

Covenant of Mayors: The way forward for the EU's flagship climate initiative

By Frédéric Boyer, Head of the Covenant of Mayors Office (pictured)

The EU stands at a crossroads: in order to reach its climate and energy targets, it needs significant efforts from all its stakeholders - especially from cities and their citizens. In the framework of the Covenant of Mayors, cities have already proven that they can live up to this challenge. The recently launched new Covenant of Mayors reinforces the commitment of

cities to implement the EU's climate and energy objectives at local level.

In 2008, the European Commission launched the Covenant of Mayors with the goal of endorsing and supporting the actions of local authorities that contribute to reaching the European climate and energy targets. Over 6500 local authorities, representing one

third of the EU's population, have already joined the Covenant of Mayors and committed to reducing their CO₂ emissions by 28% by 2020, thereby exceeding the EU's 2020 own 20% target.

PRIME EXAMPLE OF DEMOCRATIC BOTTOM-UP MOVEMENT

The democratic, bottom-up approach driving the Covenant of Mayors makes it an institutional



novelty in the European landscape. A city can only join the initiative through the approval of the municipal council. Moreover, the Covenant of Mayors fosters collaborative local governance like no other movement. After adhering, local authorities develop - in close cooperation with all local stakeholders - a Sustainable Energy Action Plan (SEAP) that sets a CO₂-reduction target and outlines which measures will be taken to achieve it. The SEAP development also drives innovation within the city's governance, as different departments fully work together, often for the first time to tackle the cross-cutting issues of energy and climate.

Covenant of Mayors signatories reduce their CO₂ emissions through a variety of actions, from making buildings more energy efficient and investing in sustainable urban transport to boosting local renewable energy production. They regularly report on the progress and implementation of their SEAP by using shared methodological principles. These reports are verified by the Joint Research Centre - the in-house science department of the Commission - and are then made available on the Covenant of Mayors website in order to ensure transparency.

CITIES OF ALL SIZES ARE ENGAGING

The Covenant of Mayors is an inclusive initiative that enables cities of all sizes to join and contribute. One example is the Italian village of Castelvico, which is home to 333 inhabitants and is showing extraordinary dedication to climate action.

Despite limited means, Castelvico is on track to achieve its ambitious CO₂-emission reduction target of 35% by 2020, thanks to actions such as making the village's public lighting energy efficient or scaling up photovoltaic production. Another exemplary case is the German city of Neumarkt in der Oberpfalz (39084 inhabitants), which even aims to decrease its CO₂ emissions by 52% by 2020. In the framework of its SEAP, the city is pooling a large amount of resources to multiply its local renewable energy production. As its monitoring report shows, Neumarkt in der Oberpfalz is charging full steam ahead on its way to energy independence with its commitment to local renewable energy. These are just a few of the many dedicated cities of the Covenant of Mayors that play a key role in implementing the EU's climate and energy targets.

THE NEW COVENANT OF MAYORS: REINFORCING CITIES' COMMITMENTS

On the 15th of October 2015, signatories endorsed the objectives and framework of the Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy. This new Covenant of Mayors strengthens and reinvigorates the contribution of cities to the EU's 2030 climate and energy objectives. In the new Covenant of Mayors, cities commit to reducing their Greenhouse Gas Emissions (GHG) by at least 40% by 2030, by investing in energy efficiency and renewable energy. Cities will also place greater emphasis on providing secure and affordable energy to their citizens, thereby reinforcing

social justice. Moreover, cities will adopt an integrated approach to climate change mitigation and adaptation, in order to increase their territories' resilience.

On the 24th of November 2015, the Belgian city of Ghent was the first city to sign the new Covenant of Mayors. Ghent had already signed up to the previous Covenant of Mayors in 2009, and has now proven that it is willing to keep its forefront position in tackling climate change. For Ghent's mayor Daniël Termont, this new commitment to reduce CO₂ emissions by 40% by 2030 "puts the city on track to become carbon neutral by 2050", as he told Cities Today in a recent interview. Ghent will increase its current SEAP budget of EUR 140 million in order to reach the 2030 target, and will also boost its efforts in the areas of housing, mobility, businesses and renewable energy. To fulfill its previous Covenant of Mayors commitment, Ghent implemented several successful actions, such as revitalizing the Lederberg Leefstreek district or coaching companies on energy management practices, an action for which the city was awarded a Climate Star Award in 2014.

THE COVENANT OF MAYORS GOES GLOBAL

Looking beyond the COP21, the new initiative is also set to broaden its geographical scope and adapt the European success model of the Covenant of Mayors to the rest of the world. Thereby, it will become a global Covenant of Mayors that will transform urban governance, climate action and citizen involvement beyond European borders. ●