

Chamber of Local Authorities

46th SESSION

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Introduction to the debate:

Environment: what responsibilities for local authorities?

Concept paper prepared by the Secretariat

Environment: what responsibilities for local authorities?

Cities, home to more than half of the world's population, account for about 70 % of global greenhouse gas emissions.¹ They are undeniably at the heart of the climate challenge, they are also the central element of the response to climate action. Furthermore, according to certain data, the highest per capita emissions can be found in rural areas.² Therefore, the environmental crisis affects all areas, whether urban or rural.

The Congress has carried out several studies on the environmental question and the role of subnational authorities. Good practices were collated in the [3rd Human Rights Handbook for Local and Regional Authorities on "Environment and Sustainable Development"](#) and proposals were made in its [2022 report on "A fundamental right to the environment: a matter for local and regional authorities"](#). Building on the need to take environmental concerns into account in local governance, the report suggests the elaboration of an Additional Protocol to the European Charter of Local Self-Government.

In May 2023, the Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe stressed the vital role of local and regional authorities in protecting the environment through the [Reykjavik Declaration "United around our values", in particular in its Appendix V](#).

The [Potsdam Declaration for a shared commitment to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment](#) signed in July 2023 reaffirms the fundamental role of cities and regions in both halting climate change and protecting people from its consequences.

However, despite the awareness of all levels of governance in Europe today of the reality of this climate crisis, the situation continues to deteriorate... According to the European Observatory Copernicus³, 2024 started with the hottest January on record. Temperature records are just one of the multiple manifestations of climate change that affect people through increasingly frequent and violent natural disasters.

In this regard, another Congress report, submitted for adoption during this Congress Session, examines local and regional responses to natural disasters and climate risks and considers the different steps for which elected representatives must prepare from the outset of an (often unfortunately) foreseeable disaster to the resilience they must demonstrate.

The thematic debate to be held at the Session of the Chamber of Local Authorities on 27 March, takes place in a context where all municipalities are impacted by the triple global crisis of pollution, climate change and loss of biodiversity. Protection of the environment at the local level is a *sine qua non* for the full enjoyment of the human rights of present and future generations.

It is therefore urgent that cities adopt integrated and green urban planning strategies responding to these issues, notably by investing in green spaces and sustainable infrastructures. The scope of responsibilities of local elected representatives with potential environmental impact range from wastewater management to the monitoring and improvement of air quality, through cleaning and maintenance of public spaces, or the construction of all kinds of environmental installations (discharges, waste treatment plants).

¹ <https://news.un.org/fr/story/2023/06/1135832>

² OECD (2021), OECD Regional Outlook 2021.

³ <https://climate.copernicus.eu/copernicus-2024-world-experienced-warmest-january-record#:~:text=According%20to%20Samantha%20Burgess%2C%20Deputy,the%20pre%2Dindustrial%20reference%20period.>

Further reading: Report of the European Committee on Democracy and Governance on [Green Public Administration](#)

In addition, many aspects of environmental regulations, such as the delivery of permits and licenses, compliance with environmental obligations, the regulation of vehicle emissions during high pollution days, and the development of land use plans, depend directly on local elected representatives and the policies they intend to pursue in order to act concretely, quickly and effectively.

- **How can we ensure sustainable actions and decision-making that is potentially binding on an electorate that elected representatives legitimately wish to retain the support of?**
- **How can local elected representatives be made to face up to their responsibilities in order to prompt all levels of governance to put in place environmental policies that have become imperative?**
- **What are the challenges local authorities face in terms of environmental protection and how to temper them?**
- **How is the dialogue between local and national authorities in this area articulated?**
- **How can we transform increased awareness among local elected representatives of green local governance into an additional protocol to the European Charter of Local Self-Government to ensure the protection of the environment in municipalities?**

All these and other issues will be raised during the debate to recall the environmental emergency in cities (and countryside), to present the obstacles that may be encountered by elected representatives in the development of potentially effective policies, but also to present how through targeted action local elected representatives can transform urban environments to ensure a prosperous future for all.

These strategies, often examples of good practice, will be presented by speakers during the thematic debate at the Chamber of Local Authorities.