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Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions — UNFCCC COP28: the role of subnational authorities in keeping climate ambition on track

(Own-initiative opinion)

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POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS(CoR),

1. is concerned about the alarming findings of the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) AR6 Synthesis Report (SYR), which provides a stark reminder that even with drastic reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, global warming is likely to exceed the threshold of 1,5 °C this century;
2. recalls that the IPCC recognises effective multilevel governance as a key enabler of climate action, which requires inclusive decision processes in planning and implementation, allocation of appropriate resources, institutional review, monitoring and evaluation;
3. welcomes the decision to establish new funding arrangements in response to loss and damage at the 27th Conference of Parties of the UNFCCC (COP27); regrets that COP27 fell short of reaching a consensus to include a clear and decisive pathway to limit global temperature rise to 1,5 °C, including a target for peaking global emissions by 2025 and the swift phase-out of fossil fuels;
4. highlights that all global modelled pathways in the IPCC report that limit warming to 1,5 °C involve rapid and deep GHG emission reductions in all sectors and that mitigation strategies to achieve these reductions include transitioning from fossil fuels to low- or zero-carbon energy sources, demand-side measures and improving efficiency, reducing non-CO₂ emissions, and deploying carbon dioxide removal (CDR) methods to counterbalance residual GHG emissions;
5. expresses concern that 2023 has marked the hottest summer on record globally⁽¹⁾, with many regions and cities experiencing unprecedented temperatures and extreme weather events causing devastating impacts on communities and natural ecosystems; emphasises that any delay in implementing effective measures to mitigate and adapt to climate change will further amplify climate risks, resulting in increasing biodiversity loss, health risks and permanent loss and damage; notes that the Summary for Urban Policymakers of the IPCC AR6 SYR underlines that cities and urban areas will experience the most significant effects of climate change, with local and regional authorities (LRAs) already facing escalating and more severe extreme weather events;

⁽¹⁾ Summer 2023: the hottest on record | Copernicus.

6. highlights that cities and regions are key allies in driving ambition further, both in the lead-up to and at COPs, by providing national negotiators with confidence that the Paris Agreement goals are implemented on the ground; recalls that cities are responsible for over 70 % of global greenhouse gas emissions and consume about 80 % of the world's energy ⁽²⁾ and that LRAs are the closest level to citizens, showcasing the visibility and credibility of climate action;
7. underlines that cities and regions are spearheading ambitious action against climate change despite growing responsibilities placed on them. This is evidenced by the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy (GCoM) 2022 Impact Report, which shows that over 12 500 GCoM signatories across 144 countries are already tackling climate change by improving energy efficiency and sufficiency, investing in renewable energy, addressing energy access and adapting to climate change;
8. underlines that the first Global Stocktake (GST) must lead all Parties and non-Party stakeholders on an urgent and transparent path to accelerate climate action; considers that the GST presents an unmissable opportunity to scale up climate action by working across all levels of governance and sectors, fostering trust, citizen engagement, transparency and accountability; underlines that whilst we must be ambitious in scaling up our climate objectives, any action undertaken must not jeopardise social and economic sustainability, quality jobs and industry, and should aim at the creation of additional green jobs and revitalising local economies; careful attention must be paid to coal and carbon-intensive regions, as well as outermost regions, to ensure a just transition;
9. recognises the critical need to enhance the ambition of some Parties and address the specific challenges faced by less developed regions in combating climate change to guarantee a green and just transition. Calls for targeted support, capacity-building and investment in these regions to ensure their meaningful participation in climate action and resilience-building efforts;

An opportunity for the EU: working for continued cooperation towards, during and beyond COP28

10. welcomes the successful cooperation with the European Commission and co-legislators at COP27 and reaffirms its commitment to strengthening synergies and promoting the engagement of LRAs in UNFCCC processes; invites the European Commission to further support the participation of European Climate Pact Ambassadors at COP28;
11. calls on the Spanish Presidency of the Council of the EU to recognise in the Council Conclusions on the preparations for COP28 the leadership of LRAs in accelerating and broadening climate mitigation and adaptation action, while effectively engaging citizens in the transformative process to sustainable lifestyles and patterns of consumption and production, as well as to stress the need for increased involvement of LRAs in the process of updating and implementing nationally determined contributions (NDCs), national adaptation plans (NAPs) and long-term strategies;
12. welcomes the recognition of the role of subnational governments in the European Parliament Resolution on COP27 and encourages the European Parliament to further develop these messages in its Resolution on COP28; highlights the importance of strong coordinated action between the European Parliament and the CoR delegations to COP28, ensuring there is a reference to the role of cities and regions in the COP28 final documents;

⁽²⁾ UN-Habitat Strategic Plan 2020-2023.

13. acknowledges the EU's pioneering role in becoming the first climate neutral continent by 2050 and the progress made in the adoption of the Fit for 55 package and efforts to strengthen the at least 55 % reduction target for 2030; underlines the importance of fully benefiting of the revision process of National Energy Climate Plans (NECPs) as an effective instrument to implement the Fit for 55 targets; stands ready to actively contribute to the establishment of a new EU climate target for 2040, in line with the urgency of the climate emergency; highlights that many cities and regions already have more ambitious targets to achieve climate neutrality well ahead of 2040; at the same time, underlines the need for support to the most vulnerable citizens through a fair and inclusive sustainable transition that will also aim to drastically reduce energy poverty;

14. emphasises that the climate crisis should be mainstreamed across all European policies and therefore all policies should be climate-proofed as stated in the European Climate Law;

15. remains committed to contribute to the EU's leadership in international climate negotiations through enhanced subnational climate diplomacy and to engage all CoR external relations bodies (ARLEM, Corleap, Joint Consultative Committees, peer-to-peer cooperation) with a view to ensuring that commitments made at global level are translated into tangible action on the ground;

Advancing local mitigation and adaptation action to meet the Paris Agreement goals

Mitigation action

16. highlights that the objective of global energy security is not to be considered an alternative to the objectives of the Paris Agreement and urges Parties not to compromise between these objectives and to speed up the shift to renewable energy, low carbon safe and sustainable energy production, and ultimately phase out the use of fossil fuels without placing disproportionately high costs on fossil-fuel-reliant cities and regions;

17. reaffirms the principle of a just transition and emphasises the pivotal role of subnational governments in accelerating a just and clean energy transition that is socially compatible with local and regional contexts and needs, and that prevents energy and mobility poverty; stresses the paramount importance of re-skilling and upskilling, particularly of transitioning workforce sectors;

18. reiterates that the Paris Agreement states that food security must not be jeopardised and that Parties to the agreement must make efforts to eradicate poverty;

19. calls on all Parties to take into account cost-effectiveness and technological neutrality in achieving greenhouse gas emission reductions and removals and increasing resilience in order to ensure the most appropriate and suitable technology for their needs while keeping a stable, reliable and diverse energy system with costs viable for citizens;

20. reaffirms the steadfast commitment of LRAs to accelerate climate action, sometimes demonstrating greater ambition than their national governments⁽³⁾, as shown by cities and regions in initiatives such as the Race to Zero, Race to Resilience, MI Urban Transitions Mission, Climate Action Pathways, the Global Covenant of Mayors, Local Green Deals, and networks such as ICLEI, Regions4, Under2 Coalition, C40 cities, Climate Alliance and many others;

21. highlights that within the EU, over 11 000 municipalities signatories of the Covenant of Mayors are working to reduce their emissions, increase their resilience and tackle energy poverty, and over 100 cities participating in the EU Mission on 100 Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities are committed to achieving climate neutrality by 2030;

⁽³⁾ For instance, 75 % of C40 cities are cutting emissions faster than their respective national average.

22. highlights the importance of vertical integration in climate policies and urges Parties to include subnational climate commitments, actions and achievements in their NDCs and NAPs; points out that LRAs possess mandates and responsibilities in crucial emitting sectors, such as transport and land use, and that tracking progress in such sectors is needed to meet national targets;

23. highlights that in the EU, the contributions of LRAs to achieve national targets should be formally recognised by including a call on EU Member States to quantify subnational action in the upcoming revision of the Regulation on the Governance of the Energy Union and Climate Action;

24. welcomes the recommendations of the High-Level Expert Group on the Net-Zero Emissions Commitments of Non-State Entities ⁽⁴⁾, emphasising the need to develop stronger and clearer standards for net-zero emissions pledges by businesses, financial institutions, cities and regions; encourages Parties to facilitate data access and support LRAs with tools and capacity to develop data-driven scenarios, track progress and implement science-based policy-making, which can align national goals and local plans more effectively;

25. reiterates the commitment of LRAs to broadly share their knowledge, expertise, lessons learned and innovation power in climate action, in order to contribute to national and international efforts in reaching the Paris goals;

26. emphasises the importance of comprehensive skills development and education programmes at the local level to equip communities, especially vulnerable groups, with the knowledge and skills needed for climate adaptation and mitigation efforts. Encourages governments and stakeholders to prioritise reskilling and upskilling initiatives within local communities;

Adaptation to climate change

27. welcomes the decision taken at COP27 to initiate the development of a framework for the Global Goal on Adaptation (GGA) and reiterates that LRAs are the most suitable actors to define adaptation goals, as they retain first-hand knowledge of both the resilience needs and solutions of their population and territories; therefore, strongly recommends that Parties build NAPs that are based on subnational actions;

28. recalls that in the EU, natural disasters affected nearly 50 million people between 1980 and 2020 and caused an average of EUR 12 billion in economic losses each year ⁽⁵⁾; recognises the unequal distribution of these losses, harming cities and regions that already face challenges such as low economic growth, demographic decline or high youth unemployment;

29. calls for locally-led adaptation approaches that enable affected communities to act as the primary agents of change and reiterates the importance of reducing the risks and effects of 'maladaptation'; points out that climate change disproportionately affects the most vulnerable, including children, the elderly, people with disabilities and indigenous groups, and people living in vulnerable conditions (such as conflict areas or other areas disproportionately affected by climate change);

30. underlines that the IPCC reports recognise that women's capacity to adapt and fight climate change are often constrained due to their roles in their household and society, institutional barriers and social norms; encourages Parties to continue advancing gender-responsive climate policy by further implementing the Lima Work Programme on Gender and the Gender Action Plan, and by ensuring women's equal representation in decision-making processes; strongly believes that women should not be seen as vulnerable beneficiaries but as effective actors mitigating and adapting to climate change;

⁽⁴⁾ Integrity matters: net zero commitments by businesses, financial institutions, cities and regions.

⁽⁵⁾ Overview of natural and man-made disaster risks the European Union may face: 2020 edition.

31. welcomes de UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's general comment No 26 on children's rights and the environment with a special focus on climate change; notes that LRAs are the closest level to address the differentiated impacts of climate change on children and to ensure rights of children, support child- and gender-responsive climate action and implement policies that ensure the full respect and enjoyment of human rights of children;

32. underlines how, despite the progress made at COP27 with the launch of the Sharm el-Sheikh Adaptation Agenda, current global financial flows for adaptation are insufficient and encourages Parties to provide credible targets and plans for deploying this capital;

33. welcomes the inclusion of biodiversity as one of the themes under consideration for the GGA framework, as climate change severely damages and destroys biodiversity, protection and restoration of biodiversity also contribute to climate change adaptation; in line with the Sharm el-Sheikh Implementation Plan, encourages the Parties to consider nature-based solutions as key tools supporting climate change mitigation and adaptation, while producing significant co-benefits in terms of health and quality of life; in in this regard, highlights the devastating impact that Russia's illegal war of aggression against Ukraine has had on biodiversity, destroying crucial ecosystems, which is having a very significant impact on animals and people;

34. emphasises the importance of addressing the interlinkages between climate, biodiversity and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); is committed to ongoing efforts in aligning and coordinating processes among the UNFCCC, UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and UN SDGs to promote synergy and harmonisation;

Loss and damage

35. welcomes the progress made at COP27 in operationalising the Santiago Network and the decision to establish new funding arrangements for responding to loss and damage in developing countries which are particularly vulnerable and are already experiencing irreversible damage caused by climate change which will be exacerbated in the years to come; recalls that LRAs have already shown leadership in addressing loss and damage, as evidenced by financial pledges from Scotland and Wallonia, demonstrating that cooperation between the Global North and Global South is raising ambition;

36. emphasises that LRAs have an essential role in diagnosing, assessing and shaping responses based on the best available data concerning the needs, risks and threats of their population and territories, as highlighted in the Scottish Government's Practical Action for Addressing Loss and Damage;

37. highlights that decentralised delivery of loss and damage finance through local governments can guarantee that finance is more readily available at local level when shocks occur, and that investments are geared to respond to local conditions and channelled more effectively towards citizens' priorities;

From commitments to implementation: bridging gaps to meet the Paris Agreement goals through accelerated local and subnational action

38. notes that investing in local climate action will result in the creation of additional green jobs, revitalised local economies and reduced unemployment rates, as well as healthier communities and more health-related economic benefits;

39. underlines the need to climate-proof all financial flows, and to move from finance commitment to disbursement of climate finance, and strongly calls for direct access to climate funding for LRAs as this is essential to provide tailored and effective solutions that address the unique challenges faced by communities within their respective territories;

40. strongly recommends increasing direct support and technical assistance to LRAs; reiterates the importance of supporting capacity building and targeted training programmes to facilitate the use of climate funds and financing options through the creation of clear implementation pipelines;

41. welcomes the EU Missions on Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities and on Adaptation to Climate Change as replicable models that could be expanded not only within the EU but also in other regions worldwide; calls on the European Commission to propose direct funds via the EU Mission on Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities to implement Green Deal projects on the ground;

42. underscores the importance of mobilising financial resources from all sources, including the private and public sector at regional, national and international levels; recognises the role of international financial institutions and Multilateral Development Banks in mobilising climate finance and calls upon these institutions to ensure that LRAs have streamlined access to funding without unnecessary bureaucratic hurdles;

43. stresses the need for closer cooperation with LRAs in defining relevant fiscal measures, in line with the Paris Agreement's recognition of 'the importance of integrated, holistic and balanced non-market approaches to enable voluntary cooperation being available to Parties to assist in the implementation of their NDCs, (...), in a coordinated and effective manner ⁽⁶⁾', and underlines that this would encourage Parties, LRAs, the private sector and civil society to actively engage in the research, development and implementation of non-market approaches;

44. calls for increased coordination to respond to misinformation and disinformation campaigns aiming to discredit local climate action and for adequate resources to raise awareness, build capacity and engage local communities with climate action;

From recognition to partnership: catalysing subnational contributions to UNFCCC processes

45. welcomes the launch of the COP27 Presidency Sustainable Urban Resilience for the Next Generation (SURGE) Initiative, as well as the organisation of the first Ministerial Meeting on Urbanization and Climate and invites the United Arab Emirates (UAE) Presidency to continue this Ministerial Meeting at COP28 and actively participate in the SURGE initiative;

46. welcomes the COP28 Presidency's commitment to ensure the first-ever global delegation of mayors at the World Climate Action Summit and include local climate priorities and contributions in the COP28 programme;

47. welcomes the 2023 G7 Climate, Energy and Environment Ministers' Communiqué, which acknowledges the vital role of subnational actors in realising the transformation towards net-zero, climate-resilient, circular and nature-positive economies, and the establishment of the G7 Roundtable on Subnational Climate Actions that will inform the G20 and COP28;

48. supports the initiative by the French government to introduce regional COPs, a recommendation made by the CoR since 2021 ⁽⁷⁾. As regional COPs ensure citizens and businesses get ownership of the green deal and the battle against climate change, but also make it possible to gather field information that could be trickled up to the national and international level, providing concrete local know-how and best practices, the CoR calls on the other EU Member States to consider introducing this practice in their territories as well;

49. highlights the crucial role of the Local Governments and Municipal Authorities (LGMA) Constituency in bringing together LRAs' voices globally and in continuously reinforcing a worldwide network of subnational governments willing to fight climate change; invites the Parties to leverage partnerships and collaboration with the LGMA Constituency and the Marrakesh Partnership for Global Climate Action, as well as with the High-Level Climate Champions;

⁽⁶⁾ Article 6 of the Paris Agreement allows countries to voluntarily cooperate with each other to achieve emission reduction targets set out in their NDCs. Under Article 6, a country is able to transfer carbon credits earned from the reduction of GHG emissions to help one or more countries meet climate targets. Article 6.8 recognises non-market approaches to promote mitigation and adaptation, introducing cooperation through finance, technology transfer and capacity building, where no trading of emission reductions is involved.

⁽⁷⁾ Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions — Stepping up Europe's 2030 climate ambition towards COP26 (OJ C 440, 29.10.2021, p. 25).

50. invites the High-Level Champions to explore the possibility of expanding Regional Climate Weeks to Europe in the near future;

51. welcomes the adoption of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) at CBD COP15 and the endorsement of the key role of local governments in contributing to it, particularly through the formal inclusion of subnational governments as key partners in developing and implementing national biodiversity strategies and actions plans; strongly encourages the Parties to the Paris Agreement to adopt similar provisions of this exemplary approach;

52. commits to acting as a direct link, providing access to information and regular updates to CoR members and LRAs in Europe on the preparation and progress of the negotiations, during the COP28 and beyond; welcomes the partnership and support of other EU institutions in delivering this information regularly, bringing LRAs closer to the international climate negotiations.

Brussels, 10 October 2023.

The President
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Vasco ALVES CORDEIRO
