



The Covenant of Mayors Experience: Lessons for Fostering Local Climate Policy

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Introduction

The Covenant of Mayors aims to stimulate municipal climate action in the European Union (EU) based on the voluntary involvement of various actors at multiple levels by providing a network for local and regional authorities. Signed by 6,480 municipalities, this EU-initiative covers over 208,230,000 inhabitants,³ and unites nearly 5,000 sustainable energy action plans (SEAPs) (Committee of the Regions 2015). The Covenant of Mayors prides itself as “a groundbreaking movement” (Covenant of Mayors 2014b) and “an emblematic example of multi-level governance and bottom-up action in Europe” (Covenant of Mayors 2013a). Participants have praised its “long term commitment, citizens’ involvement, and ambitious and integrated climate action” thanks to which it could be “a model also for the other continents and be a start of a global movement” (Committee of the Regions 2014). Why has the Covenant attracted so many European municipalities? Has it been able to deliver on the promises set by its founders and members? And what can be learned from this example for the design of other voluntary policy instruments for fostering local climate policy?

The following analysis seeks to answer these questions by utilizing qualitative data from field research in France and Germany. This includes expert interviews, documents, and surveys among Covenant members.⁴ After introducing the Covenant’s functionality (section 1), the analysis examines its benefits for the European Commission (section 2) and for municipalities

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³ See <http://www.covenantofmayors.eu> as of September 21, 2015.

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(section 3). As will be shown, slightly diverging interests result in certain tensions in the interaction between governance levels, but the Covenant has identified certain remedies too (section 4). For the Covenant to succeed not only in terms of membership numbers, but also in actually fostering effective local climate policy, the paper concludes that it is essential to create and maintain co-benefits for all actors involved (section 5).

1. The Covenant of Mayors' mode of operation

The Covenant of Mayors performs all three typical functions of transnational municipal climate networks (TMCNs): information sharing, capacity-building and implementation, and rule setting (Andonova, Betsill, and Bulkeley 2009). Information sharing mainly takes the form of newsletters and so-called benchmarks of excellence shared through the website of the Covenant. Capacity building and implementation occur through workshops, webinars, and complementary EU projects. Rule setting builds on reporting obligations and benchmarking.

However, its mode of operation differs slightly from many other TMCNs.⁵ The Covenant of Mayors combines unilateral commitments by participating municipalities, specific targets and measures to achieve them, and scrutiny of reports. It builds on the involvement of non-municipal governments at the EU, national and subnational levels as well as of other stakeholders (Ballesteros Torres and Doubrava 2010).

This setup entails five specificities: Firstly, all signatories commit to the EU's 20% CO₂ reduction objective by 2020, and engage in a three-step process: establish a baseline emissions inventory; adopt a sustainable energy action plan (SEAP); and report regularly on implementation. Secondly, all reports are based on distinct Covenant methodology and tools, and checked by the European Commission's Joint Research Centre. Failure to submit, or rejection of submitted documents, may result in suspension of membership. Thirdly, its hybrid membership (Andonova, Betsill, and Bulkeley 2009) includes governments from above the municipal level and non-governmental actors. National and territorial authorities act as Covenant Coordinators providing "strategic guidance, financial and technical support to signatories. Network [sic] of local authorities, known as Covenant Supporters, commit to maximize the impact of the initiative through promotional activities, liaison with their members and experience-sharing platforms"⁶ (see Figure 1).

	<i>Type of actor:</i>	
<i>Level of governance:</i>	Governmental	Other
National	Covenant Coordinators	Covenant Supporters
Territorial		Local and Regional Energy Agencies
Municipal	Signatories	

Figure 1: Typology of Covenant Membership

Source: Author, based on http://www.covenantofmayors.eu/about/covenant-of-mayors_en.html as of September 28, 2015

Fourthly, the Covenant, including the Covenant of Mayors' Office (CoMO) in Brussels, is EU-funded. As a result, membership is free of charge, but the running of the consortium⁷ is subject to contractual terms with the European Commission. Last but not least, the Covenant is

⁵ Climate Alliance also has a particular target, ICLEI's Cities for Climate Protection Program also includes a step-wise process, and Energy Cities also goes back to an EU initiative, but only the Covenant combines these features.

⁶ See http://www.covenantofmayors.eu/about/covenant-of-mayors_en.html as of September 28, 2015.

⁷ This consortium is led by Energy Cities (a network of European local authorities on sustainable local energy) and includes Eurocities (an advocacy group of big European cities), Climate Alliance (Europe's biggest municipal climate network), the Council of European Municipalities and Regions CEMR (Europe's biggest association of local and regional authorities) and the European Federation of Agencies and Regions for Energy and the Environment FEDARENE (regional and local organizations which implement, co-ordinate and facilitate energy and environment policies).

not conceived as an additional transnational municipal climate network, but as an ‘official movement’ that provides a platform for existing networks to cooperate among each other and beyond.

Summing up, what might at first look like any other transnational municipal climate network turns out to be a supranational initiative aiming at incentivizing and instrumenting municipal climate action on a comparable, verifiable basis.

2. The Covenant as an EU initiative for stimulating municipal activity

Launched in 2008, the first signature ceremony of the Covenant took place in February 2009. It is part of a series of European climate and energy policies targeting local and regional authorities based on ‘soft’ policy instruments. What benefits did the European Commission expect from a non-regulatory, non-coercive initiative that purely relies on voluntary participation? It is this apparent weakness of the Covenant that facilitates strengthening the European Commission within the European Union and beyond (see Figure 2).

Internal co-benefits European politics	External co-benefits International politics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement policy locally • Strengthen subsidiarity • Measure local climate action 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase credibility of leadership claims in UNFCCC negotiations • Promote European mode of governance

Figure 2: Benefits of the Covenant for the European Commission

Source: Author.

The current European climate and energy policy dynamic dates back to 2005,⁸ when heads of states and governments called for a common policy approach beyond a mere common energy market (Geden and Fischer 2008). The so-called 20-20-20 targets⁹ were adopted in March 2007; the climate and energy package in December 2008. In the run-up to the Copenhagen Climate Change Conference¹⁰ in December 2009, the unilateral definition and instrumentation of European GHG emission reduction objectives also represented a means to substantiate the EU’s claim for leadership in international climate change negotiations.

In this context, the renewable energy faction at the European Commission’s Directorate-General Transport and Energy (DG TREN)¹¹ included local authorities in its program Intelligent Energy Europe.¹² Lobbying efforts of local authorities and TMCNs had pointed out the important role of the local level in many climate and energy-related sectors and decisions. Their inclusion was in line with the European Commission’s white paper on European governance of 2001 which, *inter alia*, called for enhanced participation of local government associations in policy development (European Commission 2001).

Originally, the Covenant of Mayors was intended to network the mayors of large climate pioneer cities for exchanging experiences (European Commission 2006a) in energy-efficient transport (European Commission 2006b). This approach was quickly abandoned in favour of a

⁸ Informal European Council meeting at Hampton Court.

⁹ The EU 20-20-20 targets include reducing GHG emissions by 20% as compared to 1990 levels, raising the share of renewable resources in energy consumption to 20%, and improving energy efficiency by 20%, all by 2020.

¹⁰ The Copenhagen Climate Change Conference served as 15th session of the Conference of the Parties (COP 15) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and included several other UNFCCC meetings.

¹¹ Since February 17, 2010, DG TREN of the European Commission has been split up to form the Directorate-General for Mobility and Transport and the Directorate-General for Energy.

¹² Intelligent Energy Europe was an EU funding scheme with a budget of € 730 million running from 2003 to 2013. In view of reaching the EU 2020 targets, it supported sustainable energy projects from areas such as renewable energy, energy-efficient buildings, industry, consumer products and transport. Its successor in certain respects, Horizon 2020 is an EU funding scheme for research and innovation with a budget of nearly €80 billion from 2014 to 2020. Organized in multiannual work programs, it includes a thematic section on climate action, environment, resource efficiency and raw materials.

broader approach, targeting municipalities of any size and population that would commit to future efforts and report on their measures.

3. Benefits of Covenant membership for municipalities

In light of the supranationally-defined obligations entailed by signing the Covenant, why exactly would cities want to join? Cities benefit from Covenant membership in internal politics as well as in external relations, depending on the stage of maturity¹³ that their own sustainable energy policy has reached (see Figure 3).

	Internal co-benefits City politics	External co-benefits Citizens, peers, and superordinate levels of government
Early stage of policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish authoritative constraints for taking action • Benchmark for setting targets • Methodology for climate and energy planning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visibility for local leaders • Enhanced legitimacy of city action • Facilitate funding acquisition
Mature stage of policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a lock-in for pursuing local action (e.g. energy plan update) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Audit for existing policies • Advocacy platform

Figure 3: Benefits of Covenant membership for municipalities based on stage of policy

Source: Author.

When a city with little prior experience is about to engage in sustainable energy policy, signing the Covenant can facilitate internal political and administrative processes. The legally non-binding commitment easily achieves consensus in the city council but establishes an authoritative outside constraint on factions or administrative departments to take action. In the absence of prior experience and of guidance from higher levels of government, Covenant rules provide orientation on how to proceed with regard to targets, monitoring, and planning.

Covenant membership can also be used by city governments in external relations with citizens, fellow municipalities, and superordinate governments such as those part of intercommunal structures, and at the regional and the national level. Local leaders benefit from personal visibility through Covenant events. The annual signature ceremony in Brussels for example provides an excellent public relations opportunity. When combined actively with other climate and energy initiatives, Covenant activities can help build political careers. Cities also rely on Covenant membership to enhance their legitimacy to act on local climate and energy policy. Reference to the Covenant can be made in terms of affiliation to a large movement of European municipalities or of high-level recognition of the city's commitment. This can help win over public opinion, convince neighboring municipalities to join in the effort, or defend local scopes of action towards superordinate levels. Some Covenant signatories expect it to facilitate access to funding opportunities. Although few European funding schemes explicitly refer to Covenant signature, it can be used to enhance funding applications or be a requirement for accessing specific programs of territorial governments.

Cities with a more mature sustainable energy policy use the Covenant differently than those with a less developed policy. Internally, Covenant membership can help overcome hindrances to pursuing and updating local policies. The official commitment creates lock-in and, to a certain extent, secures the political decision once made, for example after municipal elections. Externally, Covenant membership can be used as an audit: It endorses longstanding

¹³ A city with an established record in sustainable energy policy will have set up an energy- and emissions-monitoring scheme and adopted an action plan. It might have developed partnerships with relevant actors and will have started to implement or already updated its policies. Last but not least, it will have allocated the required financial and human resources.

municipal policies and provides a benchmark for their achievements. Also, the Covenant can serve as a platform for municipal advocacy. After all, sustainable energy policy is a highly dynamic policy field which entails manifold opportunities for the reallocation of competencies and resources. The CoMO provides a channel to the European Commission for lobbying of local and regional authorities. Additionally, Covenant members organize in national clubs to exchange and pool their advocacy efforts.

4. Interaction between governance levels: difficulties and remedies

As the analysis of motivations has shown, benefits of the Covenant for the European Commission as well as for signatories exceed pure mitigation, and are situational. The European Commission established the Covenant in order to intervene at the local level, to satisfy calls for subsidiarity, and to obtain quantitative data on local climate action, thereby strengthening its role in UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) negotiations and showcasing European multi-level governance. Cities benefit from Covenant membership internally in terms of policy tools and lock-in, and externally with regard to legitimacy and advocacy, funding, and self-promotion. These motivations might coincide, overlap, or conflict. What difficulties have hindered the European Commission and signatories to fully realize the benefits they expect from the Covenant? And what remedies have been implemented so far? The analysis shows that interactions of governance levels can both cause problems and provide solutions (see Figure 4).

	Difficulties	Remedies
European Commission	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workload of membership management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Additional projects, helpdesks, and handbooks
Signatories with little capacities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of technical assistance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Covenant Coordinators
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workload of reporting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Native-language documents • Joint SEAPs
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Costs of network usage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National events and contact persons • Webinars
Experienced signatories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of specific value added 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Covenant clubs

Figure 4: Difficulties and corresponding remedies in Covenant implementation based on actor types

Source: Author.

A difficulty in the daily operation of the Covenant has emerged from its numeral success: Initially meant to involve the mayors of metropolises in a network of pioneers for pioneers, the Covenant developed into “the mainstream European movement” (Covenant of Mayors 2015) including inexperienced, small and rural municipalities. From the Brussels perspective, the great number and heterogeneity of signatories represents a success, but also a challenge. The Joint Research Centre was overwhelmed with submissions and it lags behind in its reviews of them. Signatories thus have to wait for approval. This undermines their experience of a direct line to the EU, and their use of their Covenant profile for auditing. Similarly, the CoMO is unable to attend to all signatories. In response, additional EU-funded projects such as “Come 2 CoM” (May 2010–April 2012) have promoted Covenant membership along with providing technical assistance to signatories in establishing baseline emission inventories and drafting their SEAPs (European Commission 2014). Country-specific helpdesks have been created so as to be better available for signatories. Handbooks and guidelines aim to reduce the need for personal attendance. Available at the library section of the Covenant’s website, they explain for instance how to establish a SEAP or how to finance its implementation.

Nevertheless, municipalities with little capacities and no specialized staff for sustainable energy policy require more detailed assistance. They reasonably conclude that they are not able

to live up to a Covenant commitment; some opt for alternative schemes.¹⁴ Also, Covenant signature and target achievement are a different kettle of fish. Small or inexperienced signatories often encounter fundamental difficulties in taking the steps foreseen by Covenant rules. If no preliminary work has been done before, many signatories struggle to keep the schedule (European Commission 2014); some are subsequently suspended from membership.

In some places, the gap between the needs of municipalities and the offer of the Covenant is filled by Covenant Coordinators. Initially subsuming territorial governments in the category of supporting structures together with Covenant Supporters, the Covenant of Mayors now considers them key factors for success, namely in terms of Covenant promotion, personal attendance, technical assistance, mobilization of local stakeholders, access to funding, and communication with the CoMO. (Covenant of Mayors 2014b) Some Covenant coordinators limit their engagement to providing information about the Covenant,¹⁵ organizing training for municipal personnel, and employing specialized staff. Others provide Covenant signatories with additional resources for climate and energy monitoring and planning in the form of co-funding for local energy agencies or specific funding schemes for municipal action plans etc. (Covenant of Mayors 2013b; Covenant of Mayors 2014b).¹⁶ This includes support when municipalities shy at the additional workload of Covenant reporting, be it because of staff hour requirements or because submission forms are in English. Other measures to reduce the workload for signatories consist in the translation of manuals in national languages, the above-mentioned creation of country-specific helpdesks, and the introduction of joint SEAPs. These may be submitted by neighboring local authorities since 2012 (Covenant of Mayors 2014a). Limited staff hours and language skills, combined with restricted travel funds, also complicate access to the network of the Covenant, its events or even best-practice database. Country-specific events as well as webinars are easier to reach and take part in. National Covenant contact persons serve as an interface and facilitate the flow of information from and to the European level.

In contrast, experienced signatories already are acknowledged actors with established relations to the public, to other territorial governments and European institutions, and with stronger ties to other TMCNs.¹⁷ In comparison, the Covenant has come late and provides little additional contacts or resources which is why leadership figures of the starting time have since lost interest in the Covenant. However, the additional administrative workload of Covenant membership is not considered prohibitive because these cities typically dispose of relatively well-equipped, specialized departments. Where experienced signatories lag behind on their reporting obligations, it is rather an issue of either internal scheduling (e.g. around municipal elections) or simple neglect (e.g. change in staff). In principle, membership in all important TMCNs goes without saying to these cities.

For experienced signatories to actively make use of the Covenant, national Covenant clubs are supposed to provide an authoritative platform for advocacy towards the national and the European level. For example, Covenant clubs issue open letters to national governments in

¹⁴ The European Energy Award for example, a quality management and certification scheme, includes more detailed proceedings, personal attendance from consultants and, in some countries, receives national funding.

¹⁵ Some Covenant Coordinators and Supporters have stopped promoting the Covenant in order not to make false promises to their members, but maintain Covenant membership as an audit. This development points to the significant resources required to live up to their role as operational Covenant facilitators (Covenant of Mayors 2014b, 2–4). The number of Covenant Coordinators only grows slowly, and some have been suspended or reclassified as simple signatories for failure to report (Covenant of Mayors 2013b, 1).

¹⁶ Such incentives from the provincial level for example explain to a large extent the overwhelming number of Covenant signatories from Italy and Spain.

¹⁷ In France, many cities refer to Energy Cities as the authoritative contact to turn to; the same goes for Climate Alliance in Germany. For historical reasons, these are the most common TMCNs in both countries. Cities' membership dates back as long as the 1990s, and contacts with network staff as well as peers are well established. Attendance of network events has become a habit, and network resources and proceedings fit members' needs.

order to influence legislation, and to the European Commission in order to impact the future development of the Covenant itself.

Summing up, the bigger the Covenant's membership becomes, the more heterogeneous its performance. All Covenant stakeholders have experienced mixed results in realizing their organizational interests within this governance arrangement. No single actor has been able to monopolize the Covenant governance arrangement for its particular interests, but most were able to partly obtain the co-benefits aimed for. By trend, these consist in strengthening the EU's role by streamlining local climate and energy policy and to enhance (at least some) subnational authorities' role in the field.

5. Conclusions: prospects and limits of fostering local climate policy

What can be learned from the Covenant's example on how to foster local climate policy? It is important to keep in mind that local governments are not agents of superordinate levels, but act on their own behalf. Especially in the case of voluntary instruments, they will cherry-pick programs according to their own preferences and conditions. As they choose and use programs strategically, causal relations between program participation and particular activities should not be taken for granted. Participation might just as well be an add-on for policies undertaken anyhow, or fail to implement of program targets.

Rather than relying on cities' goodwill, well-designed programs should offer tangible benefit to participants. Funding naturally comes to mind, but other forms of co-benefit, such as methodology, legitimacy and advocacy, can attract local governments as well. The broader the target group, the more challenging the satisfaction of its needs. Considerate policy design will also avoid excessive administrative workload and program overlap which could deter local governments from the program or from taking action at all.

Last but not least, programs should not only aim for participation, but create favourable conditions for target achievement. Despite the need to supervise implementation, monitoring must not become overly laborious. Early consultation on methodologies can help to enhance compatibility. In order to keep participants engaged at it, a program should bring continual, or at least repeated, benefits to its users. Otherwise, program entry can become an early, but solitary achievement. For example, regular target updates enable more advanced participants to use the program for encouraging and legitimizing updates of their action plans. No design whatsoever, though, can replace resources with voluntariness. Accompanying projects, too, cannot provide the required stability as their impacts risk expiring with their funding period. In particular, program missions need to be backed with corresponding staff.

To put it in a nutshell: Multi-level systems provide opportunities for fostering local climate policy, but require considerate program design and sufficient resources in order to create tangible benefits for all actors involved. Incentives should transcend program entry and continuously encourage target achievement at different stages of implementation.

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