Coastal erosion: Europe must act urgently to protect its regions and people

From Guadeloupe to Türkiye, and from the North Sea to Italy and Greece, speakers shared their experiences on Tuesday 27 October in Strasbourg, at the 51st session of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe. Residents forced to watch their land disappear, agricultural and tourism under threat, and infrastructure that has become difficult to insure: the first-hand accounts brought home the very real impact of a phenomenon that is often discussed in terms of statistics. Warmly received and enthusiastically adopted, the report "How can we cope with coastal erosion?" sparked a lively debate on what can be done before it is too late.

For centuries, human societies have sought to hold back the sea and stabilise the shoreline. But in the face of accelerating climate change, rising sea levels and increasingly violent and frequent storms, this approach is becoming unsustainable for many of Europe's coastlines . That is the conclusion of the report presented by Fanis Spanos (Greece, EPP/CCE) and Anthony Buchanan (United Kingdom, ILDG), who urge local and regional authorities to view the coastline as a shifting landscape whose transformation must be anticipated.

More than a quarter of Europe's coastline is affected by erosion. According to the report, the annualised costs of damage associated with coastal flooding – currently estimated at between €1.2 and €1.4 billion in the European Union and the United Kingdom – could rise to between €137 and €814 billion per year by 2100.

"Coastal erosion is no longer a secondary or isolated issue. It is now a fundamental challenge to territorial balance, economic stability and social justice across Europe," said Fanis Spanos.

Anticipate rather than react

Among the proposed approaches is "planned retreat": avoiding new development in exposed areas and, where protection is no longer viable, preparing to relocate homes, businesses and infrastructure.

"We must stop viewing the coast as a fixed boundary and start managing it as a dynamic interface between land and sea," said Anthony Buchanan.

France: a testing ground for adaptation that is still a work in progress

Invited to take the floor, Sophie Panonacle, MP for the 8th constituency of Gironde and Chair of the CNTC, France's national coastal management committee, outlined the difficulties facing the country's regions, particularly in the Arcachon basin.

France's 2021 Climate and Resilience Act gave local and regional authorities new tools to anticipate changes to the coastline. But as Sophie Panonacle pointed out, their implementation is hampered by a lack of funding. The MP spoke of her repeated parliamentary initiatives to remedy this situation, including her proposal to create a Coastal Erosion Fund designed to support authorities in their adaptation policies.

Sophie Panonacle also emphasised the importance of risk mapping: before deciding where to build, protect or relocate, it is essential to know precisely which areas are at risk. Such studies involve a significant outlay, but failure to plan ahead could prove far more costly.

Another challenge was raised by Mélanie Lepoultier (France, ILDG). Some coastal protection infrastructure can no longer find insurers willing to cover it. The French delegate proposed creating a European self-insurance mechanism to pool these risks.

In future, dykes and other fixed protective structures may play a lesser role, but they will not disappear entirely from local authorities' toolkit; rather, the rapporteurs recommend combining them with dune restoration, wetland conservation and improved sediment management.

For Rosa Barone (Italy, SOC/G/PD), the key is to stop waiting for disasters to strike before taking action. Her Dutch colleague Eke Folkerts (EPP/CCE) spoke about the long-term policies implemented in the Netherlands, while stressing the importance of involving island communities in decisions about their future.

Young people call for more ambitious measures

The youth delegates made the case for nature-based solutions, while calling for more support for innovation and research. They also stressed the need to strengthen legal obligations on climate action.

In this context, they referred to the Council of Europe's work aimed at recognising the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment in a legally binding instrument, which has yet to be drafted.

Local elected representatives and public trust

On the front line when it comes to dealing with the consequences of coastal erosion, local authorities must make often-tough decisions that directly affect residents' lives. Their success depends on ongoing dialogue with the public and on mutual trust, which is essential for developing shared responses and securing acceptance of the changes that are needed. But these authorities cannot be left to build and maintain that trust on their own: they need firm political, legal and financial support at national, European and international levels.

Sophie Panonacle proposed extending co-operation beyond Europe by creating a global coalition of coastal cities within the framework of the United Nations. The aim would be to share experiences and bring the challenges faced by local and regional authorities to the international stage.

The Turkish delegates invited their counterparts to continue these discussions at COP31 on climate change, scheduled to take place in Antalya from 9 to 20 November 2026.

Lastly, Bryony Rudkin (United Kingdom, SOC/V/DP) drew attention to what should happen after the vote on the report. The document must continue to be shared, promoted and used to inform policy decisions, she said, rather than becoming just another adopted text.

The unanimous vote in Strasbourg shows that this assessment is widely shared. The challenge now is to provide the means for this shared commitment to be realised: funding studies, protection measures and support for affected communities. Meeting these challenges will require lasting co-operation between local and regional authorities, national governments and European institutions, far beyond the debate in Strasbourg.