that is proposed by the European Commission;

26. recalls the important role and many activities of the subnational and local tiers in the area of development aid and decentralised cooperation in close cooperation between the CoR, its members and the EU Commission, such as the CoR's "Atlas", the web portal and the so-called "Assises of decentralised cooperation";

27. would like to see measures on a global level to support the development of an environment-driven business sector, which could be brought about by:

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- coordinating and developing models for the environmental certification of goods and services produced by companies by means of comparative life-cycle analyses for goods and services, etc.,

- coordinating and developing models for environmental management systems for companies and organisations, by means of environmental accounting for instance, and

- producing new models for the financing of green solutions and green companies;

28. acknowledges the need to make progress on developing new mechanisms and tools for cooperation between the public and private sectors (social and economic stakeholders) on designing and implementing policies for the green economy. The emphasis should be on boosting and consolidating multi-stakeholder partnerships;

29. reiterates that one of the key challenges today is to radically reduce our climate impact, both at global and local level, while at the same time securing energy supplies and ensuring prosperity. Municipalities and subnational governments have major roles in this process. Within the European Union, they are assuming responsibility for a broad range of initiatives aimed at reducing climate impact, securing energy supplies and adapting to climate changes. The Cancun agreements, adopted in December 2010, recognise local governments as governmental stakeholders and open access to international financing mechanisms for cities. Subnational and local governments need to be actively involved in national climate action plans and expect access to financial support;

30. emphasises that measures must be taken to protect, secure and redevelop key resources, materials and natural capital. In particular, the CoR would like the Rio+20 Summit to place a special focus on water. Access to water is a rapidly growing problem and a major challenge, especially for big cities. The CoR therefore supports the establishment of an international partnership on water to tackle this problem and refers in this connection to its recommendations on the role of subnational governments and local authorities in promoting sustainable water management (Opinion CdR 5/2011 fin);

31. emphasises the need to improve the governance and the protection of the marine environment and oceans and consider that it becomes one of the key pillars of the Rio Framework, aside climate and biodiversity;

32. highlights the European Commission's comment that "the sustainable use of land and agriculture will be a cornerstone of the green economy," and therefore takes the view that sustainable urban development and spatial planning mean minimising the extent to which productive agricultural land is built on in such a way that it cannot be used for farming in the future;
33. believes that to enable the transition to a global green economy, large-scale financial resources have to be mobilised. Taxation and pricing should better reflect environmental costs and benefits. The CoR reiterates its calls for mainstreaming the polluter pays principle and extended producer responsibility, as well as cost-recovery options for the management of natural resources. The green economy roadmap should launch new public and private financing initiatives and partnerships;

34. proposes that the roadmap should also provide for a series of specific and tightly scheduled steps for eliminating all environmentally harmful subsidies by 2020. This would free up extra funds for other activities. In addition, reduction targets and efficiency standards like those which have been developed in the EU for a range of products and processes should be applied at international level;

C. The institutional framework – towards better governance

35. recommends a transformation of the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) into a World Environment Organisation (WEO). Transforming UNEP into a UN Specialised Agency would create a global multilateral environmental organisation, as the most promising way forward to improve international environmental governance. It should have a revised and strengthened mandate and operate on an equal footing with other UN specialised agencies. Moreover, it should include an implementation arm, decentralised at regional or national level, and aimed at providing countries, subnational governments and local authorities with more direct support on effective implementation of Multilateral Environmental Agreements, such as on climate change or biodiversity;

36. also recommends the creation of a Sustainable Development Council (SDC) instead of the existing Commission for Sustainable Development (CSD). The aim of this proposal is to achieve better governance, a common view and coordination in the work on sustainable development on all levels;

37. supports the development of Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), in particular those with a long-term perspective, following the example of the Millennium Development Goals. A broad political commitment based on common goals should be then broken down into a set of specific and concrete targets and ways of measuring them;

38. insists that the Rio+20 Summit recognises that governance needs to include all government levels, from the local and the subnational, via the national and regional, to the global. Rio+20 should subscribe to a consequent multilevel governance approach, based on interaction, synergy and complementarities between all governance levels;

39. draws attention to the fact that within the Rio Conventions, subnational governments and local authorities have recently been given increased recognition of their special status as governmental institutions, including for example their recognition as "governmental stakeholders" in the Cancun Agreement, and Decision X/22 of COP 10 CBD "Plan of Action for Subnational Governments, Cities and Other Local Authorities". The CoR was an active supporter of these developments;

40. requests that subnational governments and local authorities need to have a place in the institutional framework for sustainable development as relevant governmental actors with full recognition alongside national governments and UN entities. The Rio+20 summit should take the opportunity to adapt the existing structures of the so-called "Major Groups" in order to reflect evolutions since 1992 notably in the role of local and subnational governance, for instance by creating a new and inclusive category of "governmental stakeholders". The CoR deplores that in the current international governance architecture, despite their specific and growing role in governance, the representation of subnational levels of governance at UN bodies is putting them on the same level as civil society, business or other groups which are defined by socioeconomic criteria rather than by their role in the governance system;

41. suggests in this regard that the Rio+20 Summit mandates UNEP (or the future World Environment Organisation), or the Sustainable Development Council (SDC) to create a standing committee for subnational and local governments as a new structure that adequately reflects multilevel governance and offers a permanent mechanism of consultation of and cooperation with subnational governments and local authorities across the world. The Committee of the Regions could serve as a model in this respect;

42. recognises that responsibilities and roles of the subnational and local levels differs widely, both within the European Union and globally and that subnational and local self-governance is constantly developing. It is therefore necessary to bear these differences in mind when trying to involve subnational and local governments as closely as possible in the processes of developing sustainable societies;

43. wishes to stress the importance of common views and coordination to be developed in the work for sustainable development on a global level. In this process, cities and subnational governments are principal players. Important platforms for coordination and exchanging experience are the Covenant of Mayors, Agenda 21 and the Sustainable Development Strategies;

44. stresses that the emphasis of the European Commission on the private sector should not divert attention from the need for the Rio+20 Summit, the EU and Member States to promote sustainable development governance at the level of subnational and local public authorities, including the empowerment of citizens;
45. wishes to emphasise the importance of making citizens the focal point in working towards a sustainable society. Therefore the goals and measures of this process need to be adapted to different local situations. The dialogue concerning both physical and financial measures as well as changes in consumption and behaviour must be based on the existing conditions at subnational and local levels. Action is required to support the direct participation of citizens in working for a sustainable society, such as

— developing consultative processes and creating meeting places for dialogue and the exchange of experience,

— supporting subnational and local development projects, both nationally and internationally, and

— raising the level of knowledge and insight concerning the need for joint efforts to achieve a sustainable society;

46. would like to see the Rio+20 Summit to support the promotion of environmental democracy globally. This could be done by the Aarhus Parties reiterating at Rio+20 their willingness to open the Convention to the whole world, but also in other ways – for example by supporting the introduction of other regional conventions like the Aarhus one, or initiating negotiations on a global Convention on Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration (?);

47. would like to see a development and revival of the Agenda 21 work. Rio+20 should define the future governance frameworks necessary to further develop Local Agenda 21 in this respect. The local Agenda 21, which was initiated after the Rio Summit in 1992, is a good example of a grass-roots process that has produced good and lasting results in the form of both concrete measures and greater insight into, and increased involvement in, sustainability issues among society’s players. The insight and participation of citizens is the basis of the local Agenda 21. In many cases local Agenda 21 work has lead to new green jobs;

48. would like to see in particular better knowledge support to the subnational and local levels. In order for the work for a sustainable society to be effective, all players need an accessible planning and decision-making basis. This is also important in connection with follow-up, evaluation and feedback of the results and experience gained in the work for a sustainable society;

49. expects that the Commission in its continued work in preparation for the Rio+20 Summit will develop and strengthen the dialogue with the CoR and its members. The CoR hopes that the EU delegation to the Rio+20 Summit will include an appropriate number of delegates from the CoR.


The President of the Committee of the Regions
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