Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions: Forging a climate-resilient Europe — the new EU Strategy on Adaptation to Climate Change

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Rapporteur: Markku MARKKULA (FI/EPP), Chair of the Espoo City Board
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POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS
THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

Main general remarks

1. welcomes the European Commission’s call in the new EU Strategy on Adaptation to Climate Change for cities and regions, along with the CoR, to pave the way to a higher level of ambition on climate resilience and to commit to better integrating EU measures into national, regional and local legislation and activities;

2. states with concern that the economic losses caused by extreme weather conditions amounted to over EUR 436 billion from 1980 to 2016, and they will increase to at least EUR 170 billion per year if global warming reaches 3 °C above a pre-industrial level;

3. reiterates that the urgency of tackling climate change in line with the Paris Agreement requires committed political leadership at all levels of governance, driving forward an action-oriented and well-defined transition to a climate-neutral Europe, underpinned by a bottom-up perspective in which adaptation and mitigation are well integrated;

4. highlights the fact that the role of cities and regions has changed from an administration-focused authority-centric style to a service- and collaboration-driven one, which includes citizens, academia, businesses, and the third sector. The CoR urges cities and regions to analyse and renew their role, collaboration, and innovation policies to boost broad-scale societal and technology-assisted innovations. This will enable them to tackle the major societal challenges and safeguard the right conditions for welfare societies;

5. calls for demand-based policies, carbon footprints and handprints to be used as the criteria for sustainable public procurement, to accelerate transformation to circular economy and increase demand for sustainable and climate-friendly products and services;

6. emphasises the crucial importance of local awareness and commitment to action; to encourage this, new innovative ways to create high-quality support to local level action are needed. The CoR will cooperate with the European Commission to develop operational action models under the title Green Deal Going Local for municipalities of different sizes and at different stages of development, adapted to their local situations;

7. notes the critical importance for the objectives set of ensuring that the latest research knowledge is used, modified and applied to potential operational needs much more rapidly than so far; therefore urges the European Commission to set up ERA Hubs so that they focus on promoting innovations needed at local and regional level from the point of view of society and work to develop ecosystems for academia, businesses, society and individuals;
8. showcases, via the CoR Green Deal Going Local political and communication campaign, how the cities and regions can accelerate the just and sustainable transition using local, regional, national and EU public and private financing, along with other supporting initiatives. The CoR is committed to cooperating and to reaching breakthrough solutions together with the European Commission, EU Missions, the EU Innovation Council, the network of regional ERA Hubs and other initiatives of relevant stakeholders;

9. points out that around 40% of EU cities with more than 150,000 inhabitants have adopted climate adaptation plans (1); encourages all cities to join and regularly update research, development, and innovation (RDI) knowledge and best practices. The CoR calls on cities and regions to join forces with local and international industry, forming partnerships to adapt to and mitigate climate change, and calls on the Commission to disseminate positive results;

10. strongly supports the strategy's approach of achieving resilience in a fair and just manner. Climate change is becoming increasingly problematic, especially for people living in vulnerable situations, older, sick and low-income people. The strategy must pay particular attention to these groups;

11. stresses its readiness and commitment to co-creating a Europe-wide adaptation system with cities and regions, as well as a well-functioning multilevel governance structure with clear responsibilities. The aim is to enable action and to create effective regional and local adaptation and mitigation mechanisms based on joint collaboration between the public, private and third sectors, and to improve knowledge, capabilities, and the use of financial resources;

The Adaptation Strategy in the framework of the European Green Deal

12. believes that, within a year of this regulation entering into force, the Commission should adopt guidelines establishing common practices and principles for identifying, classifying and properly managing physical and material climate risks when planning, developing, carrying out and monitoring plans, programmes and projects;

13. suggests that synergies should be established between adaptation guidelines and the Directives on Environmental Assessment;

14. notes that local and regional authorities are responsible for more than 70% of climate change mitigation measures and up to 90% of climate adaptation actions, therefore no adaptation policy will be successful unless it takes into account the needs, views and expertise of regions and cities;

15. calls for high levels of engagement from cities and regions in preparing their climate roadmaps and Green Deal Going Local action plans, as the bedrock of efforts to tackle climate change — and with a view to preventing the unadaptable and adapting to the unpreventable;

16. calls for the strengthening of regional cooperation of parties on climate adaptation plans and measures on the ground. The local and regional level is where measures, together with citizens and business, have to be effectuated;

17. recognises that the EU’s outermost regions face stark adaptation challenges as a result of their specific vulnerabilities, which make them particularly susceptible to the effects of climate change; welcomes all efforts to mitigate these effects, such as the exchange of best practices and global and regional adaptation solutions, to be fostered and supported by the Commission and the Member States;

18. highlights the importance of the joint development of suitable adaptation methods and instruments, to underpin the co-creation of societal innovations, cross-border cooperation, exchanges of experiences and resilience capacities; actions under Specific Objective 2 of Interreg 2021-2027 could make a significant contribution in this regard;

19. underlines that there is a growing solid base of evidence showing that in some Member States women are disproportionately vulnerable to climate change because of entrenched social norms and socio-economic structures that deprive their access to resources, decision-making, information, education, occupation, etc.; considers, therefore, the EU policies including the European Green Deal, to overcome these barriers and boost the full potential of women and girls’ skills, knowledge and qualifications to ensure the effectiveness and sustainability of climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction;

20. stresses the importance of fast-track access to expert advice on using EU knowledge and financing instruments;

21. underlines the need for nature-oriented climate adaptation of forests and forestry enterprises. Forests and forest owners play an extremely important role in climate protection, but are themselves affected by climate change; expects the announced EU Forest Strategy to take into account special forest characteristics in different parts of Europe and to be closely linked to the EU Strategy on Adaptation to Climate Change and the EU Biodiversity Strategy, as well as EU measures to support the adaptation of semi-natural forests to climate change and strengthen their carbon capture capacity;

22. calls for swift and ambitious implementation of the measures announced in the strategy to promote nature-based adaptation solutions, including new and innovative financing approaches and products. This concerns in particular the protection and restoration of wetlands and peatlands and the greening of cities. Such solutions contribute both to increasing climate resilience, healthy living and to the achievement of other goals of the Green Deal;

23. considers large-scale public-private investment in developing and implementing new innovative solutions to be essential. An example of existing knowledge is the report ‘Net Zero by 2050: A Roadmap for the Global Energy Sector’ published by the International Energy Agency (IEA) in May 2021, which demonstrates the roadmap based on over 400 interim milestones to guide the global journey to net zero by 2050. It is important for such investment to also increase economic growth and prevent premature deaths;

24. highlights the collaborative effort with the Joint Research Centre (JRC) and other Commission Directorates General to develop the concept of local scientific platforms on climate change (existing ‘local IPCCs’), with a view to encouraging cooperation with scientists and supporting local elected officials’ decision-making;

25. welcomes the Commission’s intent to coordinate between the different policy areas, as to utilise synergetic effects;

26. advocates reducing the carbon footprint by minimising the negative impacts of products, generated waste, services, and organisations; and calls for focus on the carbon handprint, by showing the positive impact that climate-friendly products and services create in terms of sustainability, based on the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals;

27. welcomes the intention to link climate adaptation to the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive, the Construction Products Regulation and the Ecodesign Directive;

28. calls on European industry to initiate and invest in carbon handprint business development, such as improving energy efficiency, reducing the use of materials, introducing climate-friendly raw materials, reducing the amount of waste, expanding product lifespans, and enhancing product usability;

29. urges the public sector to use their role and assets in many ways to help industries speed up the process of creating new carbon-neutral handprint solutions: shifting the use of public procurement to accelerate demand for and the development of sustainable new products and services, open data to analyse problems and develop climate-friendly solutions, crowdsourcing to create innovation and start-up platforms and networking to develop and disseminate new concepts and solutions to increase sustainability;
Carbon pricing — an integral part of the green transition

30. takes the view that both public and private sectors should more carefully assess needs in their procurement procedures in order to avoid surpluses and then meet actual needs using sustainable products and services;

31. urges the Commission to pay special attention to ensuring an effective CO₂ pricing system, since this is one of the most efficient measures for combating climate change. To attract the investments needed, the price of CO₂ should be predictable and at an appropriate level, and take into account the true costs of damage from CO₂ emissions to encourage energy and other companies to invest in climate-friendly solutions;

32. stresses that the pricing system for CO₂ is likely to include a carbon border adjustment mechanism to create an international level playing field, which is transparent to eliminate free riders;

33. suggests market-based solid incentives to attract the development of new carbon sinks and sustainable substitutions of material from a high to low carbon footprint. RDI should be given support to develop new CO₂-reduction technologies and measurement methods;

34. calls for a combination of appropriate market mechanisms, taxes, funding measures, legal provisions and voluntary public-sector commitments to attract climate change investment to the non-ETS sector, in order to deliver emission reductions cost-effectively;

35. calls for further improvements in the emissions trading system (ETS), and especially in relation to heating, cooling, land use and transport and forestry (LULUCF); in taking the systemic steps to developing the ETS, national energy and climate taxation should be integrated into the global ETS system;

36. is convinced that accelerating effective measures to gradually end direct and indirect subsidies to fossil fuels — for example, the existing tax exemptions for aircraft-fuel — are necessary as soon as possible to create an effective level playing field for renewable energies. They will also encourage behavioural change and generate the resources required to support a just transition;

37. calls on the EU to take a strong lead globally to develop the necessary CO₂ pricing and budgeting systems at the latest by 2030 and to negotiate similar elements with its global trading partners;

Financing for tackling climate change

38. recognises the enormous upfront investment needs, including energy-related investments, which alone, according to the European Commission, are estimated to be EUR 350 billion more annually during the years 2021–2030 than during the previous decade (²). The CoR stresses the crucial importance of partnerships, in which public funds should focus on accelerating the pace;

39. calls for the assistance to cities and regions to find the right combination of public and private funds for adaptation action, from international, European, national, and local sources; calls for red tape to be reduced and access to EU funding to be simplified;

40. calls on the EU and other actors to develop ways to measure the potential impact of climate-related risks on public finances, to develop tools and models for climate stress testing, and to take climate change into account in reporting and fiscal frameworks;

41. highlights the urgency of updating the national energy mix by using new advanced technologies in order to best serve reaching the goals of the EU decarbonisation strategy, as well as to fully encompass and benefit from the contributions of 'prosumers', local energy communities and new technologies; highlights the importance of the reliable low and medium-voltage electricity grid and the need to increase the share of renewable energies in the base-load power, in particular by developing storage and management technologies and expanding energy networks to better connect new small-scale producers to the low and medium-voltage grids; calls on the Commission to better represent smart grid projects in the list of projects of common interest (PCI) within the new proposed TEN-E framework;

(²) Stepping up Europe's 2030 climate ambition, COM(2020) 562 final.
42. points out that closing the climate protection gap requires strengthening dialogue between policymakers and their stakeholders, especially industry and investors, including insurers and pension funds;

43. welcomes the new level of commitment from the European Investment Bank (EIB) to raising the share of finance dedicated to climate action by 2025 and the development of the Climate Bank Roadmap (3); welcomes the introduction of the EIB Climate Risk Assessment system (CRA) for systematic assessment of physical climate risks;

The European Climate and Health Observatory — integrating health into climate targets

44. welcomes the establishment of a European Climate and Health Observatory under Climate-ADAPT. Through this observatory data, tools, and expertise can be pooled and connected in order to communicate, monitor, analyse and prevent the effects of climate change on human health, based on a ‘One Health’ approach; but considers it desirable that the scope be expanded, to include the effects of urbanisation and aging;

45. underlines the need to continue collecting examples of good practice tested on the ground and to make them publicly accessible and easily searchable in a repository set up by the Climate-ADAPT portal and/or the catalogue of Benchmarks on the Covenant of Mayors website; emphasises that knowledge transfer shall also be facilitated through city-to-city cooperation and appropriate peer-to-peer and mentoring activities shall be identified, promoted and financed;

Digitalisation, data, and space

46. emphasises the importance of innovative digital technologies, 5G technology, the Internet of Things, Artificial Intelligence and data analytics that improve the digital and green transformation of cities and regions; furthermore a sufficient glass fibre supply is especially important for rural areas;

47. underlines that, to be successful, all climate action, including adaptation, needs to be rooted in the best available knowledge and innovation and is entirely dependent on citizen buy-in;

48. highlights the importance of using preventive systematic and comprehensive information systems such as Galileo and Copernicus in community-based hazard and risk assessments, based on regional and local data mining solutions and the use of satellites and sensors with GIS-aided tools to map the vulnerabilities associated with different climate-related risks; encourages the LRAs to use the Copernicus Climate Change Services (C3S);

49. expects information obtained from satellite-based monitoring systems such as Galileo and Copernicus concerning leaks of methane and other greenhouse gases to be used to eliminate such leaks as quickly as possible by means of national, European and international action;

50. calls for a regional game change in climate adaptation policy and agrees with the Climate Adaptation Mission board that cutting-edge climate data services provided by Copernicus, Climate-Adapt, the Disaster Risks Management Knowledge Centre and other tools and sources, such as earth observation satellites and in situ sensors (including ground stations, airborne and seaborne sensors) are needed;

51. highlights the need to further invest in space technology to provide relevant information on climate risks and related adaptation measures and to co-operate with the Commission, the JRC, and the EEA to bring these closer to local and regional authorities;

Horizon Europe Missions

52. calls for faster adaptation and implementation of the planned Horizon Europe Mission on ‘Adaptation to Climate Change’ and other adaptation-relevant missions, including those on soil, health, climate-neutral cities and oceans, once they are endorsed;

53. stresses the crucial importance of the two climate-focused missions, ‘a climate-resilient Europe’ and ‘100 climate-neutral cities by 2030’; and calls on cities and regions representing the full geographical, social, and economic diversity of the European territories to cooperate to meet the EU climate neutrality objective;

54. suggests that the Joint Research Centre (JRC) of the EU could develop and organise research and learning activities in collaboration with the CoR to support EU mission activities under the heading ‘Science Meets Regions’. This would boost the impact of the missions and the results achieved would be promptly shared for application across Europe;

55. underlines its commitment, in line with the Joint Action Plan signed by Commissioner Gabriel, to implementing the EU Missions together with DG RTD. The CoR underlines that the EU Missions need an effective multilevel governance system, regional place-based innovation ecosystems and Smart Specialisation Strategies to reach their targets;

56. contributes to EU Missions through active local level engagement and provides support for the establishment of ERA Hubs by actively contributing to experiments, rapid prototyping, testing, demonstrating and scaling-up of the mission research and innovation outcomes;

57. stresses the importance of integrating Horizon Europe, joint demonstrating and delivery instruments, local level public-private partnership innovation initiatives, and MLG financing instruments to regional smart specialisation strategies;

58. stresses the vital importance of partnership contracts between the EU and the demonstrating cities and regions in Smart City and Climate Adaptation Missions to reach the European-wide influence, forerunner climate targets, and broad-scale results;

59. proposes the following three-step approach to the climate-related missions: 1) an open interactive process to get regions and cities involved in different ways in the mission; 2) signing the required number of forerunner communities up for testing the innovative mission solutions in real-life settings and 3) agreeing on the contribution of demonstrator communities to the large-scale deployment of innovative solutions and to the scaling-up of the best solutions for European-wide use;

60. proposes cooperation between the Climate Adaptation Mission and the Covenant of Mayors to engage as many cities and regions as possible, with the objective of developing a good understanding of, preparing for and managing climate risks; the CoR covenant ambassadors can play an active role in this process;

61. strongly supports the creation of a Policy Support Facility aimed at providing direct technical assistance to help develop and implement their adaptation strategies and plans; considers that this instrument should include an adaptation helpdesk, hands-on workshops, and other instruments to be created in synergy with the Covenant of Mayors, and stands ready to support the design and implementation of this facility;

Key partnerships and COP26

62. highlights the UNFCCC’s COP26 as a crucial milestone in securing the EU’s place at the forefront of global climate action, and stresses that ongoing activities and commitments by regions and cities should have a solid and visible role at the COP26;

63. calls on the UNFCCC to strengthen the visibility and recognition of subnational governments in global climate diplomacy and activities, with international communities and network organisations, such as ICLEI, Under2Coalition, Regions4, Climate Alliance, and UCLG United Cities and Local Governments;

64. recommends increasing the role of cities and regions in the Climate Adapt Platform (*) and is keen to deepen cooperation, especially with the European Environment Agency, the EIT Climate KIC, and the Joint Research Centre: recommends that they provide regular updates on scientific knowledge and projects relating to climate change, its impact and vulnerability in the main biogeographical regions in Europe;

(*) https://climate-adapt.eea.europa.eu/
65. calls on the Commission to strongly recommend that the Member States involve subnational governments in drafting their adaptation strategies and in promoting the development of regional and local strategies, as well as a regional breakdown of national strategies; the CoR stands ready to organise multilevel energy and climate dialogues for this purpose.

Brussels, 1 July 2021.

The President
of the European Committee of the Regions
Apostolos TZITZIKOSTAS