

Cities and regions: An alternative solution to uphold the COP21 agreement?

Written by Ángela Vallina on 10 May 2018 in Opinion
Opinion

Parliament's report highlights the key role cities play in the fight against climate change, explains Ángela Vallina.



Ángela Vallina | *Photo credit: European Parliament audiovisual*

Climate change is an undeniable fact and is now a daily reality. We are witnessing a rise in extreme temperatures, forest fires, droughts, floods and storms. We are also experiencing the proliferation of invasive exotic species and a loss of biodiversity, coupled with increased competition for water and demand for energy.

Man's responsibility for climate change is beyond a doubt and is now causing devastating environmental effects and high socioeconomic costs, particularly for the most vulnerable populations.

Climate change is accentuating social disparities throughout the EU; some social groups are more exposed than others due to poor health, low incomes, inadequate housing, lack of mobility or because of gender inequality, among other factors.

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Pollution is causing health problems for citizens as a whole, including cancer, allergies and premature death. This is a social tragedy and it comes at tremendous health costs. A failure to invest in rectifying the situation will increase health expenditure in the longer term.

The report I drafted for Parliament deplores the US withdrawal from the Paris agreement, and presents alternatives and solutions looking at the role of cities and municipalities in the fight against climate change. The EU still has a lot of work to do. It accounts for nine per cent of the world's emissions; cities account for 75 per cent of this figure.

More than 70 per cent of Europeans live in urban areas, which is where 73 per cent of jobs are. Cities have a major responsibility in global warming, but they also have major potential for solutions.

I am very satisfied with the success and support the report has received, both in the regional development committee and in plenary; all the political groups were able to reach a consensus. This involved a lot of teamwork, including with several experts. In the report, we addressed an important social demand: to place the fight against climate change at the highest level of the political agenda.

Parliament's text can be a point of political reference for the role European regions and cities will play in fighting climate change. It starts with a general analysis of global warming and its most serious consequences, followed by a series of proposals and suggestions linked to cohesion policy and the role of cities and regions.

It highlights that climate change is affecting social disparities and increasing the vulnerability of society's weakest populations, that lack the capacity and resources to deal with its effects.

In this respect, the report laments the US decision to withdraw from the Paris agreement and points to the social costs and economic impact caused by greenhouse gas emissions, which is currently affecting urban infrastructure, public health and social care systems.

Mitigating climate change must be a major priority within EU cohesion policy and the Commission and member states must set ambitious objectives within their own legislation. The multi-annual financial framework should increase its contribution to climate objectives and the cohesion policy budget must expand after 2020.

Regions, cities and towns have a vital role to play in the energy transition and in helping to achieve climate and energy objectives from the bottom up.

The Commission should provide them with greater support, through training, awareness raising, financial guidance, technical knowledge, communication, research and development, education in climate protection and advice for both mitigation and adaptation.

The report praises initiatives such as the global covenant of mayors for climate and energy and the role that several cities and regions have played in the fight against climate change and protection of the environment. It encourages cities to join this or similar initiatives.

The text also calls for easier access to finance for smaller cities and regions. The priority for financing must be given to coal-dependent regions, which need to carry out a major social, economic and labour energy transition restructuring process, in which adequate employment plans must be guaranteed.

In addition, the report reiterates the commitment to the subsidiarity principle. Cities and regions must have the necessary competence and sufficient political, administrative and financial autonomy to plan and carry out actions against climate change.

About the author

Ángela Vallina (GUE/NGL, ES) is Parliament's rapporteur on the role of EU regions and cities in implementing the COP 21 Paris agreement

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