



Taking the initiative



The EU needs a committed, multilevel approach if it is to achieve, and exceed, its 20-20-20 objectives, writes **Gérard Magnin**

Who would have believed that a new European construction instrument would come into being on Tuesday 10 February 2009? What exactly happened in Brussels on that day? No important European summit or new treaty was announced, it was just an inconspicuous event with a low media profile. And yet, that day, a few weeks after the adoption of the EU energy and climate package, close to 400 municipal leaders met at the European parliament to sign the Covenant of Mayors. The point was to voluntarily pledge support to EU and national leaders for reaching and exceeding the 20-20-20 objectives in their territories.

Interestingly enough, the objective of this meeting, in a parliament packed with enthusiastic people, was not to contest a European decision, but to approve it and to commit to the same targets at local and regional levels. This triggered a unique dynamic movement throughout Europe. With an initial objective of 25 to 30 cities, the initiative, three years on, currently unites 4000 mayors representing over 160 million inhabitants and a CO₂ emission saving potential of 150 million tonnes. Such a collection of cities – including 30 capitals – towns and villages as well as provinces, regions, associations, agencies and ministries supporting a European initiative is unprecedented. Within this framework, 1200 signatories have already sub-

“Any forthcoming European growth pact should address the energy transition of cities and towns”



mitted a sustainable energy action plan. In collaboration with local actors, the implementation of these roadmaps represents thousands of practical actions, 10s of billions of euros worth of investment and associated job creation.

From an institutional point of view, the Covenant of Mayors stands out as a unique example of European multilevel action involving citizens, local authorities and the EU in reaching the 20-20-20 objectives. This has earned the initiative strong support from the Committee of the Regions and European parliament. In addition to the president of the commission, many commissioners regularly refer to it.

From a geographical point of view, bridges have been built towards other continents. With signatories from over 40 countries, the Covenant of Mayors has become a vector of cooperation for the eastern and Mediterranean neighbourhood. It has also become a natural partner of China as testified on the occasion of the EU-China urbanisation partnership event on 3 May 2012 in Brussels.

From a thematic point of view, the Covenant of Mayors is about reducing CO₂ emissions through sustainable energy actions. But more broadly speaking, concerns as to unemployment, poverty, innovation, quality of life and ecological growth are intimately connected to local energy issues. ‘The low energy city with a high quality of life for all,’ Energy Cities’ motto, has thus found its echo in the Covenant of Mayors initiative.

As regards innovation, the Covenant of Mayors is not at a loss. It is a market penetration vector for a large spectrum of technologies and products, including those required for devising

intelligent urban systems. The covenant is behind a new local governance uniting citizens, SMEs, banks, associations, and job centres. It forces administrations to work in a cross-cutting way and to develop integrated policies. It encourages local visioning exercises aimed at designing local energy roadmaps. It is also a bench test for the launch of financial schemes.

A movement is born. National signatory clubs are being created. Some have launched Local energy alliances uniting industry and civil society actors. A group of 40 mayors is being created to represent, with their networks, the Covenant of Mayors at national and European levels. The Covenant of Mayors initiative is a transition vector towards a more decentralised energy system in tune with demand and territories’ potential. It is far from having reached its climax. Its innovative power from a conceptual, institutional and operational point of view is not to be underestimated.

European construction is running out of steam and there is a lack of motivation. A crisis of confidence as regards the institutions is taking hold of citizens who are expecting a new, more democratic approach with a clear focus on both local and global concerns. Energy and climate issues can contribute to this renewal. Any forthcoming European growth pact should address the energy transition of cities and towns to reflate the economy and create jobs. Ahead of the upcoming Rio+20 summit, Covenant of Mayors signatories and members of Energy Cities have come up with 30 proposals for the energy transition of territories. Let us hope this grassroots Europe will get its voice heard. ★

Gérard Magnin is executive director of Energy Cities