

Sustainable Energy Week: A cross-cutting priority

Written by Michele Emiliano on 20 June 2019 in Opinion
Opinion

By tackling air pollution and climate change together, Europe can safeguard the health of its citizens, says Michele Emiliano.



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I was present when the Paris Agreement was signed in 2015 at the United Nations COP21 Convention on Climate Change.

Yet the EU has only recently adopted a general framework for achieving climate neutrality by 2050, an important step towards the COP24 held in Katowice, Poland.

Here, Katowice, Region Puglia and the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) partnered with WHO and the Global Climate and Health Alliance on an event in November 2018 in Geneva, which specifically looked at the health consequences of climate change.

At the, 'Air Pollution and Health' conference in Geneva, we launched the 'Breath for Life Programme.

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This calls for stronger cooperation on the common goal of decarbonisation and has already received the signatures from all EU regions.

Yet despite more than seven million deaths worldwide attributed to air pollution ever year, governments have not yet been clearly set out the policies and investment needed to address climate mitigation and air pollution.

Only 3 percent of health investment in developed countries is allocated to prevention. As a result, the healthcare costs arising from environment-related diseases are increasing.

The European Environment Agency estimates that some 483,000 premature deaths occur in Europe every year due to air pollution.

WHO's 2005 guidelines called for reductions in certain particulate matter pollutants by up to 50 percent.

Decarbonisation has been proposed as one of the most effective government preventive policies for protecting citizens' health.

The Lancet Commission on Pollution and Health called for a rapid exit from coal and the transitional use of natural gas as part of medium-term steps to fully converting to renewable sources of energy.

In this spirit, the EU launched the 'Platform on Coal and Carbon Intensive Regions in Transition' to identify potential funding sources for the transition to a coal-free economy.

The UK and Italy, among others, have already planned for their transition to be completed by 2025.

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Puglia in Italy is currently the biggest CO₂-emitting region in Europe (197 million tons per year), mainly due to the presence of a large state-owned coal-fired power plant in Brindisi and the ILVA steel plant in Taranto, recently acquired by Arcelor Mittal Group.

These two plants contribute to the burning of ten million tons of carbon each year, making Puglia Italy's largest producer of polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (40,000 kg per year).

The new EU Emission Trading System limits coal price reduction and provides funding for technological innovations and projects.

There are already EU pilot projects - using hydrogen and natural gas - to test coal-free steel production in Austria (Voestalpine), Germany (Salzgitter) and Sweden (Lund-HYBRIT).

These pilots were presented at a European Parliament conference in June last year and at a CoR event in Taranto in November.

The steel production plant in Taranto is causing additional problems.

It is so close to inhabited areas that schoolchildren are legally obliged to remain at home on designated windy days to avoid potentially dangerous exposure to fine particulate matter from the steel plant.

Under the guidance of WHO, which will also cooperate in generating the Health Impact Assessment in Taranto, Region Puglia has launched its roadmap to decarbonisation.

This includes converting the Taranto steel plant and the Brindisi coal-fired power plant to hydrogen and natural gas.

At the same time, the traditional and low-value steel from coal-intensive processes does not have a long-term future.

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Therefore, the EU should promote a new generation of plants capable of producing clean, smart steel, featuring innovative material properties and characteristics.

Devoting relevant resources from the new multiannual financial framework (2020–27) can stimulate and accelerate these changes while also supporting Member States to create the favourable conditions needed for a new market for sustainable and intelligent steel.

Based on my rich experience at both international and regional level, I decided to volunteer as rapporteur on the CoR opinion on the 2050 long-term strategy for climate neutrality.

Both international commitments and local contingencies show how urgent it is for the EU to have a credible roadmap for climate neutrality in place as soon as possible.

At the CoR, we had a wide discussion on this topic. We again highlighted the vital importance of local and regional authorities in this process and the strong need for policies aimed at a just transition to climate neutrality.

We call for a European climate neutrality observatory, aimed at mapping and monitoring the vulnerabilities of the different territories to this transition.

We also call for the mainstreaming of climate neutrality, environmental sustainability and climate change adaptation in all EU funds and funding programmes.

In the CoR's opinion, we emphasise the strong link between climate policies and air quality and the

direct impact of these policies on the health of the EU citizens both now and in the future.

I believe that implementing an ambitious agenda on climate neutrality is now a cross-cutting priority; I am fully committed - as CoR rapporteur and as President of Region Puglia - to work hard to in delivering this.

About the author

Michele Emiliano is Committee of the Regions rapporteur on the clean planet for all report

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