

Observation for adaptation in cross-border mountain regions

Audrey Parizel, Commission for Environment, Climate Change and Energy
of the European Union Committee of the Regions

INTRODUCTION

It is a pleasure for me to be here with you at this conference, representing the Committee of the Regions. For those of you that come across the Committee of the Regions for the first time, it is an EU institution established in 1994 with a consultative role to provide representatives of local and regional government with a voice at the heart of the European Union.

The European Commission and Council of Ministers are obliged to consult the Committee of the Regions' now 353 members on proposed EU laws across a wide range of policy areas, including climate and energy policies.

Within the Committee of the Regions I am the administrator in charge of the climate portfolio. My mission is to ensure that on all initiatives of the EU concerning climate, the crucial role of local and regional authorities, as well as territorial cooperation is not overlooked.

Today I will focus on adaptation specifically in mountain regions. I will not talk about science because I have colleagues here who can do it much better than I. I will talk about the political messages the Committee of the Regions has been sending to the EU institutions when dealing with adaptation at local level.

ON MOUNTAIN REGIONS

Let me start in 2009 when the European Commission published a paper announcing it will issue an EU wide strategy on adaptation to climate change in 2013. Already in this paper, the European Commission recognised the important role of regional authorities as well as the differences between territories and their capacity and resources to adapt to climate change.

Since then, the Committee of the Regions has issued several official positions papers (which we call opinions in the EU jargon) to remind the EU institutions that climate change impacts first and foremost people which are living in differentiated territories and that regional and local authorities are at the forefront in designing adequate and urgent solutions.

In the respect of differentiated territories requiring differentiated policy response, last year, the Committee of the regions issued an opinion specifically focusing on mountains.

It did so because we, at the Committee of the Regions, considered and still consider that mountain regions are especially sensitive to climate change and are the first to suffer from its impacts on the environment, socio-economic activities, health and quality of life of populations. Indeed data from all mountainous regions in the EU point out to an accelerated warming as compared to other regions.

Therefore, in addition to advocate for an adaptation strategy which contains a local and regional dimension, the Committee of the Regions also asked the European Commission to have a special focus on mountainous regions.

Another point that I would like to quote is the issue of data. At the EU level we underline that mountain areas are already becoming more vulnerable and that more scientific research, a good system for information exchange and earmarked specific funds are necessary to help foster good cooperation between local and regional authorities across the EU.

Our approach is not only to ask for more research to gather data on temperature rise in mountains, it is also to ask for a combination of data concerning temperature rise as well as territories' vulnerability and capacities to adapt to the consequences of climate change.

The vulnerability approach is central to our way of thinking. Knowing the work of the Pyrenean Observatory on Climate Change, I know it manages to collect high quality data on climate change in the region. However, these data are difficult, time-consuming and expensive to collect and analyse for projections at local level. Data on vulnerability of receptors such as people, infrastructures and economic sectors are usually more readily

available. Combined to analysis of territories' capacity to adapt, they are essential to identify risk and later to build up adequate adaptation policy.

Also, a major point in this opinion is that territorial cooperation is essential concerning mountain regions. In Europe, mountain regions go across borders. Today we are in the Pyrenees, and one issue French Pyrenees can encounter can be similar to issues encountered by its Pyrenean neighbours. Therefore we have been adamant that promotion of cross-border territorial cooperation is crucial to ensure correct adaptation to climate change in mountains. At the time we stressed that many mountain regions had already begun developing adaptation strategies, their objectives needing to be coordinated and their results studied as a matter of urgency. Our approach was to ask the European Commission to centralise these initiatives and ensure coherence.

ON OUR MOST RECENT POSITION ON ADAPTATION

As foreseen, the European Commission has issued its EU strategy on adaptation earlier this year and consulted the Committee of the Regions accordingly. This was the opportunity to strengthen and update our general position on adaptation.

In our opinion replying to the European Commission, the Committee of the Regions stressed the importance of adopting an integrated approach to build resilience to climate change in Europe. An integrated approach would entail measures on both mitigation and adaptation in the context of a broader strategy cutting across systems, sectors, spatial scales and timescales. Most importantly, an integrated approach is chiefly delivered by regional authorities.

In addition the Committee of the Regions is promoting a multilevel governance approach. It particularly emphasises that national adaptation strategies should provide governance pathways to support the process of adapting regionally and locally. It does argue that in all cases some form of sub-national adaptation governance framework is needed to transmit EU countries adaptation investments, legislation and policy down to the local level. It is the

Committee of the Regions' priority that local and regional authorities are included not only in the policy-making phase but also in the implementation process of adaptation.

In this respect, the Committee of the Regions reiterates that funding is key and that the importance of local and regional networks in the promotion of adaptation measures should be better recognised. EU funding should be used to provide appropriate financial support for such networks.

CONCLUSION

Ladies and gentlemen, having considered the political messages delivered by the Committee of the Regions, I would like to conclude by pointing out that regional authorities from the mountains can easily recognise themselves in our positions. We advocate for the recognition of territories' specificities and the need for territorial cooperation to across border. This is especially relevant for mountain regions.

In this respect I would like to give credit to the work of mountain regions, be it in the Pyrenees, the Alps, the Carpathians and Baltic areas. These cross-border projects first showed that mountains are more harshly impacted by climate change than other territories. They also brought to attention the specificities of mountainous regions with an exceptional range of biodiversity depending on altitude, the issue of forestry acting as carbon sinks and the heavy reliance of these regions on a few climate-dependent economic sectors such as tourism. They demonstrated how cross-border territorial cooperation could stir up action at an adequate level, avoiding duplication of efforts and promoting joint initiatives as well as experience sharing to identify the best course of actions.

Ladies and gentlemen, I will stop there by saying that this is this vision that the Committee of the Regions will bring to the Conference of the Parties of the UNFCCC (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change) which is due to take place in a few days in Warsaw, Poland.