

NETWORKING THE COVENANT OF MAYORS

Feedback from the ground on the Covenant of Mayors implementation

in Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands,
Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Sweden, Baltic Sea Region



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ABSTRACT

The NET-COM project brings together 12 networks of local and regional authorities committed to the achievement of the Covenant of Mayors (CoM) objectives. This second report provides a feedback from the ground on the progress of the CoM implementation within the target countries and regions of the project partners since the last report in 2012.

The report is based on national observations describing the perception of the CoM and factors influencing its implementation. For the report, the project partners drew on their experiences with the implementation of the initiative and carried out a survey among CoM signatories, CoM supporting structures and non-signatories in their country.

The results show that the visibility of the CoM has increased in all countries. However, the drivers and obstacles which influence the implementation of the CoM and the perceived negative and positive aspects are recurrent. The political impact of the CoM in the municipality and at European level is the initiative's uncontested positive aspect and driver. On the other hand, the technocratic image and high reporting workload is still perceived as an obstacle for the CoM implementation. The willingness and vigour to work on these obstacles and drivers have to be kept up.

The last part of the report encompasses recommendations from the local level to strengthen the implementation of the CoM. We hope that the feedback presented in this report will continue to improve the CoM implementation and will contribute to the further success of the initiative.

OBSERVATIONS MADE BY THE COVENANT ACTORS THROUGHOUT THE TARGET COUNTRIES

Positive aspects of the Covenant of Mayors

The **visibility of the CoM has increased** in all target countries and regions. This is, amongst others, related to the efforts of the Covenant Clubs. The Covenant Clubs have been active in forging new alliances with different kinds of partners (city networks, governmental bodies, etc.) and in providing space for dialogue and information exchange. More support to the signatories could be given, the national and European context for implementing the CoM improved and the awareness of the CoM increased. As a result, all target countries boast new signatories and many of them have additional Covenant Supporters and new Territorial Coordinators.

As in the first report the **political impact of the Covenant of Mayors in the municipality** remains the uncontested positive aspect. The CoM objectives provide a clear goal for local energy and climate policy and help to create awareness on the importance of integrated energy strategies and climate change mitigation. Municipal actors can refer to the commitments made in the framework of the CoM to push certain actions forward and to not lose track. Local authorities that are already well engaged in sustainable energy and climate issues use the signing of the Covenant to gain new momentum.

The **political impact of the CoM at European level** continues to be important for signatories as well. Through the CoM the crucial role of local authorities in creating sustainable local economies, shifting toward sustainable energy sources, energy sobriety and mitigating the effects of climate change is recognised. Additionally, the CoM is perceived as a prestigious European movement receiving a lot of attention, thus giving the local authorities' actions a European dimension and visibility. Finally, and this was not voiced in the last report, some signatories consider the CoM an opportunity to help to shape the political framework conditions for local authorities at European level.

Using a **uniform method to develop a local Sustainable Energy Action Plan (SEAP)** is another uncontested positive aspect acknowledged by signatories. The SEAP methodology provides a common European framework and is guidance for those municipalities which have gathered little experience in planning and implementing local environmental policies. Additionally, the **Baseline Emission Inventory (BEI)**, which is part of the SEAP, is regarded as making the need for improvements in energy efficiency evident. The technical support in the framework of the CoM is perceived by some signatories as an important help in implementing their commitments.

Many signatories continue to highlight the positive effect that the CoM has on **funding opportunities**. The fact that local authorities have a well-structured SEAP helps to prepare competitive project proposals in the framework of different programmes supported by the European Union. Furthermore, there are more and more signatories that have successfully obtained funding to effectively implement their municipal energy plans. Some signatories highlight that the EU funds in the new programming period starting in 2014 focus on energy aspects and expect that the CoM will help to benefit from these funds.

The **exchange of experience** at national and European level is again raised by signatories as a benefit of the CoM. The CoM events give the opportunity to share best practice, to forge partnerships and to get informed.

In the feedback collected for this report, a greater focus was set on the role of the CoM in **activating citizens and local stakeholders** than in the feedback collected for the report last year. Municipalities increasingly recognise that the support and input from citizens is valuable for the CoM implementation, last but not least in times of local authorities' limited financial resources.



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Negative aspects of the Covenant of Mayors

As in the last report, the high workload associated with the SEAP development contributes to a **technocratic image of the initiative**. The perception comes up that the CoM is a matter of **bureaucratic reporting** rather than a strong, common, local initiative for change. The difficulties faced in gathering data for the BEI add on to this.

Furthermore, the CoM is perceived as **inflexible** and not adapted to everyday realities. As in the last report, an example for this is the necessity for a city council approval for the CO₂ reduction target of 2020, even if the municipality has a city council approval for a more ambitious long term CO₂ reduction target. This results in an administrative burden for the local authorities concerned. The revised SEAP template offers the possibility to include a longer term CO₂ reduction target, but the municipality still needs the 2020 target and the city council approval for it to receive approval of its SEAP by the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission (JRC).

Moreover some signatories wish for more **technical support and a more fluid communication with the Covenant of Mayors Office (CoMO) and JRC**. This is reflected, as in the last report, in the fact that the JRC has faulted SEAP documents that have been submitted, and that signatories have even temporarily been excluded from the initiative without clear explanations. Long waiting periods for the feedback of the Joint Research Centre add on to this, although some Covenant actors feel that these periods have shortened since the last report.

Although the access to funding is perceived by many local authorities as a positive aspect of the CoM some local authorities are not satisfied with the existing funding opportunities, especially smaller towns. This and the above mentioned workload and requirements connected with the CoM and missing technical support, lead to signatories from small towns to believe that the initiative is only **fit for larger cities**, which have the appropriate staff and access to funding. Additionally, the **short term benefits of the CoM are often perceived as being too little**, making it difficult to convince cities, small or large, to join.

Finally, the **compatibility of the CoM as well as synergies** among the CoM and **other existing initiatives and programmes at European level** are not clear for several municipalities.

FACTORS INFLUENCING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE COVENANT OF MAYORS

Obstacles encountered

Despite the efforts of the Covenant Clubs, in some countries the work on **energy and climate related issues continues to play a minor role** on the political agenda. Some of the local authorities, experts and citizens continue to not see the advantages of tackling climate and energy related issues. In Bulgaria, for example, the focus is still on energy prices and energy supplies. In Poland, many local authorities are afraid that their citizens will not approve undertaking serious commitments in the field of energy consumption and CO₂ reduction (for example in the framework of the CoM) as a considerable part of the citizens believe that this will slow down local economy, reduce the comfort of living and generate unnecessary costs.

Some municipalities continue to be afraid that despite their efforts **they will not be able to meet the CO₂ target in 2020** and it is also unclear to them what will happen if they do not meet the target. This hinders some municipalities from joining the CoM.

For the elaboration of a BEI there is a **lack of experienced technical staff** and especially the problem with little **availability of data**. The strict privacy rules in Sweden continue being a barrier for the elaboration of the inventory. In some countries the Covenant Coordinators have managed to find solutions for the collection of data for the BEI. In Flanders, the regional administration has been convinced to support the municipalities in terms of data delivery. In Austria, the Covenant Coordinator is adapting its CO₂ assessment tool for Austrian municipalities to automatically transfer the results into the BEI and is developing a guidebook on data acquisition. Also in the Netherlands, the Covenant Coordinator has made available an online tool to calculate CO₂ emissions.

The local authorities continue **to lack financial and human resources and support from the national and European level to elaborate and implement the SEAPs**. Generally there is a lack of EU and national funding possibilities especially for small municipalities. The lack of tools and opportunities for **small municipalities** has often been stated in the feedback collected for this report. Additionally, local authorities are discouraged to apply to the existing funds because of the extended procedures and the large competition.

Even though more and more documents are being translated, the **language barrier** continues to be perceived negatively by the signatories. Some Covenant Coordinators, as for example in Poland, have started to translate the CoM information material themselves.

Some countries, like Slovakia and Italy, regard the **little involvement of the public** as an obstacle for making the CoM successful in the long term. It is not enough to sign the Covenant and elaborate SEAP, but one has to find a way to implement and elaborate this plan in cooperation with local actors.

Finally, an obstacle which has come up in the feedback is the **changing national political contexts** that influence the implementation of local energy action negatively but also positively. This was specifically mentioned by Slovakia, Poland, Flanders, Bulgaria and Sweden.



Drivers to join the Covenant of Mayors

Naturally the drivers to join the CoM reflect the perceived positive aspects of the initiative.

As stated before, in countries in which municipalities have little experience in developing and implementing sustainable energy policies, some local authorities perceive the CoM as important and useful. It gives the municipalities a **framework and roadmap** to plan and implement activities oriented at reducing CO₂ emissions.

In countries where many municipalities have already been active in energy and climate related issues, the CoM is not necessarily regarded as an additional workload. Quite the opposite, these municipalities can build on their experience and the CoM can be used to give **existing activities a further boost** and to initiate new activities.

The impact of the **signature of the CoM on the local authority's image** continues to be an important driver. Many municipalities are willing to be a part of the prestigious European movement and are happy that their actions gain visibility at national and international level.

Since the establishment of the Covenant Clubs, the CoM is increasingly seen as a good opportunity to **exchange experience** with other municipalities engaged in the Covenant and to become inspired by their actions.

The CoM is regarded by some local authorities and citizens as bearing the **possibility of achieving additional benefits while improving the energy situation** in a municipality e.g. improving quality of life of its citizens, creating new jobs, improving local economy, improving safety (e.g. by modernisation of public lighting), modernising local infrastructure, improving quality of the local environment which will make the city more attractive both to its citizens and potential investors.

Even though gaining access to EU funding is not considered that easy by the signatories, they expect that having signed the CoM and prepared a SEAP will help them to be **better prepared to access these funds**, especially in connection to the new EU Programming Period 2014 -2020, with a strong focus on energy related issues.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO ENHANCE THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE COVENANT OF MAYORS

As in the last report, the Covenant actors were asked to formulate recommendations addressing the Covenant of Mayors Office and the JRC, recommendations directed to the European and the national level and finally strategic recommendations.

In contrast to the last report the recommendation “Recognition of existing action plans and processes by the JRC and the Covenant of Mayors Office” and “More understanding for national circumstances” were not voiced explicitly by the Covenant actors. Yet, as there have only been minor changes since the last report in this regard, the above mentioned recommendations persist.

Simplify the elaboration and implementation of the SEAP and the reporting process

The elaboration of the SEAP has to be simplified. Hopefully the new template will bring considerable improvements. If the SEAP elaboration continues as it is, the signatories ask for more time.

Also, the evaluation process of the SEAPs has to be simplified. The reports submitted by the local authorities that are often associated with a high administrative and time burden should be consulted for further assessments besides the evaluation by the JRC. Furthermore, it should be made clearer what the Covenant commitments encompass. For example, a transparent checklist of all documents to submit is highly recommended. The JRC’s many years of experience in the evaluation of SEAPs could enrich these checklists. The time needed to inform signatories about the result of the evaluation has been reduced and should be reduced further.

The reporting workload is regarded by the signatories as being too high. Hopefully the new monitoring template might reduce some of this workload.

In general, a better communication between the CoMO and the Covenant Supporters should be aimed at.

Finally the signatories recommend tools and processes that can fit better smaller municipalities.

Improve funding opportunities at European level

Just as in the last report, this recommendation continues to be important as gaining access to financing opportunities is a strong driver for cities to join the CoM. European financial instruments for municipalities should be linked directly to the Covenant of Mayors to better convey the advantages to join the CoM. Furthermore, there is a need for stronger financial support addressing especially signatories implementing their SEAP. The application process for funding programmes could be facilitated for municipalities who signed the CoM for instance by recognition of submitted and approved SEAPs and waiver of the requirement of additional data. Existing European funding opportunities need to be improved: municipal treasurers have to be involved in the development of financial programmes for municipalities to ensure the usability and manageability of future programmes. Longer deadlines for applications for funds are needed since project development takes a lot of time. Funding schemes that address small municipalities would be helpful. More information on other innovative ways of funding, for instance Energy Performance Contracting, is wished for by Covenant Actors.

National support to the Covenant of Mayors initiative

Even though in some target countries Covenant Clubs managed to lobby the governmental institutions, there continues to be a big need for instruments, investments, supporting structures, new legislation from the national government, to enhance the implementation of the CoM. As stated in the last report, it is important that national authorities recognise CoM signatories as key partners in the implementation of national energy policies and actions.

More territorial actors in the Covenant of Mayors

Since the creation of the Covenant Clubs the networking with territorial actors has improved in many countries. More organisations and governmental institutions are part or cooperate with the network and intermunicipal cooperation, for example in Flanders, could be started. Cooperation with local stakeholders and other networks has proven to be fruitful. One lesson learnt is that providing sufficient support to the signatories contributes more to the extension of the initiative than inviting municipalities to sign. This development has to be kept up. The territorial actors should be given more visibility and encouraged to get engaged.

Promoting the Covenant of Mayors

There is a need for more active involvement of citizens in the development and implementation of local energy policies and actions. Energy-aware and committed citizens will encourage local authorities to join the CoM and support them in fulfilling their commitments. Therefore, it is important to promote the CoM as a way to improve quality of life. The signatories, on the other hand, are the living proof that the implementation of CO₂ reduction measures in order to reach ambitious CO₂ reduction goals can work. Their promotion of the CoM should be ongoing.

More synergy

A better synergy of the different initiatives at national and European level is needed. This would unite efforts to reduce CO₂ emissions and open up new positive opportunities for all actors involved. Moreover, a better cooperation amongst initiatives could decrease the workload of municipalities that are involved in different initiatives.

Networking the Covenant of Mayors

The experience from the Covenant Clubs has shown the importance of networking and bringing together different actors. These bring with them different capacities, expertise, contacts and can support the signatories and/ or the successful implementation of the CoM. Recommendations are to embed meetings in other events in order to attract new municipalities to the CoM. Another possibility is to embed the Covenant Club itself in existing clubs/organisations, as a strategy to attract new municipalities to the CoM and to benefit from the public awareness of the organisation.



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