

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions — The Seventh Environment Action Programme and the Sustainable City

(2014/C 271/05)

Rapporteur Daiva Matonienė (LT/ECR), Member of Šiauliai City Council

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I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

A. *General context*

1. In the interest of efficient use of resources and of reaching low-carbon economy that protects and grows natural capital and safeguards public health and wellbeing, the 7th Environment Action Programme (EAP) is meant to achieve the environmental and climate change targets in which the Union has already agreed, to provide a legal framework for environmental policy up to 2020 and to set out a long-term vision until 2050 for the EU and its Member States.

2. The European Commission has asked the Committee of the Regions to issue an opinion on the proposed measures for implementing the seventh Environment Action Programme's eighth objective and posed four specific questions:

- (a) How can the European Union encourage cities to take urban planning and design measures that reflect the principles of sustainable development?
- (b) How could dissemination of information about existing and available EU funding instruments for promoting sustainable development of cities be improved?
- (c) How could the EU foster more efficient exchange of information and know-how on the best ideas and measures concerning sustainable cities in the EU?
- (d) How can cities of more than 100 000 be encouraged to contend for the title of European Green Capital?

B. *Background*

3. Some 350 million people in the EU (70 %) live in towns and cities of more than 5 000 people. In all likelihood, 80 % of Europeans will live in cities or suburbs by 2020. Quality of life and global environmental conditions directly depend on the state of the urban environment. The largest share of environmental pollutants originates in cities.

4. Many cities essentially face similar environmental challenges: improving air quality, reducing noise pollution, traffic congestion and greenhouse gas emissions, preventing biodiversity loss, water shortages, floods and damage from storms, preserving green space, rehabilitating contaminated land, and improving waste management and energy provision.

5. The CoR stresses the tangible benefits of implementing sustainable policies and measures including improved environment, better public health, enhanced quality of life, more regulatory certainty for industry, and less market distortions. Also, highlights that the costs of not implementing EU environmental legislation are broadly estimated at around EUR 50 billion a year in health costs and direct costs to the environment ⁽¹⁾.

⁽¹⁾ Commission study, 'the cost of not implementing the environmental acquis', COWI 2011.

6. Underlines that sustainable cities will be defined by their ability to achieve climate change mitigation targets. Given the concentration of population in urban areas, notes that cities will need to play a leading part in the reduction of greenhouse gases if global temperature increase is not to exceed 2 degrees C; and cities are best placed to encourage the behavioural change that must accompany the radical transformation of energy and transport infrastructure. Further recognises that the ability of cities to adapt to inevitable climate change and extreme weather will also determine their economic and social sustainability and therefore the competitiveness of the European Union.

7. In assessing and planning EU measures related to the development of sustainable cities, global context should also be taken into account. The UN conference on sustainable development of 22 June 2012 adopted the Rio+20 Declaration, which underlines the importance of an inclusive and environment-friendly economy and sets post-2015 goals for sustainable development.

8. In line with the Rio+20 Declaration, the CoR considers a sustainable city to be one that promotes a society that is economically, environmentally and socially sustainable, that has only a minimal impact on the environment, promotes new technologies, creates jobs, preserves natural and cultural heritage and offers social protection. It is also a city which empowers its local community to participate in the local decision-making process.

C. *The key principles*

9. Promoting sustainable cities requires a holistic approach that provides answers both to questions of environmental protection and to the social and economic problems of cities, as well as addressing how cities can build resilience to disasters. The concept of a sustainable city has to be about more than just environmental protection. The challenge is to ensure that the criteria are based on the appropriate levels of information from the different subject areas and relevant to the different kinds of cities across the EU. This is essential in order to ensure that the criteria are easy to use for any city which wants to work towards sustainability, and to create public ownership of this process. A holistic and sustainable approach will be a pre-requisite for future urban development. For further proposals on urban policies and on resilience policies, the CoR refers to the opinion on the EU Urban Agenda and the opinion on managing risks to achieve resilience ⁽²⁾.

10. Making cities sustainable requires sound environmental protection measures which need to be mainstreamed into all relevant policy areas and need to be integrated with other sector-specific strategies and activities, including those aimed to create jobs and growth.

11. Under the principle of subsidiarity, sustainable urban planning and spatial planning fall within the remit of the Member States, it is imperative that this principle be upheld and that LRAs are involved at the earliest stage possible in drafting those policies, as well as implementing and enforcing them on the ground. The European Union can take supporting action and encourage cities, regions and Member States to exchange information, share best practices and learn from each other.

12. While EU measures, financing arrangements and priorities also are geared mainly towards large cities of more than 100 000 people, notes that approximately 56 % of EU towns and cities have a population of between 5 000 and 100 000. Underlines the importance of the accumulative impact of small- and medium-sized towns' and cities' sustainability and underlines that there is considerable scope in smaller towns to conceive and implement the principles of sustainable urban development.

13. Underlines the need for an overall discussion on the direction of sustainable cities with the aim of establishing common goals by 2050.

⁽²⁾ COR-2013-06902; CoR-2014-02646.

D. *Proposed measures*

I. **How could the European Union encourage cities to take urban planning and design measures that reflect the principles of sustainable development?**

a) *Multilevel governance and the mechanism*

14. Towns and cities are responsible for implementing measures related to urban planning, development, environmental protection and energy policy, which is why they are ideally suited as a level of government to implementing sustainable urban development measures in the most cost-effective way possible.

15. The principle of multi-level governance should be strengthened, since success depends on cooperation on sustainable urban development and on a common approach between the cities which have responsibility for urban development, and the other levels (regional, national and European) which contribute to the overall framework for sustainability.

16. The CoR, as the EU institution representing the voice of regions and cities of EU and the point of contact for many local networks, should be a central element within this governance system. This will ensure that EU legislation better reflects the situation and needs of towns and cities. This would also allow them to create ownership for urban sustainability measures.

17. In order to achieve sustainable cities, a combined bottom up/top down approach is required. It is not enough for cities to take the initiative. What is needed is a common approach coordinated at EU level with the appropriate degree of flexibility that allows towns and cities to assess themselves against common sustainable city criteria and pursue the sustainability goals for cities by taking their own measures. It is also necessary to facilitate access to EU funding mechanisms to this end. The recommended EU criteria, which could build on the Reference Framework for European Sustainable Cities (RFSC), would be used to assess a town's or city's sustainability as well as its strengths and weaknesses. Based on the results, the town or city could give direction to its development and decide what needs to be done to improve its position. These criteria could be weighted differently according to their level of importance.

18. Local, regional and national levels of governance should aim for horizontal and vertical coordination, including inter-municipal and cross-border cooperation, ensuring a comprehensive approach to urban development in order to avoid making duplications and isolated and uncoordinated investments.

19. The CoR welcomes the new instrument of 'Partnership Implementation Agreements' and asks the Commission for more clarity and guidance in involving LRAs in this instrument.

20. The Committee of the regions therefore proposes that common goals for sustainable towns and cities by 2050 be set at EU level, based on a catalogue of recommended criteria. The measures which are necessary to reach the goals should already be included into the European Commission's country-specific recommendations, which provide guidance on how to implement the objectives of the Europe 2020 strategy. The development of the long term goals and the necessary criteria should be based on the existing initiatives in this area including the Leipzig Charter on sustainable European cities.

b) *Public participation and additional funding mechanisms*

21. The CoR encourages local and regional authorities to discuss their respective sustainable urban development concepts with all relevant stakeholders at the different levels of governance. In this regard, public consultations are an excellent way to involve citizens in the strategies to be defined. Once criteria for sustainability have been developed, public debate about the performance measured against these criteria could encourage more cities to follow on the path towards sustainability.

22. Calls on the European Commission to work with the Member States towards a common approach to measure supporting the development of sustainable cities and to collect information on which successful mechanisms exist already for such support. A common approach and flexible procedures would allow cities to choose the best measures for sustainable urban development in the long run.

23. Cities and towns should promote an innovative and effective partnership between the public and private sectors so that projects that reflect the idea of the sustainable city are implemented as efficiently as possible;

II. How could the dissemination of information about existing and available EU funding instruments to promote sustainable development in towns and cities be improved, and how could the EU promote a more efficient exchange of information and know-how in terms of the best ideas and measures for sustainable towns and cities in the EU (Commission questions (b) and (c))?

24. Existing funding options and structures need to be used including those available under the LIFE plus programme to support pilot projects. The EIB programme for funding energy-efficiency measures is already being deployed with success and the possibility to develop similar programmes in other areas relevant to sustainability should be explored.

25. Project grouping, a mechanism sometimes deployed in practice, which groups several municipalities with the same objective, should be promoted. It facilitates the financing of small projects that are of importance to the region.

26. Public awareness raising and providing incentives is one of the key factors in making sustainable cities a reality. Measures aimed at water conservation, expanding recycling and composting plants, boosting public transport use and saving energy, etc. do not by themselves amount to active and broad public involvement in building sustainable towns and cities. The CoR calls on the European Commission to advise cities on possibilities to use visual information measures allowing the public to be better informed at any given time about the state of the urban environment (information about air pollution, traffic congestion, etc.).

27. The Committee of Regions welcomes the work of the European Commission on providing a web-based portal as a single point of contact and encourages its members to provide relevant information if and when required. Calls on the Member States to make sure that information about criteria, funding instruments and initiatives reaches towns and cities. Relevant communication plans should be drawn up with the involvement of EU institutions, their representations in the Member States, the associations of the local and regional authorities and any other relevant stakeholders.

28. The existing platforms and facilities and their databases and initiatives should be integrated into the EU-level efforts to support sustainable cities and used to encourage cooperation between them, and between the cities and regions already involved in networks such as the Covenant of Mayors, the Reference Framework for European Sustainable Cities (RFSC), Energy Cities, Eurocities, ICLEI, the Global Climate Change Alliance.

29. The European Commission should review and reinforce its communication strategy in the light of the new funding period, and encourage both the Member States and towns and cities to take advantage of the 5 % of the ERDF earmarked sustainable urban development.

30. The Committee of the Regions, providing the experience of the local and regional authorities and working together with the European Commission and the stakeholders, will continue to disseminate information and promote good practices on sustainable towns and cities as well as available funding opportunities.

31. The CoR reiterates its support to the development of Structured Implementation and Information Frameworks (SIIFs) for all key EU environmental laws and calls on the EC to involve LRAs to participate in the SIIFs.

32. Underlines that sustainable and environmentally friendly urban mobility plays an important role in the sustainability of our cities. For further proposals on sustainability and sustainable transport in cities, the CoR refers to the opinion on the Urban Mobility Package ⁽³⁾.

33. The EU should further promote and, where appropriate, expand existing initiatives that support innovation and best practice in cities, networking and exchange, and cities should be encouraged to take the lead in sustainable urban development. With this in mind, the CoR points to innovative measures in the field of sustainable urban development to be funded via the ERFD between 2014 and 2020. Such measures include pilot projects to test new solutions to EU-relevant problems connected to sustainable urban development.

⁽³⁾ COR-2014-00090.

34. The CoR also suggests the EC to support and expand projects put forward by local networks and which proved to be successful such as peer-review and mutual learning activities, including site visits, green twinning, partner-to-partner mentoring and coaching, work shadowing, review and assessments and mobility schemes for city experts.

35. Focal points for sustainable urban development could be set up at national and at regional and local level. With their help, specific measures, including exchange programmes for experts, could be coordinated more easily. Energy agencies and administrations of NUTS II level development regions could play such a coordinating role. They already have well-established contacts with the cities under their authority together with experience in coordinating European programmes.

III. How can cities of more than 100 000 be encouraged to contend for the title of European Green Capital?

36. The contest for the title of European Green Capital has been quite successful and should be developed further. The example of the European Capital of Culture shows that an award with a legal and financial base has even greater potential to encourage cities to participate and to generate long term results. The CoR is in favour of the European Green Capital being developed in this direction.

37. One aspect of the European Green Capital Award, which should be reconsidered is the fact that according to the current eligibility threshold, only cities of more than 100 000 people can contend. The CoR therefore suggests that a second category for cities and towns of at least 50 000 people, could be considered so as to open up new opportunities to Europe's smaller towns and cities. It would then be appropriate for the criteria for this category to be adapted to the resources and needs of smaller cities in order to allow a maximum of candidates to enter competition.

38. The CoR calls to further reinforce the European Green Capital Network to allow winners of and contestants for the title of European Green Capital to make their cities known to the general public, compare notes on successful outcomes and technical ideas, and be able to use their own platform or existing structures to this end.

39. The CoR actively promotes the European Green Capital Award and suggests the European Commissioner for the environment to write a letter not only to all Member States requesting that they raise awareness about the reward among their cities and regions, but he/she could also address this to environmental organisations that closely cooperate with cities and towns.

40. A prize awarded by the European Commission for the best 'European Eco-Neighbourhood' might be considered, in order to foster the restoration of neighbourhoods identified as poor or vulnerable, and to encourage local communities to get involved in managing their own areas.

41. In addition to the EC initiatives, other awards (for example a Green Flag Award, Biodiversity conservation, Green transport promotion etc.) at local, regional and national levels could be considered.

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*The President
of the Committee of the Regions*
Ramón Luis VALCÁRCEL SISO