

## Civil society's contribution to the energy union

Written by Luca Jahier on 24 July 2018 in Opinion  
Opinion

The energy transition is an excellent opportunity to put people at the heart of the EU decision-making process, writes Luca Jahier.



The energy transition offers huge potential for cities and regions to pursue new, innovative and effective policies at regional level and is a terrific opportunity to put the EU on the right track to achieving faster sustainable economic and social development. European organised civil society can play a significant role in transforming the way people think to help them embrace change.

As President of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), I was able to put this message across at the recent EESC plenary session on 11-12 July, where I had a frank exchange of views on decentralised energy provision, regional economic development and sustainable transport with Maroš Šefčovič, European Commission Vice-President responsible for the energy union.

Europeans have a central role to play in the energy dialogue, and involving the EESC, Europe's house of organised civil society, in the energy union initiative is pivotal for enabling people to really make a valuable contribution to the EU energy and transport policies of the future. The energy union is more

than energy and new technologies or European and national policymaking. It encompasses the transformation of Europe's society and economies which in turn has a direct impact, both positive and negative, on the everyday lives of Europe's citizens.

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This is why the EESC has spent years advocating for an energy dialogue and meaningful and innovative forms of participatory democracy in Europe's energy policymaking. By bringing together the expertise of organised civil society from across Europe, the EESC tries to make sure that no one is left behind in the modernisation of Europe's economy - not in terms of the environment, jobs and opportunities to create economic value, and not as a consumer.

I am reassured to see that Šefčovič is on the same wavelength. In our debate, he underlined just how important it is to link the EU's energy initiatives to regional policy and development and, at the same time, to strengthen cooperation between EU bodies and civil society.

Šefčovič emphasised the pivotal role that EU regions and cities can play in the energy union initiative as a rich source of innovative solutions. He said that, "the energy union cannot be built here in Brussels, but in our cities and in our villages."

I can only agree with that. It is at the local level that plans and political commitments are turned into tangible actions and the changes coming up in energy provision have to be the result of a collective effort, where all of us, from farmers in France and renewable energy cooperatives in Belgium to mayors in Poland and local utilities in Germany, contribute with creative solutions and fully participate as 'prosumers', which is to say, they both consume and produce energy.

A number of initiatives will have to be developed locally, from rolling out charging points for urban electric vehicles to constructing smart buildings, not to mention decentralised renewable energy production and energy cooperatives. All this, in turn, will help boost local growth and jobs.

Šefčovič rightly said that the first priority of the energy union is security of supply; "Once we make sure that we have enough energy in Europe, then we need to meet our climate obligations. Once our energy is greener, we need our companies to use it and our industry to remain competitive in Europe, promoting innovative ideas."

The central idea underpinning the energy union is to look at energy in relation to the rest of the economy, not in isolation. This is why, for the first time, the Commission has adopted a unifying approach to energy and climate, which includes all related policy fields and where one of those fields - transport - has become more and more central, especially in recent years.

Putting sustainability at the core of every policy has become more urgent than ever. As we know, transport is responsible for almost a quarter of Europe's greenhouse gas emissions and, in comparison with other sectors, this share is growing.

The contribution of organised civil society to this topic is vital and for this reason, I flagged up the practical achievements of our institution on several fronts. I referred to the ongoing closures of coal mines across the EU, the issue of social justice for the energy poor and the need to modernise transport, acknowledging the added value provided by our house of civil society for each action adopted by the Commission:

- Platform for coal regions in transition - The EESC came up with the idea of launching such a tool, which the Commission created to provide support and technical assistance for former coal mining areas.
- EU energy poverty observatory - It was set up to monitor and tackle the root causes of energy poverty, which affects approximately 50 million EU citizens. Here again, the Committee was behind the project: it put forward the idea of creating such a body in 2013 and will shortly become a member of the consortium underpinning its work.
- Third mobility package - This large set of proposals is structured around the three pillars of sustainability, safety and smart mobility. Here again, over the years the EESC has offered feedback to the mobility packages on a regular basis, followed the developments closely and actively contributed to shaping the new policies, issuing opinions both on its own initiative and following referrals from other institutions.

The Committee constantly works on these matters and, specifically at our most recent plenary session, we took a stand by adopting two meaningful and very important opinions. The first, drafted by Lutz Ribbe, highlights that the energy transition can have positive economic effects on Europe's regions and stresses the need to link energy and cohesion policies more systematically.

The second, put together by Tellervo Kylä-Harukka-Ruonala, touches on the role of transport and, by reviewing the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), comes to the conclusion that we need a new and more integrated approach to the subject, one that considers the economic, social and environmental aspects and is geared towards achieving the very same SDGs.

This is just some of our most recent work, but I would like to mention the yearly report on the state of the energy union, as the EESC is once again the only EU institution presenting an assessment, from the perspective of Europe's diverse civil society, in response to the Commission's annual progress reports.

In conclusion, the commitment to the regional level and the cross-cutting approach to energy from the economic, social and environmental perspective in the latest Commission proposals are extremely meaningful, but they are not enough. Legislative measures need to be matched by cooperation among stakeholders across all sectors and borders.

Šefčovič is right: the European Commission's goal is to make sure that no region, and no citizen, is left behind.

It is precisely for this reason that we need to take action, because I believe that we can transform challenges into success stories. However, we need to act fast. The energy union initiative holds huge potential for innovation at local level and represents a tremendous opportunity for people to show their initiative through bottom-up action.

We have the chance to make a difference and to show that the involvement of the EESC, our house of European civil society, is timely and effective. For it is at the Committee that we discuss these matters, every day and with all stakeholders across the socio-economic spectrum, and we come up with innovative solutions that we present to the EU institutions.

This is how we can add value to sustainable development, which is at the core of my presidency programme for a 'rEUnaissance'.

Let's make sure that Europeans are at the heart of the decision-making process in EU energy and transport policies. Let's put civil society, the driver for change, at the heart of the energy union initiative.

### **About the author**

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