CoR Action Plan to help regions and cities fight the COVID-19 in the European Union

Political context

The COVID-19 outbreak continues to expand globally. Governments at all levels, and in particular local and regional authorities, are being called upon to provide emergency services, communicate on how to contain the spread of disease, coordinate efforts, and mitigate as far as possible the impact on economies.

There is an urgency for the EU to support and assist them. Regional and local leaders are at the forefront of the fight against the pandemic and many of them are struggling to provide health services. They urgently need better coordination among all levels of governance; better provision of essential equipment; quick and easy-to-use financial support to address the immediate needs and pragmatic solutions to adapt to the local and regional requirements. The efforts put in place so far by the European Commission and by the Council of the EU are heading in the right direction, but more must be done, including by the European Committee of the Regions.

The role of the European Committee of the Regions and its members

Within its institutional role, the CoR is the reference point between the European Union and its local and regional governments. In the framework of the current crisis, it must **assist, inform, engage and represent** regions and cities across Europe. In operational and concrete terms, our Committee must:

1) Foster EU support to local and regional authorities in the health sector, via the call for an EU Health Emergency Mechanism
2) Make available an exchange platform to foster cooperation and facilitate mutual support between cities and regions across Europe
3) Provide through CoR mechanisms concrete feedback from the local and regional level on how to address the health, emergency response, social and economic aspects of the pandemic and their impact on people and their local communities
4) Provide regular and practical information to local and regional authorities about EU measures to address the crisis
5) Facilitate a reality check on the ground of the EU's measures to fight the pandemic; gather evidence to improve EU policies based on the experiences of the local and regional level (policy health check)

All CoR members and alternates, as well as national and EU territorial associations and relevant stakeholders, will be invited to contribute to the exchange platform – on a voluntary basis and with full respect of their working restrictions. The contributions would allow the CoR to make available relevant stories, offering possible solutions and responses to other regional and local leaders facing similar challenges. All inputs, personal experiences, ideas, proposals, video messages and feedback will be sent to: covid19@cor.europa.eu. A feedback mechanism will be available for all contributions.

These actions and measures will be accompanied by targeted communication actions to explain what the EU is doing to assist and support local communities in their fight against the Coronavirus pandemic.

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The CoR Action Plan in Five Points

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1) Foster EU support to local and regional authorities in the health sector, via the call for an EU Health Emergency Mechanism

Every day across Europe, thousands local and regional leaders are leading the battle to limit the spread of the virus and manage its impact on the ground. Tribute must be given to the professionalism, the dedication and the courage of all those who are on the frontline. The EU must help our local communities at a time when they need Europe the most, by urgently putting the European Union's budget and intervention capacity at work for our citizens and business. The CoR calls for an EU Health Emergency Mechanism aimed at better coordinating efforts to address a pandemic involving all levels of government with the following functions:

- Significantly strengthen the Emergency and Disaster response capacities of the EU, including the direct involvement of local and regional emergency response structures
- Coordinate the distribution of essential medical equipment throughout the EU
- Coordinate the supply of essential medical equipment through joint procurement initiatives and monitor the supply chain of essential products
- Coordinate the measures to reduce the spread of the virus
- Strengthen the EU's ability to coordinate the testing and mapping of the virus
- Update and monitor the pandemic plans of Member States, also focusing on the involvement of all levels of government. Member States and the EU need to undertake a resilience "Health and Emergency response stress test", similar to the one carried out for financial institutions following the financial crisis, to assess the preparedness of the EU's health systems for future challenges.

2) Make available an exchange platform to foster cooperation and facilitate mutual support between cities and regions across Europe

The CoR must help showcase local and regional action of our members and facilitate mutual support. It must make available an exchange platform to share in and throughout the European Union best practises by local and regional authorities in responding to the emergency. This could be done by collecting examples of successful actions and measures at local and regional level initiated by our members. The CoR must also carry out a pro-active strategy to engage its members and promote mutual co-operation on resources, knowledge and synergies for joint actions.

The President will send a letter of to all our members to ask their feedback on their most urgent needs, and to gather proposals on how to jointly answer them. The responses will be collected and assessed. Skype conferences will be organised to present and discuss these proposals among our members. These dialogues will be continued in the future CoR Commission meetings, particularly NAT (Health, Emergency Response, Corona 19 response initiative: Solidarity Fund), ECON (economic measures/state aid/fiscal); COTER (ESIF funds, Corona 19 response initiative) and SEDEC (ESF, social measures). The CoR should also animate its members to activate their city twinning and interregional and cross-border co-operation agreements to provide interregional support for the most affected cities and regions as has been done in the past. The CoR could seek to cooperate with the INTERREG programme to facilitate such exchanges.

3) Provide through CoR mechanisms concrete feedback from the local and regional level on how to address the health, emergency response, social and economic aspects of the pandemic and their impact on people and their local communities

To address the health, emergency response, social and economic aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the European Committee of the Regions use all possible efforts to push for EU supporting measures at national and regional level in the following areas:

A) Financial support for local businesses and people faced with unemployment should be made available through existing channels. This should be done by ensuring – if needed – quick changes to the Operational Programmes or by increasing the flexibility of the margins within the existing programmes.

B) EU support for tailor-made regional recovery strategies that are currently drawn-up by many EU regions to stabilise the local/regional economy:
- Direct temporary aid schemes to support local economy for ailing SMEs in the most affected sectors
- Provide guarantees for working capital and postpone payments of taxes and social contributions
- Income support for the self-employed and direct temporary support for workers who are laid off during the crisis
- Promote regional investment programmes to renew public health and social infrastructure
- The EU should provide easy-to-use guidance and 'off the shelf' solutions for these aid schemes, using the full flexibility of the state aid and public procurement rules

A renewed commitment on behalf of the EU's Member States to find an agreement on the future MFF would send the right signal to their local and regional authorities, as well as business community and international partners. At all costs it must be avoided to exploit the crisis to justify toughening national positions. On the contrary, this should be a wake-up call for national capitals that crises know no borders and only a strong, well-funded Union can support its members, regions and cities. The early adoption of the next Multi-Annual Financial Framework would also be an important signal for taking the right measures to come out of the crisis by providing cities and regions the long-term perspective for their investment needs (taking into account the extended scope of the ESIF funding for health related investment that the Commission has recently proposed).

4) Provide regular and practical information for local and regional authorities about EU measures to address the crisis

Nearly every day the European Commission is initiating new initiative to address the shortage of essential supply and help to address the social and economic consequences of the crisis. The CoR could envisage publishing briefing notes about the latest changes focusing on practical information about how these initiatives could help efforts at local and regional level.

It is crucial to keep regions and cities regularly updated about the EU's financial, policy and programmes being implemented to tackle the virus. The exchange of information on the different measures taken by Member States is insufficient. Local and regional authoritiescall for further promoting the EU-wide availability of official information in emergencies (e.g. spread of epidemics/infectious disease/crisis preparedness and response) in a format that is accessible and understandable for citizens, with an EU-wide database similar to the single digital gateway, such as established by the European Centre for Disease Contral, ECDC. Once the acute phase is over, the Member States and the EU need to undertake a 'Health and Emergency response stress test', similar to the one carried out for financial institutions following the financial crisis, to assess the preparedness of the EU's health systems for future challenges at all levels.

5) Facilitate a reality check on the ground of the EU's measures to fight the pandemic; gather evidence to improve EU policies based on the experiences of the local and regional level (policy health check).

The CoR should be seen as the point of reference for all regions and cities who need political assistance and support with the EU and its Member states. Collecting direct evidence from our members whether these EU initiatives are sufficient and could be improved. A dedicated RegHub consultation could be launched in the medium term (before

the end of the temporary measures in place) whether the EU proposals were implemented in an easy and effective way, a Territorial Impact Assessment exercise will be launched to collect evidence of their impact.

It is suggested to set up a working group within the CoR administration to coordinate and initiate these fivemeasures. The President will be directly involved in the activity of the working group via his Cabinet. A regular report and monitoring of the actions will be ensured by the CoP and the chairs of the most involved CoR Commissions will also be engaged.

Targeted CoR communication actions

In parallel with the previous points, and to reinforce the visibility of the European Committee of the Regions' action, a series of targeted communication actions will be launched.

The actions should be mainly based on digital tools and focus on how the EU is and can support local and regional governments and their communities.

Central to this campaign would be a digital hub offering the most relevant information, a map of stories from the regions and cities; EU financing tools and programmes with contact information; news, opinions and reports from the CoR, other EU institutions, WHO and other local and regional government associations; and an EU and regional dashboard on numbers affected.

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