

Chamber of Local Authorities

48th SESSION

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Introduction to the debate:

Environmental protection: how can local elected representatives make a difference?

Concept paper prepared by the Secretariat

Environmental protection: how can local elected representatives make a difference?

Floods in Austria, France, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain. Droughts in Croatia, Greece, Hungary Italy, Romania, Spain, Türkiye, and Ukraine. Heatwaves in Albania, Cyprus, Greece, Finland, and Türkiye. Wildfires in Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, North Macedonia, Portugal, and Slovenia.

All of this and more took place in Europe last year. The fact, intensity and increasing number of natural disasters like these is testament to the reality of climate change and environmental degradation that is only set to grow with devastating impacts on local communities.

Local elected representatives are on the front line of all this. They know the communities, businesses and even individuals who pay the terrible price of events like these. They are also at the forefront of the response, ensuring peoples' safety, coordinating rescue efforts and rebuilding the services, structures and lives that have been affected.

More than this, they are also responsible for making decisions, adopting strategies and ensuring the resources needed to both prevent and mitigate the impact of environmental harms. Sometimes they do this alone, and sometimes in coalition with local business, organisations and civic groups. Often, this results in innovative solutions that are then used by other communities and at scale. Through their commitment and willingness to act, local elected representatives have the power to bring out sustainable changes and make the difference in addressing environmental challenges.

Local elected representatives often take the lead on sustainable urban planning and green construction, energy-efficient building renovation and the preservation of green spaces to improve the quality of life and reduce the carbon footprint of their municipalities. The development of sustainable mobility, including low-carbon public transportation, cycling infrastructure and car-sharing policies, also helps to reduce carbon emissions. In addition, optimised waste and water management, through selective sorting, composting and reduced use of plastics, helps to preserve natural resources. Investment in renewable energies promotes local energy transition. Local politicians as well as educating and raising awareness among citizens through participatory campaigns and initiatives, which are essential for anchoring environmentally friendly behaviour within communities.

The Congress is active on these issues too, playing its part in helping ensure the multi-level response required to tackle the triple planetary crisis of pollution, climate change and the loss of biodiversity as requested by European leaders at the Reykjavik Summit of Heads of State and Government. The Congress strives to provide local and regional elected representatives with the tools and information they need to strengthen environmental protection. Recent examples include:

- a 2024 report on the circular economy at sub-national level¹;
- a report on water resources under pressure and the importance of good water governance at local and regional levels, submitted for adoption during the current Congress Session;
- a report on coastal erosion that is now underway.

More than this, following the [Reykjavik Declaration \(Appendix V\)](#) and the Congress report on "[Towards a green reading of the European Charter of Local Self-Government](#)", the Congress' Monitoring Committee is preparing a draft report on an additional protocol on the environment to the European Charter of Local Self-Government.

¹ Congress of Local and Regional Authorities (2024), CG(2024)47-14, [Fostering a circular economy at local and regional levels](#).

A thematic debate on all of these issues will be held during the Session of the Chamber of Local Authorities. This will include an exchange of views with the mayor of Split (Croatia), who has put in place ambitious environmental protection strategies within his municipality, the Congress thematic spokesperson on Environment and Climate Change and a Youth Delegate.

In thinking about that debate, we might ask ourselves:

- **Are we “over” climate change? what can local politicians do to beat apathy and green their communities?**
- **What are the obstacles to local politicians acting on the environment and how can we get around them?**
- **How can local councillors reconcile environmental imperatives with economic realities?**
- **How can local authorities work together to have a greater impact?**
- **What resources (human, financial, technical) do local authorities need to do more to protect the environment?**
- **How can an additional protocol to the European Charter of Local Self-Government help?**

The debate will be a prime opportunity to discuss what are the right steps forward.