

A minor revolution has taken place in Brussels where the European Commission has created a direct association with European cities – bypassing national governments – in an attempt to meet the EU's energy and climate targets. More than 500 cities have already signed up to this Covenant of Mayors.

Brussels enlists cities in climate fight

| by *Hughes Belin*

Cities are in the front line of the fight against climate change. Pollution, mobility, energy supply, waste, industrial discharge, public procurement, building permits, networks, well-being – all these issues are dealt with a local level. Home to the vast majority of the population, cities have tremendous potential to change the energy balance. This is why Andris Piebalgs, European energy commissioner, decided to approach mayors directly to get their commitments to limit greenhouse gas emissions, stimulate energy efficiency and promote the use of renewable energy.

The Covenant of Mayors was born from an exceptional set of circumstances. Energy has seen a marked increase in media attention over the past few years and climate even more so. In addition, with the impending expiration of the Kyoto Protocol, it was essential that measures be taken, at a European level, to reduce emissions. The European Commission was forced to propose practical solutions that can be implemented rapidly and which will deliver results in the short term. This resulted in

an energy efficiency action plan in 2006, with about 100 possible measures. One of these was the Covenant of Mayors.

Unilateral commitment |

The basic premise is simple: mayors pledge themselves to convince their citizens of the importance of energy efficiency and the fight against climate change. They must generate positive results before their end of term. So the Covenant is primarily a commitment by mayors that their municipalities will meet, and even go beyond, EU targets. The mayors have agreed to prepare, within a year after signing, a baseline CO₂ emission inventory and an action plan for sustainable energy. The EU's Joint Research Centre (JRC) will help them. Funding will be supplied in part from the European Investment Bank.

Cities that lack the required resources can call on a network of supporting structures. 'For 20 years or so, we have fought hard to get a European initiative towards local authorities on the subject of energy and now climatic questions', explains Gérard Magnin,

Covenant of Mayors

Energie-Cités is a group of some 1,000 municipalities in 30 countries committed to promoting local sustainable energy policies in areas such as urban design and transport. The organisation works in partnership with Climate Alliance, which for twenty years has been urging municipalities to commit to reducing emissions. The other partners are Fedarene (the European Federation of Regional Energy and Environment Agencies), and two major general groups, Eurocities (regional European capitals) and CEMR (Council of European Municipalities and Regions). This consortium was selected by the European Commission to carry out the Covenant and has established its secretariat in Brussels, the Covenant of Mayors Office.



Energy Commissioner Andris Piebalgs with several Mayors at the Covenant of Mayors.

Executive Director of Energie-Cités. His organisation leads the consortium of city networks, which will manage the Covenant of Mayors. Over 500 cities have signed up. This number is expected to grow to 1,000 by the end of the year.

Magnin describes the initiative as a move away from seeing energy as a sectoral question to viewing it as a territorial issue. The initiative is “bottom up” and definitely not the Commission’s usual way of working, which tends to be very much segmented and “top down”.

Quality of life |

Energie-Cités intends to set up a benchmarking process allowing cities to compare methods and to stimulate friendly rivalry. Some cities have already exceeded their objectives. Växjö in Sweden with 80,000 inhabitants, decided in 1996 to be ‘fossil fuel neutral’ by 2010. Today 84% of its heating comes from biomass, well over the 20% renewable energy target.

Some other smaller cities are well on their way to energy autonomy. Some German cities, such as Freiburg, have shown that it is possible to have buildings that produce more energy than they consume, and to provide a better quality of life. ‘Chasing these objectives, is chasing a better quality of life’, says Magnin. It is an opportunity to ‘finally re-focus development on humans rather than on markets which for sixty years has ruled our societies by cutting life into segments as if it were a piece of sausage.’

Urban policies have not been subject to review at EU level because they are determined at a national level. But then again, neither have reviews been carried out at national level in most member

states. Two years ago, the European Environmental Agency (EEA) carried out a study on “urban sprawl” in 25 European cities. It emerged that Munich is the only city to have been able control urban sprawl in the past 50 years. That means population growth outpaced the growth of urbanisation in Munich. A further EEA study on the quality of life, including the appreciation of public spaces, was published in February this year. Munich again was awarded top marks with 94% satisfaction. ‘The conclusion is that compact cities provide greatest satisfaction relative to green areas’, says Magnin. He thinks the future trend will be to re-centre the city and its suburbs around public transport.

There does not seem to be any correlation between political beliefs and energy and climate commitments, but there does appear to be a sense of continuity once processes have been initiated. The true mark of success is the ability of successors in charge to continue projects, says Magnin. ‘Once you have made the idea your own, you have won.’

The mayors present for the signing of the Covenant at the European Parliament in February all had the feeling that they were part of a movement. Many said they felt stronger because they were not alone. The only thing that had been missing until now was the willingness by the Commission to bend the rules with regard to the subsidiarity principle and to approach local authorities directly, bypassing national governments. According to Magnin, local authorities have much more power than is often realised, because they are able to show national authorities that there are real alternatives. ‘Inventiveness will rarely be found in central administration offices.’ ■