
THE EU AS GLOBAL CLIMATE LEADER

- THE EU COVENANT OF MAYORS: BOOSTING LOCAL CLIMATE ACTION FOR THE EU'S GREEN TRANSITION

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- AFTER PARIS: THE NEW GOVERNANCE ECOSYSTEM FOR CLIMATE ACTION AND THE ROLE OF THE EU

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The role of cities as key actors in addressing climate change and achieving sustainable development has become widely recognised over the past two decades. For example, the 2013 report of the UN High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda stated that “cities are where the battle for sustainable development will be won or lost” (UN High-Level Panel, 2013). The European Union’s (EU) Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy (CoM) is an example of how that battle is already being fought in the cities and municipalities of all sizes that will be a driving force behind the European Green Deal (EGD), the EU’s new roadmap for reaching climate neutrality by 2050.

The European Commission launched the EU Covenant of Mayors, as it was then called, in 2008 following the adoption of the 2020 climate and energy targets, which compelled member states to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by 20% compared to 1990, to increase renewable energies by 20% and to improve energy efficiency by 20% by 2020 (EC, 2008). Although these targets were mandatory only for member states, the idea behind the creation of the CoM was to mobilise municipalities and build on their potential to reduce GHG emissions and support the delivery of the 2020 goals.

Between 2014 and 2015, at the time of the negotiations of the Paris Agreement, the CoM underwent significant transformations and evolved into the EU Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy. With the change in the name came a broader focus and more ambitious goals. In addition to the work on mitigating GHG emissions, two new work streams were added: one on ensuring access to secure, sustainable and affordable energy for all, and a second that put a stronger emphasis on adaptation measures. Further, the CoM stepped up the mitigation target from 20% of emissions reduction by 2020 to 40% by 2030. This increase was in line with the EU’s 2030 Climate and Energy Framework, which was adopted by member states in 2014 and comprised the EU’s contribution to the Paris Agreement (EUCO, 2014). The CoM has thus become an important tool for the implementation of the 40% GHG reduction goal at the local scale. It also provides an example of how the European Commission has boosted local action to support the achievement of EU and international climate agreements.

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The CoM is a multilevel governance experiment that can contribute to increasing the commitment of European cities to climate change (Domorenok et al., 2020). It has evolved over the years into a mechanism not only for sharing good practices in urban climate governance across Europe, but also with third countries. At the time of writing, there are 10,358 signatories to the CoM from 57 countries inside and outside the EU, and the number keeps increasing. Although the vast majority of signatories are from EU countries, the CoM has also been signed by municipalities in third countries such as Turkey, Armenia, Mexico and Ukraine. Compared with other city networks that work on urban climate governance (e.g. ICLEI, Climate Alliance and C40 Cities), the CoM is one of the most successful in terms of membership numbers and global reach. It has been an inspiration for the creation of similar initiatives such as the Compact of Mayors created in 2014 by the UN and the UN Special Envoy for Cities and Climate Change, Michael R. Bloomberg, under the leadership of UN-Habitat and the major city networks C40 Cities, ICLEI and United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG).

To make participation easy, the CoM works in a simple and flexible manner. Upon signing, municipalities commit to voluntarily reduce their emissions by 20–40% (depending on the joining date) and to submit a Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plan (SECAP). The SECAP provides information on cities' main sources of CO₂ emissions in sectors ranging from municipal buildings to transport, waste and the production of local energy. The plans also specify the tools, policies and budgets for meeting the goals to which cities have committed. Within two years of the approval of the SECAP, cities have to report on their progress and identify good practices, successful, innovative policies, and the tools used to implement them. In turn, the CoM offers its members technical and methodological support, engagement and visibility at EU level, and access to knowledge through the sharing of good practices amongst all signatories.

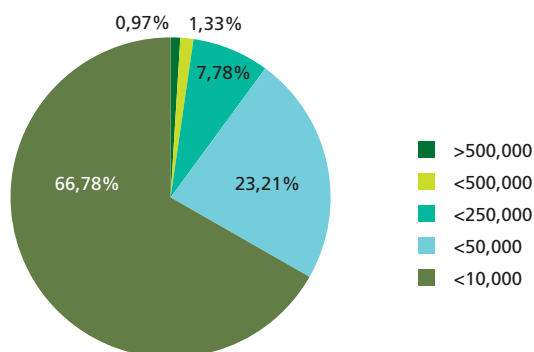
Over the coming months municipalities that joined the CoM before 2014 will have to report on the steps taken to meet the reduction of at least 20% of their GHG emissions by 2020. This will be a milestone for the CoM, as it will demonstrate how useful it has proven in reducing GHGs and in engaging local actors in climate governance. Although previous accounts by the signatory cities indicate that most are on track to meet their commitments (Crocì et al., 2016; Kona et al., 2017; Melica et al., 2018), the number that have actually gone beyond the mere signing of the CoM to introduce meaningful policies to address climate change and sustainability challenges remains to be seen.

I. The EU Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy in figures

The increase in the number of signatories to the CoM over the years has been constant. Currently, it includes 10,358 signatories (cities and regional coordinators) covering a population of approximately 322,754,173, including some municipalities in third countries. The CoM has been especially useful for boosting climate action in small municipalities: currently, 66.78% of all signatories are municipalities with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants, 23.31% have between 10,000 and 50,000, and only 0.97% have a population of over 500,000 (see Figure 1). This shows its potential

to promote action at the local level of governance. This potential should not be disregarded: while small scale actions adopted locally may not significantly decrease global emissions by themselves, they can inspire other cities on how to reduce GHGs, provoking a snowball effect that can have a significant global impact.

Figure 1. Percentage of signatories by population. Data from the EU Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy website (accessed 2 October 2020).



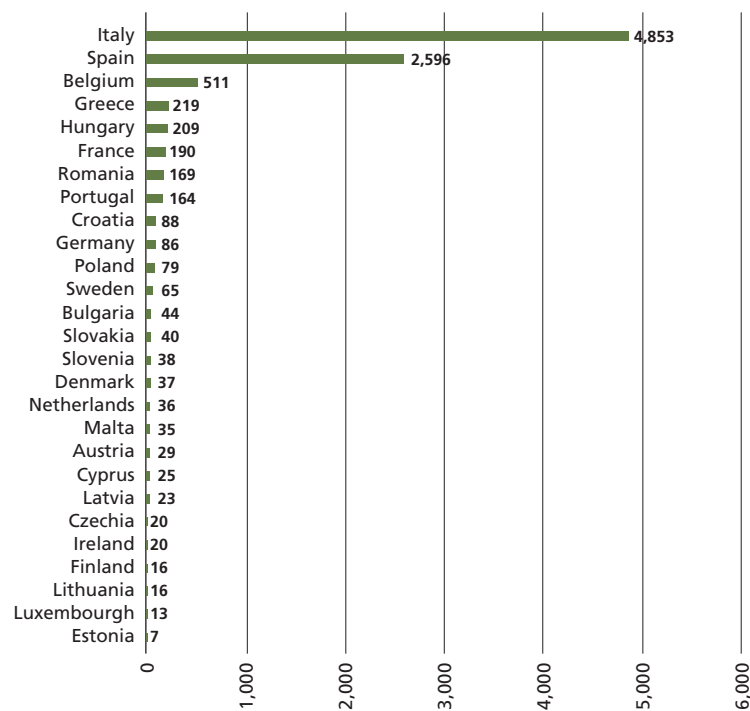
One of the reasons the CoM has attracted so many members is probably the flexibility it offers signatories. Rather than instructing cities on how to reduce their GHG emissions, the CoM has given cities the freedom to experiment and develop their own strategies. As a result, local authorities have formulated an incredible variety of approaches, tools and policies that might otherwise never have seen the light of day. Local-level climate actions range from initiatives promoting sustainable transport to the building of more cycle lanes, the purchase of new public vehicles and the promotion of transport sharing systems (for e.g. bikes, scooters and cars), and the improvement of energy efficiency in the residential sector by supporting better housing insulation. By giving municipalities room for flexibility and experimentation, the CoM has fostered local-level climate action that enriches and complements national approaches, making local authorities valuable partners for national governments and regional authorities (Kona et al., 2018: 574). Notably, the inventiveness of local authorities has often also prompted them to aim for more ambitious climate goals than their respective national governments. For instance, while the Spanish government committed to reducing its GHG emissions across sectors by 10% by 2020 compared to 2005, the cities of Seville and Bilbao committed to reduce their emissions by 29% (base year 2000) and the city of Gijón by 35% (base year 2007). Overall, CoM signatories committed to an average of 27% GHG reduction by 2020, 7% higher than the CoM's minimum requirement of 20% (Kona et al., 2017: 14).

Yet, the large number of CoM signatories conceals its somewhat limited geographical scope. Figure 2 shows the overwhelming Italian and Spanish majority. Belgium, the country with the third most signatory cities, has almost 2000 fewer members than Spain. Countries with a longer history of environmental public policies, such as Germany, Sweden and Denmark have only a few dozen cities participating in the EU Covenant. These discrepancies illustrate the CoM's far from homogeneous influence across the EU. In part, the lack of pre-existing national

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or regional support structures for local authorities to mitigate GHG emissions explains why the CoM has been more successful in some countries than in others. In countries like Italy and Spain where such support structures were missing, cities embraced the CoM in an effort to adopt coherent local policies to reduce GHGs and increase the share of renewable energy (Melica et al., 2018; Domonerok et al., 2020). A mechanism like the CoM is therefore particularly useful for mobilising cities in countries where local-level climate change policies are lagging behind. In line with this, the mobilisation of cities through the CoM and other similar initiatives can ensure wider participation from the bottom that will contribute to increasing national and European efforts to implement Europe’s Green Deal.

Figure 2. Number of signatories by EU country. Data from the EU Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy website (accessed 2 October 2020)



II. The EU Covenant as a mechanism for influencing global climate governance

The CoM is only one of a number of instruments and initiatives that the EU has created to mobilise local climate action. Others include CIVITAS - Cleaner and Better Transport in Cities,¹ the European Green Capital award,² the recent Green City Accord³ and 100 Climate neutral cities by 2030.⁴ All these programmes have the benefit of mobilising cities through diverse incentives (whether the prospect of winning an award or of accessing funding opportunities), but they also pose many challenges. While their aims and objectives are very similar, they tend to have different reporting schemes, which can create confusion and be time-consuming for local authorities.

1. Civitas: <https://civitas.eu>
2. European Green Capital: <https://ec.europa.eu/environment/europeangreencapital>
3. Green City Accord: https://ec.europa.eu/environment/topics/urban-environment/green-city-accord_en
4. Mission 100 climate neutral cities by 2030: <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/communities/en/community/city-science-initiative/document/mission-100-climate-neutral-cities-2030>

In cities, the European Commission seems to have found valuable partners for advancing its climate and environmental ambitions. By engaging cities in EU networks and projects, the Commission can leapfrog member state decision- and policymaking and demonstrate how specific strategies can be successfully implemented at the local level. It is no coincidence that the CoM was launched in 2008, only a few months after EU leaders adopted the 2020 climate and energy targets. So far, many cities' climate actions have already proven that a 20% reduction in GHGs by 2020 is a reality in their territories. In fact, recent estimates by the Joint Research Centre indicate that a 25% reduction had already been achieved by 2017 (Bertoldi et al., 2020: 27). Now, the goal of the CoM is to demonstrate that a 40% GHG reduction by 2030 is also possible. Moreover, cities that want to go a step further can apply to take part in the forthcoming 100 climate neutral cities by 2030 programme, a proposal by the Horizon Europe Mission Board for Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities to support cities to achieve climate neutrality by 2030 (Gronkiewicz-Waltz et al., 2020).

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From a constructivist perspective, offering cities the opportunity to share good practices among peers and engage with EU institutions is an effective strategy for the political and administrative Europeanisation of climate governance and for strengthening European identity. Further, with European cities having become pioneers in climate policies and actions, the CoM is ideally suited to sharing its experience in local environmental governance with third countries and to consolidating European global climate leadership. The global reach of the CoM was also reflected in the creation of the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy (Global Covenant) in 2016, which brought together the EU Covenant for Climate and Energy and the Compact of Mayors. The EU's contribution to the Global Covenant has been of great significance: it not only brought the majority of member cities to the initiative along with its consolidated experience in mobilising cities in the region, it also contributed strategic direction by co-chairing the programme. This influence over the Global Covenant has enabled the EU to extend its urban climate governance model to other cities around the world.

Other European climate initiatives also build on this potential for international exchange and the transfer of experience. The 100 climate neutral cities by 2030 programme, for instance, is being planned not only as an instrument to step up the number of European cities striving for systemic change and climate neutrality, but also as a tool to facilitate and create synergies with other international climate initiatives (Gronkiewicz-Waltz:16). Other examples are the CIVITAS network, in which non-EU cities can also participate, and the Green City Accord, which will be open to cities outside the EU once the programme is consolidated within the EU. All these initiatives serve to consolidate the EU's global climate leadership by first mobilising local actors within the EU, and then sharing the acquired knowledge and experience with third countries. In this way, the EU not only shows that it can lead by example, it also influences the boosting of local action globally. The reality is that since at least 2013 the EU has been aware of the great potential of its so-called "green" or "climate diplomacy" (Ruiz Campillo, 2017). The EGD, which has "green deal diplomacy" build into it, will become one of the key instruments for convincing and supporting others to promote more sustainable development and to ensure green alliances with third countries and regions (EC, 2019: 20–21).

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III. Ten examples of how cities already contribute to the European Green Deal

The EGD is the European Commission's top political priority and the road-map for the transformation of the EU into a fairer and more prosperous society and economy. The twin green and digital transitions have become even more important since the COVID-19 crisis. The Commission has responded by reinforcing the EGD as Europe's post-crisis growth strategy, ensuring that recovery investments, job creation and support to the hardest-hit regions and sectors are in line with the principle of green and sustainable growth (EC, 2020). The EGD's holistic approach underlines that all EU actions and policies must contribute to its objectives (EC, 2019). This commitment will see the EU promote action at all levels to make the EU a greener and more sustainable region, which will in turn help it meet international environmental obligations such as the Paris Agreement and promote the 2030 Agenda.

Cities are far from being the main focus of the EGD (just seven mentions compared to 37 references to member states), but they are key to the transformation the EGD is to drive. The overall success of the CoM is an example of cities' contribution to tackling environmental and sustainability challenges. Cities have developed a broad range of initiatives to reduce their GHGs, ranging from the use of technology to reduce consumption of public lighting to planting trees and promoting ecological agriculture in municipalities. Given their innovative policies and actions, cities are an ideal laboratory for testing different approaches to the implementation of the EGD. What follows are examples of CoM member cities addressing the various action areas outlined by the EGD since 2008 that may serve as inspiration for other municipal, regional and national authorities:

1. *Increasing the EU's climate ambition for 2030 and 2050.* Almost half of the current CoM signatories (4491 municipalities) have already committed to the 2030 goal (i.e. emissions reduction by 40%), showing the great ambition and commitment of local actors.
2. *Supplying clean, affordable and secure energy.* Many CoM cities have installed photovoltaic power plants (e.g. Albox, Spain), mini-hydroelectric plants (e.g. Feltre, Italy) or wind farms (e.g. Mol, Belgium) in their municipalities as a way of producing more sustainable energy.
3. *Mobilising industry for a clean and circular economy.* Cities such as Munich (Germany) have developed information campaigns and training programmes for businesses that promote energy efficiency and environmental protection. Other examples include the city of Ghent (Belgium), which ran an energy coaching pilot project in which 15 local companies participated.
4. *Building and renovating in an energy and resource efficient way.* Dijon Métropole (France) has promoted the building of a low-energy eco-district in former wastelands using passive design with a focus on the creation of green areas and cycling and pedestrian mobility. Other cities like Genk (Belgium) and Koprivnica (Croatia) have invested in renovating the energy systems of residential buildings and installing more efficient windows and doors for better insulation.

5. *Accelerating the shift to sustainable and smart mobility.* Cities in the CoM have a great record in promoting sustainable mobility. Common measures include the creation of new bike lanes and the purchase of more efficient public vehicles; the promotion of bicycle tracks in the city through information boards (e.g. Zagreb, Croatia); the creation or improvement of pedestrian areas within the municipality (e.g. Dublin, Ireland); and the electrification of public transport (e.g. Gothenburg, Sweden). A great example of the transition to low-energy mobility can be found in Växjö (Sweden), which has managed to coordinate the transportation system for all goods purchased by the city council in a way that saves money and reduces CO₂ emissions and mileage.
6. *From “Farm to Fork”: designing a fair, healthy and environmentally friendly food system.* Paris (France) has introduced a food carbon simulator for caterers to calculate the GHG emissions of the meals they serve and has adopted a Sustainable Food Plan (2015–2020) to promote green and healthy catering in municipal restaurants and schools. Other cities such as Buzet (Croatia) are promoting sustainable agriculture as a way of transitioning towards a more environmentally friendly food system.
7. *Preserving and restoring ecosystems and biodiversity.* Fingal County Council (Ireland) has connected cycling trails, greenways and green belts for recreation and biodiversity protection. Murcia (Spain) has built water-saving irrigation systems for green areas to help preserve water resources. In Loures (Portugal), tree planting and the cleaning of degraded forests will both contribute to preserving biodiversity and reducing GHG emissions.
8. *A zero-pollution ambition for a toxic-free environment.* Lessebo (Sweden) has undertaken works to decontaminate old landfills as a way to prevent pollution from spreading. Other municipalities like Coín (Spain) and Conco (Italy) are addressing light pollution by replacing public lighting.
9. *Pursuing green finance and investment and ensuring a just transition.* CoM cities offer great examples of how green public procurement can contribute to more sustainable cities. Many of them have opted to purchase 100% green energy for municipal buildings (e.g. Gooik, Belgium) or including green criteria in the procurement of furniture for public spaces, public transport, cleaning services and paper (e.g. Turin, Italy).
10. *Activating education and training.* Education is key to transforming citizens’ consumption habits and cities are also doing their share. While educational activities at schools are some of the most popular initiatives among signatories, cities such as Helsingør (Denmark) have offered workshops to craftsmen, and Agioi Anargyroi-Kamaterio (Greece) has offered energy education to both adults and children.

Without doubt, the flexibility of the CoM in promoting mitigation and adaptation at city level is one of its main strengths. It gives cities the room to transition towards sustainable development in creative and context-specific ways. The above examples illustrate the determination of cities in the fight against climate change and how they can be relevant actors in the multi-level governance that will be necessary to transform the EU into the fairer, greener and more prosperous region the EGD envisions.

Cities are key actors in the consolidation of the EU's climate leadership and credibility in global governance.

Conclusion

Active and effective local responses will be needed if the European climate transition is to be successful. From the beginning, the CoM has channelled local climate action, supporting cities in their efforts to tackle climate change and offering them the possibility to gain national and European recognition. As shown above, initiatives implemented by cities in the CoM offer a great variety of options on how to address climate change and sustainability at the local level. The CoM supports cities in sharing their experiences and knowledge, and it fosters a sense of responsibility and overall unity in how to approach climate challenges from a European perspective.

In her presentation of the EGD, Commission President Von der Leyen declared that, with the EDG, Europe would show the rest of the world how to be sustainable and how to transform our way of living and working in a way that would convince others to move in the same direction. It should be added that without cities the rollout of the EGD will be almost impossible. Cities are key actors in the consolidation of the EU's climate leadership and credibility in global governance. All the initiatives cited in this chapter are examples of efforts the EU is making to engage cities in global environmental governance. At the same time, they highlight the importance of cities for the implementation of the EGD. Cities are key to the EGD's ambition of making Europe the first climate-neutral continent by 2050. The majority of the EGD's thematic priorities, from the transition to secure and affordable energy, sustainable transport, a more circular economy and a healthier food system, will rely on action by cities and the development of local policies in collaboration with citizens.

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