

EUROPEAN UNION



Committee of the Regions

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OPINION

Resource efficiency opportunities in the building sector

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- asks the Commission to analyse ways and means in which the Committee and local and regional authorities can be involved in the consultations which are to follow from the present communication;
- considers that, for local and regional authorities across the EU, the priority is to move forward in their efforts to develop common indicators which are a pre-requisite to the development of common objectives and standards in greening the construction sector;
- calls for the local and regional level to be consulted on indicators for resource efficient buildings to be prepared by the European Commission and to be given the opportunity to contribute to these indicators throughout the development process;
- supports the Commission communication in its endeavour to emphasise that disseminating best practice plays an important role in the transition towards more resource-efficient buildings. In this respect, cooperation projects between groups of regions with similar features must have priority. Regions which have particular skills issues must be supported by cooperation mechanisms focusing on difficulties related to the transfer of knowledge;
- considers that special attention must be given to the specific problems of rural regions and small and medium-sized towns, as these regions are less efficient than large towns. Their defining features need to be recognised in the definition of standards, targets and other implementation measures. The Smart Cities research priority area in Horizon 2020 should instead be called Smart Cities and Regions, and complemented by a new priority area entitled Smart Rural Regions and Towns.

Rapporteur

Csaba Borboly, President of Harghita County Council (RO/EPP)

Reference document

Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on Resource efficiency opportunities in the building sector, COM(2014) 445 final

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions – Resource efficiency opportunities in the building sector

I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

1. fully supports the European Commission's efforts to develop common objectives and indicators as a basis for common European standards for resource efficiency in the building sector in order to increase policy coordination and coherence. Local and regional authorities are key partners in promoting greater resource efficiency, given the contribution this makes to sustainable development through its positive impact on the environment, the climate, the economy and society. Similarly, by using instruments such as green public procurement, these bodies can boost the market for goods manufactured from construction and demolition waste;
2. is therefore concerned that the Commission communication overlooks the role of local and regional authorities, despite the fact that the Committee has drawn attention to this aspect in previous opinions on similar subjects. Stresses the central role of local and regional authorities as investors, not least in the building sector, but also as far as public procurement, the implementation of EU and national legislation on buildings, the support for local business and innovation, and the information of investors and the public at large are concerned. For this reason, the Committee asks the Commission to analyse ways and means in which the Committee and local and regional authorities can be involved in the consultations which are to follow from the present communication;
3. points out that in the broad and complex policy area of sustainable buildings, initiatives must be based on a holistic approach which takes account of all aspects related to the needs and concerns of individuals, communities and institutions that will use them. Local circumstances and benefits to the local economy should be considered as important aspects of sustainability, for instance respecting the key principle of free movement by promoting the use of local building materials which are often considered most efficient and can have a positive impact on the local economy;
 - A. *Fundamental problems*
4. considers unacceptable that recyclable construction and demolition waste (CDW) of tertiary buildings is often put into landfills without prior assessment of the economic viability of its collection and recycling. The CoR considers that priority should be given to close the recycling loop for instance by setting individual targets on specific types of waste, mandatory provisions for auditing, dismantling and sorting the CDW, before demolition or renovation of tertiary buildings, as is already the case in some regional and local laws;
5. considers that the "greening" (more environment-friendly operation) of the building sector requires public authorities to provide a framework for clients, contractors and developers in the construction sector for a transition towards more environmentally friendly practices, because the construction phase is crucial for the environmental performance of any building throughout its

life cycle. Such a transition would not happen as rapidly as supposed in the absence of common EU indicators and standards, but also when there is no economically viable business models for selection of greener and more resource efficient building techniques and materials compared to the current situation;

6. considers it necessary to clarify that demolition waste may come from either complete demolition of a building or from renovation, and it therefore needs to be specified that the concept of demolition includes partial demolition in the course of renovation. In most regions, overall waste produced in the course of renovation exceeds the total waste generated by the complete demolition of buildings;
7. commends the Commission on its intention to stimulate the market in recycling construction and demolition waste by stepping up support for research and demonstration projects. Such projects, also within the Horizon 2020 framework programme and carried out in close cooperation with the Member States, should aim to develop solutions on how to make recycling more attractive economically; In addition, the CoR is in favour of introducing measures to support the market uptake of secondary materials produced from CDW;

B. Local and regional authorities supporting resource efficiency policy

8. considers that, for local and regional authorities across the EU, the priority is to move forward in the efforts to develop common indicators which are a pre-requisite to the development of common objectives and standards in greening the construction sector. It is in the interests of local and regional authorities to draw attention to the major environmental and economic challenges involved in improving resource efficiency in the construction sector;
9. underlines in this context that local and regional authorities already play a significant role in promoting sustainable buildings at low or no costs through local or regional building codes. Best practices resulting from the implementation of these codes, such as minimum requirements on daylight levels, energy efficiency or construction materials, could significantly contribute to promote genuine sustainable buildings in Europe and should therefore be promoted;
10. points out that local and regional authorities play a key role in reducing the environmental impact, of buildings, as within their scope of responsibility they develop appropriate measures and implement strategies in support of resource efficiency, by carefully assessing local features and aspects;
11. calls on local and regional authorities to make use of spatial planning and town planning tools and practices when formulating sustainable buildings policy. Renewable energy, energy efficiency, waste management and operation and maintenance issues should also be taken into account;
12. in this context, calls on local and regional authorities to adopt a holistic approach throughout the entire building lifecycle including the construction products, the design and construction of a building, its maintenance and renovation, in order to promote a more efficient use of materials, energy and water consumption as well as better waste management;

13. considers that the efforts made to date by the EU's local and regional authorities are extremely important, with outstanding examples being the Emilia Romagna region's energy efficiency strategy and the autonomous province of Bolzano's climate plan entitled "Energy – Alto Adige 2050", programmes identifying new technologies and approaches based on the traditional local architecture of Harghita county, and the innovative activities of the city of Rakvere in Estonia and of the community of Anavra, Almyros municipality, Magnisia, Greece. These and similar initiatives lead the way in resource efficiency and the sustainable construction industry;
14. notes that industrial activity linked to construction materials from the green construction industry and demolition would create many jobs. Developing regional and local action plans on these issues, together with appropriate use of human resources, would contribute substantially to achieving resource efficiency targets;
15. believes that, an initiative like the Covenant of Mayors could be useful to address also the challenge of resource efficiency. The Committee firmly believes that the appropriate ways to do so should be explored once the EUs resource efficiency targets have been approved;
16. also draws attention to the fact that resource use is determined in large part by design-related decisions and choices over construction materials. Therefore, as noted by the Commission, in order to bring resource efficiency gains, engineers, designers, manufacturers, contractors, authorities and end users need usable and reliable information, so that their decision-making is based on the criterion of sustainable design. Accordingly, and given that local and regional authorities are the licensing bodies closest to all stakeholders, it is up to these authorities to develop specific information sessions to raise awareness, as well as policies and mechanisms for supporting and encouraging the use of these resources, by means of financing lines from the European funds for this purpose. These policies should be part of a common European approach for assessing buildings' environmental performance, which should cover all the key indicators defined;
17. calls on the Commission to actively involve the local and regional level in developing a framework with core indicators to assess the environmental performance of buildings throughout their lifecycle. The local and regional level should be consulted on and given the opportunity to contribute to these indicators throughout the whole development process;
18. draws attention to the fact that local and regional authorities play an important role both as the political level which carries out financial investments in sustainable buildings and as owners of public buildings, public housing and utility networks;
19. reiterates its opposition to the system of macro-economic conditionality whereby if a Member State fails to meet its obligations under EU law (for instance concerning the waste or energy efficiency targets) it allows for punishment of the Member State by withholding the ESIF funding in part or in full. This system risks penalising local and regional authorities with no regard to the extent to which they have contributed to the policy targets;

20. calls on local and regional authorities to step up cooperation on green public procurement, thereby helping the local and regional level to meet the EU's ambitious targets for sustainable buildings;

C. Definitions, indicators, R&D

21. recalls that the construction industry is a tool, and buildings can have both positive and negative impacts within a particular town planning, architectural, social, economic and environmental context. Particular importance therefore must be attached to the problem of sustainability in this complex set of interrelations;
22. points out that the technical and performance characteristics of certain construction materials change rapidly after manufacture, and this process continues in some cases even once the materials are in place. It is therefore important to analyse whether, and under which conditions these materials after demolition are suitable for reuse and whether it may be necessary to introduce a separate certification system for such materials;
23. nonetheless, highlights the need for research into the upkeep and maintenance of buildings and associated facilities as this could provide opportunities to extend their lifecycle. More specifically, awarding contracts to Energy Service Companies in the field of energy supply and improving and maintaining installations should be encouraged;
24. stresses that re-purposing construction materials from demolition sites, for example for building roads, should be treated as a key research area as many construction materials contain harmful, hazardous or contaminating components and appropriate answers have not yet been found as regards gauging, and where necessary reducing, the inherent risks to the environment and human health;
25. considers that rediscovering traditional construction technologies and materials can be a great opportunity for the European construction sector: they are often models of the way in which local resources can be used for efficient solutions geared to local conditions, without these leading to – in accordance with land use – the opening of new quarries, where not added in a consistent context;
26. points out that analysis is needed of whether renovating existing buildings is an appropriate solution in every case: existing buildings in many regions of Europe, including commercial, residential and public buildings, can be renovated to provide a suitable degree of comfort only after substantial investment. These situations draw attention to the fact that, while renovating existing buildings is always more resource efficient in terms of the individual building than demolishing them or building new ones, the aesthetic, architectural and social value of a new building is much greater in some cases – especially from a user's perspective. Therefore, in order to ascertain whether renovating existing buildings is an appropriate solution, alongside the purely technical aspects, consideration must also be given to the architectural, social, economic and environmental aspects as well as the user's perspective;

27. also notes the huge potential for creating jobs in the field of sustainable construction, particularly in an economic sector like this, that has been so hard hit by the crisis. With support and appropriate training in new methods of environmentally sustainable construction, many unemployed people in the sector could be reintegrated into the labour market;
28. recommends that when the common criteria are being developed for assessing the environmental sustainability of buildings (as core indicators), renewable raw materials - preferably local or indigenous materials subject to traceability mechanisms - also be explicitly taken into account. It would reiterate that the use of renewable raw materials can significantly contribute to resource conservation in construction: the use of resources in this area is not limited to just construction (e.g. timber construction) and insulation, but also extends to finishings (on floors, walls and surfaces) etc. This applies in particular to the "cascade use" of renewable raw materials, i.e. multiple use at several levels. Likewise, renewable raw materials can replace fossil fuels for heating buildings and thus reduce the impact on the environment;
29. would point out that as regards construction, the Commission document does not mention the use of renewable energy, although such energy clearly contributes to a building's sustainability. Solar thermal, photovoltaic and wind power systems integrated into buildings, and the use of biomass to heat buildings or service water, would greatly reduce the environmental impact throughout the lifecycle, particularly as regards CO₂ emissions. Mention should also be made of other technologies, such as geothermal energy, the potential for centralised generation, efficient district heating and cooling infrastructure, renewable energy sources, waste heat or high-efficiency cogeneration. An accurate analysis must take account of the materials and energy used to generate electrical units and energy;
30. considers that clarification and common definitions are needed as quickly as possible at EU level for terms which are often used interchangeably: passive building, environmentally friendly building, sustainable building, low energy building and zero carbon building. Progress through appropriate R&D initiatives and consultations is needed urgently as these definitions will form basis for common standards and policy measures in this field in the future;
31. emphasises that alongside the reuse of metals and glass, which is covered in detail in the communication, the research highlights promising data regarding concrete and wood. As construction materials, concrete and wood are suitable for reuse, easily sorted and simple to recycle and/or use. Local and regional analyses regarding the reuse of these materials should therefore have priority;
32. considers that with regard to the use of wood and other natural construction materials, it must be borne in mind that growing needs in the construction industry will lead to direct or indirect changes in land use and ecosystems. It is important that this industry does not repeat past mistakes as regards the production of biomass for energy. Changes in land use and ecosystems must be analysed in detail and taken into account when developing common objectives and indicators for resource efficiency in the building sector;

33. proposes that university curricula for engineers, architects and economists alongside resource efficiency procedures, should also include practices to reduce additional use of materials and waste generation as a result of design plan changes;
34. considers that with regard to resource efficiency and specifically in the case of recycling construction and demolition waste, the costs and impact of sorting and transport must also be taken into account. Fully standardised analysis procedures are therefore necessary, and policy and R&D processes must also integrate the comparison of options factoring in transport and on site or local recycling capacity;

D. Governance, partnership, knowledge transfer

35. is pleased that the Commission communication emphasises that disseminating best practice plays an important role in these measures. In this respect, cooperation projects between groups of regions with similar features must have priority. In this field, it is not feasible to have one standard practice or universal approach: local and regional actors must learn from one another which are the most suitable solutions, and pooling local knowledge from different regions could provide added value;
36. points out that many local and regional authorities have observed that the Member States view instruments established by energy efficiency rules merely formally, as a system alien to the design culture of their regions or countries. The Committee therefore suggests drawing up some form of interim report on the state of implementation of energy efficiency directive without creating new reporting obligations for local and regional authorities, but involving them on a voluntary basis in the formulation of the report;
37. points out that some regions do not have appropriate knowledge and skills, and so the technology gap – when more developed regions pull ahead – may increase, particularly in less developed regions. With a view to solving this problem, these regions must be supported by cooperation mechanisms focusing on difficulties related to the transfer of knowledge. Consideration must be given to the possibility of maximising the transfer of knowledge regarding design and construction to regions with insufficient skills;

E. Compensation mechanism

38. considers that political leaders should be aware that any radical change in the construction sector will require political will and strong leadership by the upper levels of local and regional administration. They cannot disregard the fact that local and regional operational budgets are limited and offer scant room for investing in improvements to buildings, even if such investments offer an excellent return and are quickly amortised;
39. points out not only environmental but also economic and social benefits of sustainable buildings as compared to the costs of construction and maintenance, and emphasises that, according to the results of the market analysis to which the Commission refers, the cost of investing in green construction is only a few percent higher than in traditional construction;

40. considers that special attention must be given to the specific problems of rural regions and small and medium-sized towns. Their defining features need to be recognised in the definition of standards, targets and other implementation measures to prevent them being disproportionately affected or to allow them to be compensated where necessary. Consequently, the Smart Cities research priority area in Horizon 2020 should instead be called Smart Cities and Regions, and complemented by a new priority area entitled Smart Rural Regions and Towns.

Brussels, 17 April 2015.

The President
of the European Committee of the Regions

Markku Markkula

The Secretary-General
of the European Committee of the Regions

Jiří Buriánek

II. PROCEDURE

Title	Resource efficiency opportunities in the building sector
Reference(s)	COM(2014) 445 final
Legal basis	Article 307(1) TFEU
Procedural basis	Optional referral
Date of Commission letter	16 July 2014
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Commission responsible	Commission for the Environment, Climate Change and Energy (ENVE)
Rapporteur	Csaba Borboly, President of Harghita County Council (RO/EPP)
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