The low-carbon challenge

By 2050, Europe could cut most of its greenhouse gas emissions. This, in a nutshell, is the basis of the European Commission’s roadmap for moving to a competitive low-carbon economy in 2050. But so far European countries are taking only a third of the steps necessary to transform their economies.

Addressing the climate change challenge will mean imposing restrictions on businesses and society. However, from the depths of the global economic crisis, it can also be an opportunity for growth. In order to make the transition to a low-carbon economy and reap its benefits, including lower oil bills, the EU will need to invest an additional EUR 270 billion annually over the next four decades, according to the 2050 roadmap.

The Bulgarian economy is currently characterised by high levels of energy intensity and a low level of response to climate change issues. As all EU member states are obliged to obtain 20 percent of their energy from renewable sources, the Bulgarian Government has declared its “inclination” to stimulate the huge investments required. But how? Through financing from the emissions trading scheme? The National Plan has still not been adopted. Through financial instruments in the new Energy Efficiency Strategy? This has still not been approved. Through some secret plan kept in reserve? There is no clear answer to this straightforward question.

Within the RSC project, the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works implemented a pilot action to integrate the RCCI into the monitoring system for regional development plans. The index was calculated for the six NUTS-2 Bulgarian regions and the results were disappointing. Bulgaria lags far behind on every issue in the index: there is a lack of climate change experts in the regional and national administrations; a lack of national financial means and political support for mitigation and adaptation measures; and little use of renewable energy sources. The RCCI will be integrated into monitoring in the next planning period, helping to assess the long, hard road that Bulgaria still has to travel.

The RSC partners have worked together over the past three years to realise the potential of regional development programmes to stimulate climate change mitigation and adaptation by the inclusion of energy efficiency and renewable energy issues. I believe the RSC has helped all the partner regions to understand how their economies affect climate change and how they can move towards a low-carbon future. I hope that, when the project ends, all the partners will continue working together to pursue the low-carbon cause.

Margarita Atanasova, Chief Expert, Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works, Bulgaria
On April 13-14, 2011, the partnership held its final capacity-building workshop and thematic seminar at the Regional Environmental Center in Szentendre, Hungary. The focus of the workshop was a presentation of the outputs and results of the document “Analysis of the Carbon Emissions-Related Aspects of the Economies of Three European Regions,” developed within the framework of the RSC project. All the partners were eager to learn about the usage of the so-called PACE tool (Prioritisation of Actions for a Low-Carbon Economy), which was presented in detail on the first day.

The results of the application of the tool for each of the three regions were discussed, along with the regions’ feedback.

The workshop was also an opportunity to examine the status of pilot actions carried out by three partners: the University of Debrecen (HU), Liguria Region (IT) and LaMoRo Development Agency (IT). These actions are aimed at transferring experience in stimulating climate change mitigation and adaptation and at developing a model of a low-carbon region. A fourth pilot action has already been carried out successfully by the Bulgarian Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works.

To support the workshop’s capacity-building role, ongoing initiatives in the partner regions were also presented. Malta is now considering carrying out an assessment of the potential use of photovoltaic solar modules on agricultural buildings, while Cornwall is compiling a more precise greenhouse gas inventory by calculating the sectoral breakdown of carbon intensity and energy intensity data.

These examples, together with other initiatives from within and outside the RSC partnership, will feed into the final project publication, a methodological handbook on integrating climate change adaptation and mitigation into regional growth. The drafting and timing of the handbook were discussed at length at the workshop, and the handbook is due to appear in September 2011.

Zsuzsanna Keri
Strategic environmental assessment (SEA) and sustainability assessment or appraisal (SA) provide for the systematic review of the objectives, instruments and other aspects of plans and programmes against selected environment and/or sustainability criteria. The SEA gives planning teams a better understanding of the impact of proposed plans or programmes on the environment or overall sustainability. As climate change is an integral part of environmental policy and long-term sustainability concerns, tools like SEA and SA represent a critical opportunity for integrating climate change into planning.

Directive 2001/42/EC requires that SEA be carried out by EU member states for a range of public plans and programmes that affect the environment. SEA is mandatory for regional strategies, development programmes and sectoral plans.

One of the sub-objectives of the RSC project is to investigate the use of SA in integrating climate and low-carbon objectives into regional planning. A working group of four RSC partners identified the key issues and links between SEA/SA and the integration of climate change in planning documents. Information on levels of experience and knowledge in RSC partner regions was collected via questionnaires; interviews with authorities, planners and SEA practitioners; and desk research.

The resulting study, “The role of SEA/SA in integrating climate change into regional planning”, provides practical advice for improvement. It offers guidance to planners, policy makers and sector specialists involved in preparing plans and programmes, helping them to improve the integration of climate change aspects at each SEA phase. Positive experiences and examples of innovative practices can be helpful in regions that lack knowledge and experience. The overview of literature also helps transfer the global climate change debate into the context of regional development and planning processes.

“Taking into account the recent developments in Japan, Burgenland is proud to be a part of the RSC partnership in order to support a sustainable change regarding low-carbon industries in European regions. In Burgenland, 60 percent of electricity consumption is already supplied from renewables. But this is not enough: Burgenland has taken the political decision to become energy autonomous by 2020. We are therefore eager to get to know new technologies from our RSC partners and exchange experiences with them.”

Georg Schachinger, General Manager of the Regionalmanagement Burgenland GmbH, Austria

“Liguria Region and its Environmental Department are developing a number of policies aimed at environmental sustainability. The RSC project is one of these and is a very meaningful project since it aims to implement new policies to face climate change and to develop innovative tools to tackle these issues, such as the Regional Climate Confidence Index. Liguria Region is also bringing to an end a pilot action aimed at carefully analysing the CO₂ emissions balance in the area of the Montemarcello Magra Regional Nature Park. This will contribute to planning its management towards sustainable development.”

Renata Briano, Councillor, Environmental Department, Liguria Region

Venelina Varbova
Pilot actions to transfer RSC results

Liguria Region

Liguria Region has been implementing a pilot action in the Montemarcello Magra Regional Nature Park aimed at introducing effective regional climate change policies and achieving the goals of the Kyoto Protocol and the 20-20-20 initiative. The park has a keen interest in environmental and sustainability issues, and many of the towns within its territory have ISO 14001 certification and registration with the European Eco-management and Audit Scheme (EMAS). The pilot action is being implemented in 21 towns with the aim of drawing up a precise CO₂ emissions balance according to IPCC methods. It takes into consideration emissions sources as well as the absorption ability of plants in order to ensure the appropriate management of the park territory, which has 50 percent forest cover. The data will be used to map areas where emissions are higher and areas where absorption may be increased by efficient forest management in order to counterbalance emissions from neighbouring areas. The emissions trading approach will also be used.

Matteo Graziani, Irene Sanguineti

LaMoRo

A study by Piedmont Region explored the potential for integrating climate change issues into local SEA plans and programmes. The aim was to present mitigation and adaptation issues within the wider context of environmental and sustainability assessment at territorial level, where emissions reporting obligations exist.

Assessing the impact of local plans on climate change is a complex task: it is difficult to quantify impacts at local level and cumulative impacts over a wider geographical area. A qualitative assessment was therefore considered more appropriate, taking account of macro-level issues related to possible mitigation and adaptation actions that are locally feasible within the regional regulatory framework and the sustainability and environmental protection strategies stemming from the plans, programmes and documents issued by the regional authority.

The study will develop the skills of local authorities but also addresses all actors in the SEA process, raising awareness and strengthening the role of SEA in local planning.

Environmental Compatibility and Integrated Processes, Department of Environmental Direction, Piedmont Region

North Great Plain, Hungary

The pilot action developed by the University of Debrecen's Centre for Environmental Management and Policy comprised the study of existing regional development programmes in the North Great Plain Region of Hungary. The 2011-2013 action plans for the operational programmes of the National Development Plan were evaluated in cooperation with regional stakeholders through a specially developed matrix and the seven RCCI issues. Direct and indirect impacts were assessed using a five-point scale (from -2 for significant negative impacts to +2 for significant positive impacts).

Stakeholder interviews were then made to obtain additional information. The subsequent report will indicate the expected impacts of development programmes on the seven RCCI issues and the information will be used to formulate recommendations for regional planners and decision makers with the aim of improving the climate confidence of regional development in the next programming period.

Zoltan Karacsonyi, Tünde Szabó

Glossary

**Emissions Trading System (ETS)** – The European Union’s scheme for trading greenhouse gas emissions allowances. Based on the “cap and trade” principle it essentially puts a price on CO₂ emissions from industry.

**IPCC** – Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

**Low-carbon roadmap 2050** – An initiative of the European Commission to go beyond the 2020 objectives and cut most of Europe’s greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. It shows how the sectors responsible for Europe’s emissions (power generation, industry, transport, buildings, construction and agriculture) can make the transition to a low-carbon economy over the coming decades.

**PACE tool: Prioritisation of actions for a low-carbon economy** – An analysis tool developed by the RSC project.

**SA** – Sustainability assessment/appraisal

**SEA** – Strategic environmental assessment

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In order to enhance the impact of the project and to make use of other work of this kind, the RSC partners would be happy to get in touch with other similar initiatives, individual regions with good practice in the field, as well as companies and/or organisations carrying out research on the topic.