Covenant of Mayors : Transforming Cities into key EU climate and energy actors

According to the new study "The Role of Cities in Climate and Energy Policies: The Case of the Covenant of Mayors" by David Donnerer from Aarhus University, the Covenant of Mayors has empowered cities in their climate and energy policy-making capacities and their multi-level governance relations to become key EU climate and energy actors.

How the Covenant of Mayors has transformed cities into key EU climate and energy actors

- The Covenant has built up the capacity of cities to undertake climate and energy policies: its local action plan framework (SECAP) is an invaluable policy-making tool for cities, and has allowed them to systematize their climate and energy action
- The Covenant's exemplary model of multi-level governance has enabled cities to strengthen their ties with higher-tiered governance levels: as a result, the EU, regional bodies and cities engage in mutually beneficial relations to accelerate climate and energy action on the ground
- The Covenant has given a key role to cities in EU climate and energy policies: the world's largest urban initiative is being used systematically by key EU institutions to make cities influential policy-makers in climate and energy issues

Over 7000 cities have joined the Covenant of Mayors since it came into life in 2008. They have been honoring their commitments to the world's leading urban climate and energy initiative by substantially reducing GHG emissions through energy efficiency and renewable energy actions. In return, the Covenant of Mayors has enabled cities to acquire a key role in climate and energy policies, as a new study finds.

Comprehensive feedback from the ground

The study used both a theoretical (literature analysis) and empirical approach (in-depth interviews) to arrive at its findings. Representatives from 7 Covenant signatory cities and 3 Covenant supporting structures were interviewed. The participating cities were Aberdeen (UK), Associazione Intercomunale Terre Estensi (Italy), Bielsko-Biala (Poland), Echirolles (France), Lviv (Ukraine), Menjez (Lebanon) and Munich). Moreover, the Covenant supporting structures interviewed were the Metropolitan City of Genova (Italy), the Province of Valencia (Spain) and the Province of Vlaams-Brabant (Belgium).

In addition, key Covenant stakeholders from the EU Commission (DG Energy), the Committee of the Regions, city networks (Energy Efficient Cities of Ukraine, Energy Cities) and Covenant-related projects (SUDeP East, SUDeP South) were interviewed.

Building the capacity of cities in climate and energy policy-making

The study found 5 different ways in which cities govern climate and energy policies on their territories: self-governing, governing by authority, governing by provision, governing by facilitation and governing by collaboration. Covenant Cities use these governing approaches consistently in their local action plans, as they e.g. engage in the renovation of their municipal building stock (self-governing), upscale local renewable energy supply to their citizens (governing by provision) or seek partnerships with local stakeholders such as SMEs or universities to optimize urban resource use (governing by collaboration).

The Covenant of Mayors has built up cities' capacities in climate and energy policy-making in many ways. Its local action plan framework (SECAP) enables cities to systematize their climate and energy policies, as they use the SECAP to define and structure the actions needed in urban key sectors (buildings, transport e.g.), in order to achieve their GHG emission reduction targets. The Baseline Emission Inventory of the SECAP allows cities to undertake an analysis of the current emissions and energy consumption of their territory, and makes it possible for them to identify the areas of necessary climate and energy action.

The Covenant also strengthens the capacities of provinces and regions in countries like Italy, Spain or Belgium, as it enables them to better mobilize their cities and provide them with dedicated support. But most importantly, the Covenant's local action plan approach is an invaluable policymaking tool for cities which never made a strategic action plan before. In countries like Ukraine or Lebanon, it is the Covenant of Mayors that has enabled cities to acquire the capacity to undertake climate and energy policies.

Reinforcing multi-level governance relations of cities

Cities shape and are shaped by multi-level governance processes in the field of climate and energy. They are engaged in relations with higher-tiered governance levels (regional, national, EU level) in vertical or hierarchical multi-level governance constellations, and are also liaising with cities (horizontal multi-level governance) in peer-to-peer forms of association such as city networks. An enabling multi-level governance framework reinforces the capacities of cities to undertake climate and energy policies.

The Covenant has enabled cities to strengthen in particular their relations with higher-tiered governance levels (vertical multi-level governance). In countries such as Italy, Spain, Belgium or Ukraine, the Covenant of Mayors has established itself as the embodiment of a vertical multi-level governance model that is grounded in institutionalized, mutually beneficial cooperation between cities and higher-tiered governance levels. These countries have had historically weak national climate and energy governance frameworks, which is why it was possible for the Covenant to introduce its exemplary model of vertical multi-level governance.

Provinces and regions provide dedicated support to Covenant cities, and in return benefit from cities' ambitious climate and energy actions for their own regional strategies (e.g. becoming climate-neutral). Financial support from the EU, such as in the form of the European Regional Development Fund for Italian Covenant signatories, accelerates the implementation of signatories' action plans, which subsequently can better contribute to reaching the EU's 2030 targets.

Providing cities with a key role in EU climate and energy policies

Since the Covenant of Mayors came into existence it has made a profound impact on climate and energy policies, especially in the European Union. The Covenant of Mayors is systematically being used by EU institutions (Commission, Committee of the Regions, European Parliament) as an instrument to make cities influential policymakers in climate and energy issues. Through the Covenant's extension into the EU's eastern (Covenant East) and southern (Covenant Mediterranean) neighborhood, it has become a crucial part of EU neighborhood policy in climate and energy.

The Covenant of Mayors is also a cornerstone of the EU Energy Security Strategy adopted in 2014, as signatory cities in Eastern Europe continuously strengthen the resilience of the EU energy system through their ambitious energy efficiency and renewable energy actions. Moreover, the initiative forms a key part of the EU's climate and energy ambitions, as the EU counts on cities to reach its 2030 targets. In addition to this, the Covenant is regularly prominently featured in EU climate and energy policy dossiers, such as the Heating & Cooling Strategy (February 2016), the Energy Union (November 2015) or the New Deal for Energy consumers (July 2015). The Committee of the Regions even adopted a dedicated opinion on the future of the Covenant of Mayors in December 2015.

The study concludes that the Covenant of Mayors has facilitated the mainstreaming of cities into EU climate and energy policies, and truly transformed cities into key EU climate and energy actors. With

the Global Covenant of Mayors in the making, the role of cities is only going to grow ever important in the near future.

Background:

The Covenant of Mayors initiative was launched in 2008 by the EU Commission. Covenant signatory cities commit to go beyond EU climate and energy targets, by adopting and implementing a local action plan (SECAP) that takes an integrated approach to climate mitigation and adaptation. In accordance with the EU 2030 targets, signatories are bound to reduce their GHG emissions by at least 40% by 2030.

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Energy Cities : The European Association of local authorities in energy transition.
We have more than 1,000 towns and cities members in 30 countries. Energy Cities leads the Covenant of Mayors' Office (www.eumayors.eu) and coordinates EU projects to capitalize on city pioneers and give inspiration to more territories based on our 36 proposals for the local energy transition. Visit our best practices website and read our blog and positions papers.