Europe and the regions: A partnership for energy transition

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Interviews

In conversation with... FEDARENE President, Julije Domac.

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With their close proximity to citizens and unique competencies, Europe's regions are well placed to inform policymakers on the challenges of energy transition explains FEDARENE President, Julije Domac.

How successful have Europe's regions been in making their voice heard on energy and environment policies?

In 1990, six regions - Rhône-Alpes, Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur, Wallonia, País Vasco, Aquitaine and Nord-Pas-de-Calais – came together to create a European association with a common vision on sustainable energy and environmental policies.

[The European Federation of Agencies and Regions for Energy and the Environment (FEDARENE)](#) [1] now has over 80 members from regions in 21 European countries, drawing advice from 800 experts across the EU. Since the 1990s, funding programmes have enabled cities and regions to develop and implement energy policies that benefit their areas. European Commission projects have consolidated the partnership with cities and regions, while the European Parliament has defended local anchoring of EU policies.

In early 2018, the Parliament adopted a resolution recognising the decisive role of regions and cities in implementing the Paris Agreement. The Committee of the Regions (CoR) is also a key intermediate; its opinion on the EU's "Clean Planet for all" strategy is an excellent example of Europe's regional partnership. At FEDARENE, we believe this partnership will be a driver for European integration and cohesion. Regional projects have accelerated the sustainable development agenda, while regions and cities grow closer.

Our members have used these successes to demonstrate the benefits of EU policies and programmes and of European cooperation. This comes at a time when the EU's added value is being challenged. Some say that regions are the 'broken mirror' of the EU. However, I believe the opposite, it's the regions that make the EU so special and so diverse.

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You are now in your second term as FEDARENE president. What role can regional energy agencies play in Europe's future energy transition?

Local and regional energy agencies are the leaders we need in Europe's energy and environment transformation. Energy agencies began as knowledge centres, raising awareness and promoting environmental policies. These organisations are changing; their decades-long experience will make them indispensable when implementing sustainable energy and environment projects.

Many European regions have already shown that 100 percent renewable energy sources are possible; I live for when our national governments see this. I believe local and regional energy agencies will increasingly be the bridge between projects and finance, ensuring both the bankability of investments and concrete implementation of projects.

How will Europe's energy transition be financed?

Delivery of the EU's 2030 energy targets is likely to require additional investments of €177bn annually during 2021-2030. To reach this target, national governments need to view the energy transition as an opportunity and a driver of innovation, jobs, competitiveness and growth. The investment needed can only be achieved through embracing multiple sources of financing blending EU, public and private funds and allowing municipalities access to finance.

As project developers, aggregators, and facilitators for public authorities, energy agencies are perfectly positioned to trigger investments through public-private partnerships and other third-party financing. Investment is inextricably linked to negotiations on EU's next Multiannual Financial Framework and its long-term climate action strategy. EU Heads of State must consider both issues together and set credible objectives.

To be consistent, the EU needs a strong cohesion policy with energy transition as a horizontal pillar

providing solutions to multiple policy challenges. Market uptake projects will be crucial in decarbonising the EU's energy system, therefore adequate financial support will be paramount.

What is the role of Europe's regions in reaching a Climate Neutral Europe by 2050?

A net-zero greenhouse gas economy by 2050 will require cross-sector and multilevel mobilisation, transcending politics and economics. It will only succeed if citizens and companies take ownership of energy, environment and climate policies. With their proximity to citizens and with their unique competencies, regions will be key players in the energy transition and best qualified to inform policymaker on real needs and challenges.

Regions can also aggregate local projects, upscaling local initiatives and replicating best practices. They enable knowledge transfer and provide technical assistance to smaller municipalities without the capacity to develop or implement a climate and energy strategy. Local and regional authorities have more ambitious climate and energy objectives and they have proven effective delivery agents for EU clean energy legislation. It is vital that Member States establish the "Multilevel Climate and Energy Dialogue" required by the Energy Union Governance Regulation for effective long-term strategies.

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What policies do we need to make sure digitisation serves the energy and environmental transformation?

The digitisation of Europe's energy sector is already delivering benefits; smart grids and smart metering systems, smart home appliances and charging solutions are all a step in the right direction. However, carefully thought-out policies to reduce associated risks (such cyber-attacks and data privacy concerns) are essential. This will require cooperation at all levels of governance and the participation of essential stakeholders.

One of the most critical issues is the digital gap between European regions and cities. The largest, wealthiest municipalities can take advantage of digital solutions to enhance their sustainable development, while poorer territories may lag. Smaller municipalities need support, or this gap will continue to grow. The smooth digitisation of the energy sector will also need knowledge exchange. In recent years, we have seen a rise in mentoring and peer-to-peer programmes in the energy field.

Similar capacity-building to raise the digital skills of authorities and citizens are also needed. EU funds will be important in encouraging regional and European cooperation. They are also essential for supporting research and innovation in energy-related digital technologies, upgrading digital infrastructure and connectivity of lagging territories and leveraging public and private investment.

The EU's next MFF will need to address many issues to help EU regions and cities complete their energy and digital transformation while ensuring that no region is left behind.

For more information about FEDARENE, you can visit**: https://www.fedarene.org/ [1]**

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