

European and Mediterranean Workshop on Climate change impact on water related and marine risks

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***The role of local and regional authorities
in disaster risk reduction in the face of climate change***

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Dear colleagues,

It is a great honour for me to represent today the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, which is the representative organism of the local and regional institutions of the 47 member states of the Council of Europe.

Our societies have a long record of managing the impact of weather and climate related events. However, climate change is one of the most significant risks of our century, since it represents an enormous challenge for our ecosystem and global economy.

In fact, the United Nations report on Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction published in 2009 revealed awful statistics. The report highlighted not only an increase of human and economical losses, but also negative expectations for our ecosystem due to climate change.

The report also remarked the need to join forces between all levels of governments to mitigate and manage natural hazards and its consequences. For instance, in Europe, the vulnerability and resilience of the cities differ among countries and regions, depending not only on the level of economic growth achieved, but also on the natural risks mitigation policies and institutional capabilities.

Climate change and its consequences can be exacerbated by social inequalities. There is a strong correlation between vulnerability and poverty. In poor areas the impact of a natural disaster could be catastrophic and the capacity to reduce the risks is minimal.

The timing of the impact of climate change is not clear, but the Congress has been warning for a while about the need of a new policy of risk in which all levels of government must participate, including international, national, regional and local authorities. It needs to be understood that a priority should be the improvement of the capacities of the regional and local communities to adapt in response to climate change. More so, if we take into the account the fact that urban areas will suffer most of the adverse impact of climate change, given that they concentrate most of the socio-economic activity, in terms of population, resources and infrastructure.

Therefore, municipal authorities are in the fore line to fight against the most immediate hazards consequences: floods, heat waves, oil spills, etc... Consequently, local governments must have an adequate response for disasters.

These strategies must be developed by integrating the reduction of disaster risk into sustainable development policies, and they must include the development and strengthening of institutional mechanisms and capacities at all levels to face this kind of hazards. Implementing adequate emergency preparedness, response and recovery programs for the effects of climate change. Additionally, we must consider population's awareness.

I would like to specifically mention the report about the challenge of cities and lands affected by sea level rise.

Rising sea level affects coastal population by inundating wetlands, eroding beaches, intensifying bays, etc... Santander, my home town is a low - lying land as well.

In fact, the sea level rise is having the following impact:

- Increase in the number of floods in the coastal areas
- Generalized back movement of the coastal line
- Losses of beaches
- Increase problems in the infrastructure built in the coastal areas

Because of all of this, we strongly believe that it is key to develop policies to adapt to the new environment and to be able to promote, develop and implement strategies aimed to moderate, manage and take advantage of the consequences of climate change.

Also, as mayor of Santander, I would like to mention that the Spanish municipal authorities have been for a while implementing policies to restrain the emission of green house gases, including the local management of:

- sustainable public transportation
- improved technologies for waste management
- urban planning with sustainable criteria
- promotion of renewable energies
- etc.

All of that to mitigate the green houses gases in our city.

Nevertheless, all these municipal initiatives which demand significant efforts at the local level and that are generally afforded from limited economic resources of the municipalities, have a limited impact in the society as a whole.

For that reason in Spain the local authorities have decided to join forces to create a Spanish network of cities for climate, as a section of the Spanish Federation of Municipalities and Provinces with the full support of the Ministry of Environment, Rural and Marine Affairs with a common objective of promoting sustainable policies in the Spanish cities, specially as it relates to reduction of green house gasses emissions, to offer technical support to the municipalities, to adapt measures to fight climate change, and to promote actions aimed at establishing preventive policies.

This network is currently formed by 283 cities that represent more than 27 million people, becoming the largest reference public body in the promotion of sustainable development at local level and it has received the recognition of every stakeholder working in the global warming field.

This network has provided to our local authorities' important advantages, allowing them to join forces, generating synergies and creating advantages of working together, helping the fluid exchange of information and experiences between the municipalities.

However the biggest political success of this network has been the achievement that climate change became a priority for the Local Authorities.

Another initiative that I would like to highlight is the strategy adopted within the Mayors Climate Protection Agreement, initiative of the European Commission, in which the participating municipalities commit to reduce 20% of CO2 emissions through the implementation of an actionable plan to develop sustainable energies.

Nevertheless, it is fundamental to coordinate all these initiatives with the rest of the strategic planning tools in place at the local level. Because global warming affects many different fields, it becomes of central importance the collaboration among different councils of the same local authority, the implementation of a globally coordinated strategy of the initiatives implemented

with sustainability criteria, including increased participation of the citizenship; always aiming to achieve more efficient, healthy and friendly cities.

To conclude my presentation, I would like to mention that we are very aware of the significant challenges ahead of us. The magnitude of the task requires decisive and concerted political decisions at all levels of government.

It is clear that local and regional authorities are not the only stakeholders. We have to be sure that the disaster risk reduction is a national and local priority built on a solid institutional base for its correct application. The speed and efficacy of the response is closely linked to the coordination of efforts at all levels of government.

The Congress manifested the need to develop a “culture of risk” that integrates the knowledge and the monitoring of natural hazards with the vulnerability, risk evaluation and sensitivity of the local populations.

Climate change policies are a good example of the need to think globally and act locally. For this reason, the Congress adopted a recommendation calling national governments to include members of the local and regional authorities in the national delegations to the Conference of the United Nations for Climate Change to be held next December in Copenhagen.

While the public actions to fight climate change is constrained by the distribution of responsibilities among different actors, the magnitude of this problem and its possible impact in the local communities, requires the local authorities to be innovative, to expand their areas of responsibilities, to look for external collaboration, and to develop a “culture of risk” among the local population.

To assure the security of the citizenship is a key element for the sustainable development of our society. This is precisely what is in danger in natural disasters, and therefore it is key to establish strategies for the reduction of disaster risk since at the end our capacity of prevention and response save lives.