

Final report: Event on “Building a Climate Resilient Europe: Lessons from Frontline Communities”

On Wednesday 15 October 2025, the MEP Group on ‘Climate Change, Biodiversity and Sustainable Development’ organised a policy debate on “Building a Climate Resilient Europe: Lessons from Frontline Communities”, in the framework of the European Week of Regions and Cities. Hosted at the European Committee of the Regions, the event brought together policymakers, experts, and regional stakeholders to explore how local and frontline experiences can inform and strengthen EU-wide strategies for climate resilience.

Mr. Ilias Grampas, Deputy Director of the European Bureau for Conservation and Development (EBCD), opened the event by introducing the MEP Group ‘Climate Change, Biodiversity and Sustainable Development’. Mr. Grampas stressed the added value of this platform, which brings together Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) from different political groups and across committees, alongside representatives from the European Commission, the Council Presidency, relevant stakeholders, and academia, to discuss the pressing challenges of our times. Mr. Grampas emphasised the timeliness of the event, noting that Europe is currently facing the consequences of a rapidly changing climate, with impacts that are felt most acutely at the local level.

“It's extremely important for us, and I think I'm speaking on behalf of all co-organisers, for policy discussions to be made close to the territories that they affect, and I think we're all here to help bridge that gap and to bring frontline experience into policymakers' perspective”, as Mr. Grampas underlined. Moreover, he went on to stress the need for improved tools, data, and solutions to reduce climate risk, highlighting the need to make better use of nature-based solutions. Mr. Grampas also quoted the necessity of supporting local initiatives to integrate climate resilience into policies, but also the need for international actions to boost financing and cooperation for climate resilience.

Within his keynote presentation, **Mr. Alexandre Fernandes, Director of the International Institute for Environment and Development Europe (IIED Europe)**, shared key insights on the importance of local action for climate adaptation. He highlighted the pressing issue of climate change in Europe, which is the fastest-warming continent in the world - resulting in severe economic impacts and loss of human lives. However, Mr. Fernandes noted that Europe remains yet underprepared, with a significant gap between policy implementation and the escalating risks associated with climate change. Local leadership and the inclusive engagement of local actors can help bridge this gap, as reflected in the EU Adaptation Strategy.

IIED Europe, which is part of the International Institute for Environment and Development's (IIED) family of organisations, collaborates with the Voices for Just Climate Action (VCA) Initiative – an alliance of six organizations led by WWF-Netherlands – to advance the agenda on locally led adaptation by bringing lessons from Southern partners and communities back to European contexts. IIED Europe has also been working with European regions and local authorities to support their journey towards climate resilience through initiatives such as Pathways to Resilience (P2R), a flagship programme designed to support the implementation of the EU Mission on Adaptation.

As pointed out by Mr. Fernandes, while significant progress is being made at the regional and community levels in Europe, there is still a need for rapid and accessible financing for local actors. Furthermore, although regions have made great progress in assessing climate risks, they continue to struggle to operationalise the concept of just resilience. Marginalised groups and vulnerable communities remain underrepresented in adaptation planning processes. Lastly, he emphasised the need for enhanced monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) approaches. Mr. Fernandes went on to explain that European regions and local communities can be better supported in addressing these challenges by learning from others. There are specific knowledge gaps and areas where Europe could benefit from knowledge exchange with international partners, as also stated in the EU Adaptation Strategy.

The Locally Led Adaptation (LLA) principles, developed by IIED and its partners, and endorsed by more than 130 governments, global institutions, and local and international NGOs, aim to ensure that local communities are empowered to lead sustainable and effective adaptation to climate change at the local level. The Voices for Just Climate Action (VCA) initiative has been working with various communities to turn these principles into action.

When it comes to improving access to rapid and accessible funding, the VCA programme has launched the 'Next Level Grant Facility' - an innovative, small grant mechanism to channel finance into marginalized groups and promote community-led decision-making. Furthermore, mutual capacity building within the VCA programme ensures that local institutions can understand climate risks, generate solutions, manage adaptation initiatives sustainably, and develop success metrics that matter to them through participatory MEL approaches.

Mr. Fernandes concluded by emphasising that LLA represents a transformational approach to climate adaptation and governance, placing people, justice, and long-term resilience at the centre of decision-making. He added that the EU Adaptation Strategy and the EU Mission on Adaptation have strong potential to support and strengthen the operationalisation of LLA in the European context.

Representing the European Commission, **Elina Bardram, Director for 'Climate Resilience and Information Management' (Directorate E) in DG CLIMA**, highlighted the urgency of enhancing EU climate resilience. She underscored that resilience is gaining political momentum and support across all political parties. Ms. Bardram stressed the need for a cross-sectoral approach to climate resilience and preparedness. This, she explained, gives the European Commission a strong mandate to propose a new comprehensive framework on climate resilience that will mainstream adaptation and provide greater certainty and awareness of risk ownership across all levels of decision-making.

A key element of the new framework will be a proposed legislative measure introducing a common climate reference scenario that will apply to all decision-making, policy preparation, and budgeting processes. Since we can't plan for the future based solely on historical data, it's crucial to repurpose our planning approach and adopt a more proactive stance.. Ms. Bardram called for a shift from reactive spending towards a more proactive and preventive approach, embedding resilience by design as a fundamental principle.

The Commission's proposal aims to support Member States and strengthen coordination between EU and national level, while also promoting cooperation among Member States and regional and local authorities. Ms. Bardram went on to explain that the Commission seeks to reinforce multi-level governance, including in the context of risk ownership. Encouraged through

market incentives, all actors across society need to recognise and assume their responsibility and capacity to address risks.

Furthermore, she noted that while the LLA principles may appear novel, the EU is already applying similar approaches in practice, particularly within the framework of the EU Mission on Adaptation. She explained that the Mission bridges the gap between awareness and action, mobilising regions and local authorities through coordinated planning, innovation, and investment. The Mission translates science into practice by bringing together policy, funding, and on-the-ground implementation, while ensuring that every region has access to knowledge, networks and practical tools.

Looking ahead to COP30, Ms. Bardram stated that Europe will continue to promote global adaptation efforts. Reflecting on previous COPs, however, she emphasised the need to move the discussion beyond North–South financing towards the exchange of knowledge and best practices in adaptation. As Ms. Bardram moved on to underline, Europe’s frontline communities, though vulnerable, are also key sources of innovation. The aim is to use their experiences to drive a shift from disaster response to prevention and to build a truly climate-resilient Europe. Collaboration across all levels of governance is therefore essential to ensure safety, competitiveness, and leadership in the growing global resilience market. The overarching vision is of a Europe where innovation and policy work hand-in-hand to create a resilient economy and society.

Tanya Hristova, Mayor of Gabrovo (Bulgaria), Member of the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) and of the Covenant of Mayors Political Board, intervened not only in her capacity as local leader but also reflecting her institutional mandates within the CoR and the Covenant. She underlined that climate adaptation must systematically embed the local and regional perspective, as this is where the human, social and economic impacts of climate change are most directly experienced. According to Ms. Hristova, the Committee of the Regions strongly welcomes the EU’s move towards an integrated framework for climate resilience and risk management, but she stressed that cities and regions must be acknowledged as co-designers and governance partners, not simply as implementers of top-down strategies. As she emphasised, resilience cannot be centralised.

Ms. Hristova set out three fundamental pillars for effective resilience: clarity – with clearly defined governance responsibilities across all levels; cooperation – to enable genuine multi-level and cross-sectoral partnerships; and capacity – to invest in prevention and engage relevant stakeholders. She highlighted that capacity-building ultimately depends on predictable and adequate funding, as well as on access to reliable data for evidence-based planning and implementation. At the same time, she cautioned that municipalities such as Gabrovo still face structural barriers to long-term and flexible financial instruments, underscoring the importance of EU Missions as strategic vehicles to unlock targeted investment and accelerate resilience pathways.

Moreover, Ms. Hristova expressed her optimism about the EU Mission for Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities, which has proven effective in integrating diverse strategies and actors to address climate challenges including adaptation and resilience. She emphasised that climate resilience is a process that must involve citizens, culture, education and data, engaging communities at all levels. Flexible financial instruments that enable cross-sectoral investment can help long-term resilience strategies succeed. She stressed the need for coherence of funding and sufficient, city-level data that can be used to inform policy, and performance-based and result-oriented activities. All in all, the Missions and the work with the Covenant of Mayors demonstrated the

importance of innovative governance, such as the ‘transition teams’ in the Mission for Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities, which brings together citizens and representatives from various institutions to shape the city’s climate transition.

In a video message, **MEP Dimitris Tsiodras (EPP, EL), Member of the Committee on the Environment, Climate and Food Safety (ENVI) and Co-Chair of the MEP Group on Climate Change, Biodiversity and Sustainable Development**, highlighted the daily reality of climate change and its impacts on the economy, food and water security, public health, and infrastructure. He stressed that resilience requires more than ambition - it demands resources, innovation, and coordination. Furthermore, MEP Tsiodras noted that the Cohesion Policy is supporting regions in investing in water management, resilient infrastructure, and biodiversity protection, while the EU Missions are mobilising 112 cities to achieve climate neutrality by 2030. However, he cautioned that Europe remains underprepared for the accelerating impacts of climate change, as financing and policy instruments are not yet fully adequate.

Within his speech, MEP Tsiodras proposed three priorities for strengthening resilience. First, the establishment of dedicated funding, including new instruments focused exclusively on prevention, preparedness, and adaptation. Second, the need to improve the speed and efficiency of fund absorption. Third, the importance of capacity and innovation - noting that building resilience is not only about financial resources, but also about empowering municipalities, SMEs, and communities through digital tools, training, and knowledge transfer to implement effective and innovative solutions.

Furthermore, MEP Tsiodras mentioned his proposal for a pilot project, to map and analyse the implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at the regional level. This will help design better EU instruments tailored to local needs. As he concluded, *“the transition to climate resilience will be won or lost at the local level.”*

Moving to questions and remarks from the audience, **Ms. Laura Lopez, Programme Manager of the Voices for Just Climate Action (VCA), and her colleague Diana Francès, Advisor on Rights-based approaches for Nature Conservation at WWF Netherlands**, described the work of the VCA programme. Over the past five years, the programme has operated in seven countries across Latin America, Africa, and Asia, partnering with more than 215 grassroots and civil society organisations to make climate finance and decision-making more accessible at the local level. The programme emphasises inclusion and builds local capacity through awareness campaigns, training, and policy advocacy - a key example is in Tunisia’s Kerkennah Islands, where women in fisheries formed an official working group, gained formal recognition, secured funding access, and co-implemented coastal restoration of palm groves as a critical action to combat erosion and flooding.

Mr. Tom Mitchell, Executive Director of IIED, raised the issue of anticipatory social protection schemes - a cost-efficient, effective, and inclusive approach to building resilience (as evidenced by research from IIED and others) that is becoming increasingly prominent around the world (featured in many COP decisions, part of targets for the Global Goal on Adaptation), and yet remains underutilised in Europe. He noted that anticipatory social protection is the most efficient and effective instrument to scale adaptation across Europe, and expressed interest in sharing more information on the mechanisms supporting anticipatory social protection, noting that IIED has developed practical roadmaps on the subject.

Responding to a question from the audience, on whether adaptation is fully embedded within the structure of the Missions or managed separately within each city's operations, **Ms. Tanya Hristova** explained that her city's Climate City Contract integrates both climate mitigation and adaptation measures, illustrating the interconnection between the EU Missions for Climate Neutrality and Adaptation. In terms of adaptation, Gabrovo is implementing both large-scale interventions and small-scale innovation projects. Furthermore, citizens are actively involved in designing a new blue-green strategy, highlighting the importance of community participation. Last but not least, Ms. Hristova emphasised the need to engage citizens at the street and neighbourhood level, an approach also reflected in the Mission's recommendations.

MEP Sakis Arnaoutoglou (S&D, EL), Member of the Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (ENVI), and Substitute Member of the Committee on Regional Development (REGI), reflected on how climate resilience must go hand-in-hand with social justice. He stated that the European Union must ensure that every region has the capacity and resources to prepare for climate impacts. MEP Arnaoutoglou called for stronger solidarity measures within EU funding, greater flexibility, faster disbursement of resources, and tangible support for local and regional authorities, who are often the first responders in disaster situations. Furthermore, he emphasised the importance of including communities as active partners in climate resilience planning to ensure that climate policies protect livelihoods, reduce inequalities, and strengthen democracy. MEP Arnaoutoglou concluded by reaffirming that this is the vision of the Socialists & Democrats Group - a climate-resilient Europe, that is also fair and inclusive.

Wrapping up the Q&A discussion, **Mr. Grampas** also posed a question to **Mr. Fernandes**, on how justice is being addressed in Europe's current adaptation efforts. In response, Mr. Fernandes explained that although progress has been made in governance and in building the capacity to assess climate risks, just resilience (putting justice at the core of adaptation efforts) remains a significant gap in Europe, one that has been self-identified by the regions participating in the Pathways to Resilience Programme. Marginalised groups and vulnerable communities continue to be underrepresented in adaptation planning, highlighting a clear area for improvement.

All in all, **Ms. Elina Bardram** emphasised that local expertise will be crucial in the EU's shift from reactive approaches (repair and recovery) to proactive climate resilience (anticipation and preparedness). While adaptation is primarily the responsibility of national governments, the European Commission issues guidelines and recommendations and strongly encourages local and regional consultation. She also noted that a more structured legislative proposal is expected to be adopted by the end of 2026, while - speaking as the Mission Manager for the EU Mission on Adaptation - Ms. Bardram also reaffirmed the Commission's commitment to drawing on local knowledge and experience, an element that came as a key takeaway of the discussions.