

**Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions – Covenant of Mayors post 2020**

(2020/C 79/06)

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**POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

**The important role played by the Covenant of Mayors in European climate policies**

1. points out that the major international studies on climate change <sup>(1)</sup> underscore the urgent need to implement ambitious climate policies and that European public opinion is becoming increasingly concerned about this issue. In this respect, the Committee looks forward to the proposals for the establishment of a European Green Deal and a European Climate Law by the new European Commission and calls on the European Commission and all the Member States to acknowledge that the Covenant of Mayors is a key tool for responding to the climate emergency and for steering local and regional authorities (LRAs) in the transition towards climate neutrality and climate change adaptation, with due regard for the commitments made under the Paris Agreement and the 2050 long-term strategy <sup>(2)</sup>. It can be a key complement to the involvement of local and regional authorities in drawing up integrated national energy and climate plans;

2. recalls that the Covenant brings together cities with greater ambitions and extensive experience in local climate policy, often exceeding the standards of their respective Member States: Covenant signatories and coordinators should therefore be considered privileged interlocutors by Member States when working on the involvement of local and regional authorities in drawing up integrated national energy and climate plans;

3. calls on the European Commission to be more vigorous in supporting the 2050 target in the Covenant of Mayors. The Committee also asks the Commission to consider expanding the initiative's remit to ensure a more effective response to the cross-cutting challenges and opportunities presented to LRAs by climate neutrality, including new optional sectors such as industry, agriculture, forest management, and new environmental issues such as air quality, circular economy, biodiversity, biocultural diversity and natural carbon sinks so as to support the ambition of the most advanced municipalities. The move to include new sectors should focus primarily on the action plan, avoiding imposing further reporting and monitoring requirements on signatories; At the same time, it is important to support other forms of climate-change and environment-related cooperation that local and regional authorities in many Member States are involved in and to promote integration with the Covenant of Mayors. Where these local and regional authorities have the relevant potential to contribute to local efforts, they should be duly recognised and supported;

4. reiterates its call on the European Commission to reinforce its recognition of the strategic role which the CoR plays in the governance of the Covenant of Mayors, including its global aspects, while ensuring that this initiative remains fully true to its European origins and continues to respond to the needs of EU cities at the same time as promoting climate action all over the world;

<sup>(1)</sup> <https://www.ipcc.ch/2018/10/08/summary-for-policymakers-of-ipcc-special-report-on-global-warming-of-1-5c-approved-by-governments/>

<sup>(2)</sup> <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52018DC0773>

5. endorses the Green City Accord initiative and calls on the European Commission to take this opportunity to explore the possibility of including new environmental issues such as air quality, biodiversity, noise pollution and the circular economy in the protocol to the Covenant of Mayors. This should not involve more complex minimum requirements for signatories, but it could give them the opportunity to tackle new aspects on a progressive basis and to face up to the challenges of mitigating and adapting to climate change and of the energy transition using a more cross-cutting and holistic approach which leverages synergies;

6. considers that the sustainable development of LRAs must be structured around the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) <sup>(3)</sup>. The Committee accordingly considers that the Covenant must be solidly incorporated into the SDG framework and seen as one of the key tools for monitoring the way it is implemented at local level. The Committee therefore calls on the European Commission and the Covenant of Mayors Office to link the Covenant's methodology to the SDGs, simply by associating Covenant measures with the relevant SDG;

7. is pleased that the Covenant of Mayors has taken on a global dimension and is working to establish a consistent reference framework, and considers that the Global Covenant is a major tool for diplomacy and dialogue with third countries. The Committee also acknowledges that it plays a pivotal role in ensuring that the EU's efforts are not undermined by lack of ambition on the part of foreign countries. Nonetheless, it warns that it is important to ensure that efforts to harmonise the Covenant's reference framework at global level do not drive a wedge between it and the needs and practices of the EU's LRAs, thereby compromising its future success;

8. welcomes the various bottom-up initiatives implemented by the European Commission for cities and regions, such as the Coal regions in transition platform, the Smart Specialisation Platform on Energy (S3PEnergy), Clean Energy for EU Islands, Smart Cities and Communities, and Green capital. In this respect, the Committee calls on the European Commission to build on the mapping exercise already done through the One Stop Shop for cities <sup>(4)</sup>, and to fully explore the aims and roles of these initiatives and in particular the potential synergies with the Covenant of Mayors, in order to move towards the most user-friendly structure possible. This approach would help to establish a clear, consistent framework for the different initiatives linked to the SDGs, without compromising their specificities and individual features;

9. reminds Member States that the subnational level should be consulted in the development of national climate and energy plans and calls on the Member States to factor in the experience and feedback of the Covenant of Mayors community when drawing up, reviewing and implementing plans and 2050 long-term strategies as well as that of the more than 400 energy agencies in the EU, many of which are coordinators or supporters of the Covenant of Mayors and responsible for regional energy planning;

### **Governance of the Covenant of Mayors**

10. reiterates support for a system of Regionally and Locally Determined Contributions (RLDCs) as a way to formally acknowledge, monitor and encourage the reduction of carbon emissions by cities, local governments and regions globally. The European Commission is asked to work with the CoR to explore how SECAPs or equivalent plans could act as RLDCs providing local contributions to the UN Paris Climate Agreement;

11. notes that the Covenant of Mayors has grown and evolved over the years to cope with a landscape which has changed profoundly and that it is paramount that it be restructured if it is to meet current and future expectations. In this regard, the Committee points out that it can itself play a strategic role in providing the European Commission with a constant, two-way channel of communication with local and regional communities. In order to guarantee this, it asks the European Commission to further formalise the CoR's role within the European Covenant of Mayors, partly by including the CoR among the bodies responsible for monitoring and steering the initiative;

12. calls on the European Commission to work with the Covenant of Mayors Office and the CoR to ensure that the Covenant of Mayors or similar national and regional initiatives involving the local and regional levels, when compatible, are incorporated into national reference frameworks, and particularly into the national energy and climate plans and the national 2050 long-term strategies. In this regard, the Committee asks the European Commission to establish a group of experts on the Covenant of Mayors, to include representatives of the national coordinators, the CoR ambassadors and representatives of the Covenant of Mayors Office, the European Commission and the JRC, as well as other experts, including representatives of other climate and environment cooperation initiatives, in order to hold regular discussions on the challenges and opportunities involved in implementing the Covenant of Mayors in the various countries including in connection with other initiatives of this kind that already exist on the ground;

<sup>(3)</sup> <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/>

<sup>(4)</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/info/eu-regional-and-urban-development/topics/cities-and-urban-development\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/eu-regional-and-urban-development/topics/cities-and-urban-development_en)

13. calls on the European Commission and the Covenant of Mayors Office to strengthen the national strategy, and in particular the role of national and regional coordinators and supporter. Regional coordinators should have a stronger remit and should be supported by the European Commission, from a technical and financial point of view, partly by means of appropriate financing under the ESI Funds. This should enable Coordinators to provide in particular small local authorities with access to technical assistance. In this regard it calls on the Managing authorities to consider the crucial role of Covenant-related activities in their territory in tackling climate, energy and environmental challenges and invites them to take these activities into account in the planning for the next programming period;

14. points out that it is strategically important to reinforce the network of national and primarily regional coordinators in order to ensure that the Covenant continues to be relevant and a key mechanism for supporting the implementation and monitoring of national and regional policies and for the exchange of best practice. The Committee therefore asks the European Commission to ensure that the Covenant of Mayors Office has sufficient resources to coordinate the national partners and provide them with technical support, and to provide for parallel mechanisms which will finance national coordination activities;

15. points out that the Covenant's regional coordinators play a key role in supporting small and medium-sized municipalities which have signed up, both during the initial planning stage and when assembling, implementing and monitoring the actions. Also notes the important role of 'the Supporters', supporting organisations that facilitate accession to the Covenant by playing an intermediary role and leading promotion. The Committee therefore asks the European Commission to support coordinators and to enhance the role of the Supporters in order to ensure that their role is sustainable in the long term;

16. calls on the European Commission to ensure that the CoR is represented in the European Covenant's Political Board, providing a stronger link between the EU-level management of the Covenant and the Covenant's ambassadors, in order to provide political support for the initiative, promote the Covenant and assist dialogue with national bodies. In this regard, the Committee undertakes to make the necessary resources available so that the network of ambassadors for the Covenant becomes increasingly active and effective, in close cooperation with the European Commission and the Covenant of Mayors Office;

17. calls on the European Commission to make Covenant of Mayors data publically available and to geo-reference them: these data could contribute to create a European climate neutrality observatory, to the Urban Data Platform <sup>(?)</sup> and to the Energy Poverty Observatory which is required to collect disaggregated data, at least at NUTS 2 level;

18. at the same time, calls on local and regional authorities to take the Covenant of Mayors as an opportunity to boost the capacity of their own administrations and to train their own staff, avoiding excessive externalisation of work, which could compromise their administrations' ability to implement and update the SECAPs;

19. asks the EU JRC to establish closer ties with the Covenant's regional coordinators and to provide them with technical and scientific support when they gather and analyse the data, and when providing the municipalities with sufficient technical assistance for the implementation of the SECAPs, identifying financing and establishing interactive processes;

20. asks the European Commission, the JRC and the Covenant of Mayors Office to work further towards a simpler, stable monitoring framework which avoids the need for constant training and updates, but which provides at the same time the necessary flexibility to respond to a changing policy environment. Emphasises that monitoring requirements, while important for the functioning and credibility of the Covenant system, must not be an obstacle to local authorities, especially smaller ones, joining the Covenant and benefiting from its potential to encourage ambitious initiatives. Against this backdrop, also asks to explore how the monitoring exercise itself could be **better used**, in terms of both communication and procedures in order to facilitate the widest possible participation in the network;

21. suggests that consideration also be given to the possibility of setting up thematic networks between signatories who share similar characteristics or face similar challenges resulting, for example, from their size or geographical, social or economic situation;

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<sup>(?)</sup> <https://urban.jrc.ec.europa.eu/#/en>

22. asks the European Commission and the Covenant of Mayors Office to promote, in the context of the SECAPs, specific actions (particularly in the field of climate adaptation) which go beyond municipal, regional and national administrative boundaries, with a view to establishing groupings built around fragile environmental situations;

23. asks the European Commission and the JRC, with the support of the regional coordinators and supporters, to reconsider the procedure for evaluating the SECAPs to make it quicker and establish more user-friendly indicators geared to policy decisions. Efforts should be made to reduce administrative procedures, streamline reporting obligations and improve the use of data.

24. calls on the European Commission and the Covenant office to always use the simplest, most up-to-date and most incisive language and ways of communicating possible in order to ensure that the Covenant of Mayors and other forms of climate and environment-related cooperation of local and regional authorities become recognised as a sustainability brand and as a proof of excellence for climate action where it has achieved certain goals that were set;

### **An interactive transition towards climate neutrality**

25. calls on the European Commission and the Covenant office to promote measures to help signatories that are facing difficulties to meet the targets they committed to by signing the Covenant of Mayors for unforeseen reasons beyond their control;

26. asks the European Commission and the Covenant of Mayors Office to continue developing training and updating for signatories, endeavouring as far as possible to overcome language barriers. The Committee notes that particular attention must be paid to climate change adaptation and energy poverty, issues which are still relatively new and so require considerable efforts by most signatories;

27. asks the European Commission and the Covenant of Mayors Office to continue reinforcing the local-level group of practitioners <sup>(6)</sup> and to make it more transparent by disclosing its membership: this group represents a major resource for ensuring that the Covenant of Mayors' decision-making process takes a bottom-up approach and that the needs of local and regional authorities are taken into proper account. The European Commission could consider organising high-level training for practitioners, alongside and in addition to the existing meetings. This training work, with a particular focus on assisting practitioners from small towns, could be organised with the support of the members of the Academia corner of the Covenant of Mayors community;

28. calls on the European Commission and the Covenant office to develop further the role of the so-called 'academic corner' which aims at creating links between academic and research institutions and local and regional authorities; recalls that such links are of fundamental importance to develop the knowledge and competencies which are needed for the transitions, and that it is also necessary to reinforce the support both for research and studies, and for the dissemination of the results of such activities among the wider Covenant community;

29. asks the European Commission and the Covenant of Mayors Office to continue promoting and spreading good practices for low-cost actions, such as introducing sustainability criteria into municipal actions which are already in place or planned which generally would not require new sources of financing, merely better allocation of the available resources. In this regard, the Committee points out that it is very important to use green, sustainable public procurement across the board. Guidance to develop estimates of staff time and related costs would also be helpful in increasing participation and political oversight;

30. asks the European Commission to focus more closely on the social dimension, starting with energy poverty but including health, vulnerability to climate change, risk management and quality of life;

31. asks the European Commission and the Covenant of Mayors Office to step up the involvement of schools and educational establishments of every level in the development, implementation and review of the SECAPs. This will be pivotal for bringing about the lasting behavioural changes needed to ensure an effective transition towards climate neutrality, as is made quite clear in the 2050 long-term strategy;

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<sup>(6)</sup> <https://www.eumayors.eu/about/support-the-community/group-of-practitioners.html>

32. reiterates that it is of key importance to adopt a 'quintuple helix' approach in order to devise effective, future-proof action plans which are able to manage the complex transition which is necessary: this requires involving the public administration, industry, universities, NGOs and individuals. The Committee asks the European Commission and the Covenant of Mayors Office therefore to reinforce the formal role of the private sector, other non-municipal public bodies (such as health and research facilities), non-profit organisations and civil society, in the development and implementation of the SECAPs.

### **Systemic planning underpinned by suitable financial instruments**

33. asks the European Commission and the Covenant of Mayors Office to propose measures promoting closer ties with local and regional planning, based on sustainable mobility plans and urban planning. The Committee would point out in this regard that the recent IPCC report on Climate Change and Land <sup>(7)</sup> further underscores the pivotal role of land use policies in combating climate change. It also notes that SECAPs should become an effective, flexible and dynamic instrument for local administrations which is closely linked to the other plans and programmes;

34. asks the European Commission to bear in mind that the responsibility for mitigation and adaptation lies largely at local level. This fact needs to be recognised to acknowledge the importance of the SECAPs in the financial systems of the various countries;

35. asks the European Commission and the Covenant of Mayors Office to upgrade the SECAP, making it a comprehensive strategic document to be mainstreamed into the local administration's overall planning processes while taking account of different local needs. Each action should refer to specific plans or instruments already in place in the municipality. SECAPs could also set qualitative or quantitative criteria underpinning the municipality's planning and decision-making processes with a view to achieving the aims of the Covenant of Mayors;

36. asks the European Commission to acknowledge and reward the efforts made by signatories, coordinators and supporters through the EU's most relevant financial instruments. The Member States should be encouraged to follow suit, with a view to ensuring that their national climate and energy plans are implemented properly;

37. invites the European Commission to give a bigger role to regions which are important elements in a system of multi-level governance; asks the Commission in this context to foresee incentives such as burden sharing to encourage regions to achieve the CO<sub>2</sub> reduction targets; also considers that the ESI Funds should comprise mechanisms to support the work of the regional coordinators;

38. considers that having a current SECAP, or an equivalent energy and climate plan, should become a prerequisite for being granted access to all relevant financing programmes (City Facility, Horizon Europe, Life, etc.);

39. recalls that the transversal nature of climate-related action plans could make many of the actions eligible for support by EU funds for rural development and maritime action: encourages therefore Covenant Coordinators to further explore this possibility and the Covenant of Mayors Office to provide guidance in this regards;

40. calls on the European Parliament to explore possible cooperation with the CoR and its members in the context of the CoR Covenant Ambassadors' project in order to increase the reach and visibility of the political support for the Covenant;

41. asks the European Commission to provide the regions with clear guidance, to work with all the competent directorates-general to develop guidelines on how to support the implementation of SECAPs through ERDF Regional Operational Programmes and the ESF, to exchange good practices and to appoint people responsible for assisting the municipalities;

42. asks the EIB to step up communication with the Covenant of Mayors community, with a view to building the capacity of LRAs to make the best use of EIB instruments, focusing on designing tools to support small and medium-sized local authorities;

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(7) IPCC Special Report on Climate Change and Land.

43. endorses the establishment of the European Investment Advisory Hub <sup>(8)</sup>, which provides LRAs with the support and guidance they sorely need in the field of financing opportunities. Nonetheless, the Committee would point out that to date this instrument would seem to have had a limited impact on LRAs. It therefore asks the European Commission to look into why this is the case and to create stronger synergies between this instrument and the bottom-up initiatives, particularly the Covenant of Mayors, and points out that it is ready and willing to support the European Commission in further promoting this instrument and exploring strategies to make it more functional.

Brussels, 5 December 2019.

*The President*  
*of the European Committee of the Regions*  
Karl-Heinz LAMBERTZ

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<sup>(8)</sup> <https://eiah.eib.org/about/initiative-urbis.htm>