Enabling Outermost Regions to Inspire Climate Resilience in the EU

Key messages:

Outermost Regions (ORs), highly vulnerable yet pioneering in climate solutions, can spearhead climate adaptation best practices if supported by inclusive and well-designed EU programmes.

Effective EU support must foster integrated, cross-sectoral approaches (especially in energy, agriculture and water), prioritize localized data collection through regional expertise, and promote robust regional cooperation.

To unlock ORs' potential as 'Living Labs', EU initiatives should champion responsible tourism and diversify economies by leveraging unique assets (e.g., blue economy, geostrategic positioning), and ensure ORs' full inclusion in all relevant classifications, studies, and funding, recognizing their specificities under Article 349 TFEU.

When it comes to climate change, EU outermost regions (ORs) act as resonance boxes. They are among the most vulnerable European territories[1], highly impacted by climate change and with limited adaptive capacities and resources but also designing and implementing innovative solutions to hazards they have faced for a long time[2]. Considering these aspects, ORs, should be considered as Living Labs to develop climate adaptation solutions. Some of the unique climatic conditions ORs face today are increasingly becoming the norm in continental Europe, especially in southern Europe countries. Supporting climate resilience in ORs today means more best practices and replicable solutions on agriculture, biodiversity, extreme weather events, coastal areas, tourism and water management for continental Europe tomorrow. **With the support of inclusive and well-designed European programmes and initiatives, ORs can inspire climate adaptation across Europe.**

Exchanges with and among ORs in the scope of REGILIENCE project have identified the following key aspects to fully develop ORs potential in driving climate resilience in the EU:

1.1 Strengthen integrated territorial approaches to energy, agriculture and water

ORs remoteness and often insularity along with their high dependence on the mainland is an additional vulnerability, particularly in key economic sectors: energy, agriculture, water, tourism and biodiversity conservation[3]. Because of limited resources and lands, synergies between the different sectors should be pursued to avoid competition over land-usage. In this spirit, cross-

[1] 2024, EEA, "European Climate Risk Assessment (EUCRA)"
[2] See 2023, Ecorys "Compendium of good practices and solutions of climate change adaptation in the Outermost Regions of the EU"
[3] The ORs represent a large part of EU biodiversity patrimony, knowledge and resources must be allocated to insure the preservation of this key European patrimony.

sectoral approaches are key, they should be better addressed in the EU Missions and funding programmes by explicitly integrating diverse sectors challenges and prioritises.

For example, in the **energy sector**, it is essential to ensure grid stability and reduce external dependency to reduce the risks of blackouts and ensure reliable supply. Investing in energy storage, energy efficiency, renewable energy, energy communities and fighting energy poverty is the best approach to increase energy security and independence. ORs, with the support of their energy and climate agencies can lead by example.

To face **water challenges**, and in view of the need for independence and autonomy, desalinisation is explored as an option; however, it faces several major issues such as high energy consumption and costs, inequalities in water access and negative impact to ecosystem. Therefore, it should be done through a systemic approach, considering all aspects and sectors. Alternative blue and green solutions focusing on protecting groundwater sources must be further explored and their development supported

Tourism is a key economic sector of all EU outermost territories but also contributes to pollution and increasing pressure on nature and resources. Supporting **responsible tourism** must be a priority. Exchanges, collaboration and cooperation between touristic regions, involving key local stakeholders, are essential to develop more innovative solutions.

Finally, responsible tourism, blue economy and knowledge-based sectors should be supported to diversify the local economy and build lasting resilience[4]. As mentioned in the EU smart specialisation strategies, having high qualified professional in outermost regions is crucial. In this sense, supporting local and regional agencies, universities' research and science programmes is key as they could make qualified work durable in the territories.

1.2 Empower knowledge, expertise and data from the ground up

ORs face data scarcity, insufficient observational data for specific parameters and a lack of readily usable data on vulnerabilities and impacts across socio-ecosystems. Local expertise, granular climate data and territorial observatories are vital to understanding vulnerabilities and cascading impacts in complex island and coastal systems.

Empowering Local Knowledge: In these conditions, mobilising local expertise from research centres, universities and local and regional agencies is a key factor of success to better understand past, current, and future climate, but also cascading effects inherent to local contexts. EU services and programmes addressing more local governance levels, such as AdaptationHubs (the project establishing the Mission's National Adaptation Hubs through the call HORIZON-MISS-2024-CLIMA-01-02), should foster collaboration between local stakeholders and experts to develop and support local and regional climate observatories. To ensure this, the European Commission should create a strong incentive for data collection at the regional level. This should be a structured mechanism where Member States are supported to empower their regional and local authorities in the ORs. This requires coupling the objective of data production with dedicated financial and technical resources, for example through Cohesion Policy or dedicated technical assistance from the European Environment Agency, to ensure regions have the means and methods to produce this vital data.

[4] For example, ORs have ideal geographical characteristics for the blue economy or astrophysics.

Bridging the Science-Policy Gap: EU services and programmes should foster collaboration among local and international experts to develop and support local and regional climate observatories and impact assessment systems, which should be employed for developing proper climate proofing of new investments in the ORs. The declaration of the 29th Conference of Presidents of the ORs reiterates the need for targeted and systematic impact assessments to better adapt European policies to the ORs' context, in partnership with them. These local responses are crucial for developing comprehensive risk impact frameworks.

1.3 Boost regional cooperation and economic diversification

ORs share challenges and opportunities with neighbouring regions, their geostrategic position is a major asset to act as strategic hubs for sustainable co-development. The declaration of the 29th Conference of Presidents calls upon European institutions to take full advantage of these geostrategic realities by initiating dialogue and work involving the ORs. It also advocates to fully integrate ORs into their regional basins and requests the extension of cooperation zone perimeters under INTERREG programmes.

Knowledge Exchange and Scalable Solutions: Benefiting from neighbours' experience and expertise can enhance regional resilience and foster innovative solutions. In addition, European projects also act as interfaces for exchanges, collaboration and cooperation between ORs. To further diffuse the results of such partnerships, EU services and programmes, such as AdaptationHubs (the project establishing the Mission's National Adaptation Hubs through the call HORIZON-MISS-2024-CLIMA-01-02), shall address actively how to engage ORs. As such, DG REGIO exchange programme on climate adaptation with ORs[5] is a good example to follow.

1.4 Ensure full inclusion in EU classifications, policies and funding

Despite recognition under Article 349 TFEU, ORs are often invisible or poorly represented in large-scale climate modelling studies. They are still often excluded due to unsuitable geographic classifications and data collections, leading to critical data gaps for territorial adaptation planning. Ensuring full inclusion—or alternatively, funding localised studies and observatories[6]—is essential to avoid systemic underrepresentation in EU policies and frameworks.

> For example, not all ORs were integrated in the "biogeographical regions" approach from the European Environmental Agency (EEA), even if they are considered as "hot spots" in the European Climate Risk Assessment (EUCRA). A lot of projects used EEA work to develop their own frameworks and therefore reproduced the exclusion.

ORs must be visible in EU datasets, modelling frameworks and science-policy interfaces, with dedicated support to bridge persistent data gaps. EUCRA's chapter 10 consecrated to ORs is a best practice to be replicated in the development of the future European Climate Resilience and

[5] In 2021, DG REGIO launched a programme to foster exchanges on climate change adaptation between the ORs and their neighbouring countries and territories. It aimed at discussing common climate adaptation challenges and identifying common good practices and solutions. The objective was to enhance cooperation within the same geographic basin and identify innovative initiatives that could be replicated in each basin and beyond. More info.

[6] As mentioned in section 1.2

Risk Management Initiative. This could involve introducing specific support schemes or adjusting evaluation criteria to reflect the unique challenges faced by ORs.

Leveraging the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF)

The current proposal for the next MFF (2028–2034) raises concerns regarding funding for climate adaptation in the ORs. While ORs are explicitly mentioned in the section on Cohesion Policy within the National and Regional Partnership Plans, the absence of clear earmarking for all territories in the Cohesion Fund and the lack of robust multilevel governance mechanisms will likely reduce access to funding for ORs. Moreover, the dilution of the LIFE programme within the European Competitiveness Fund (ECF) and these Partnership Plans, along with the absence of earmarked adaptation funding within the 35% green investment target, risks creating competition between adaptation and other climate objectives such as industrial decarbonisation. ORs are only referenced in the ECF in relation to business networks and support, which fails to address their broader needs. Yet, climate adaptation is arguably more critical to the competitiveness of ORs than for other territories. OR-specific priorities must be reflected in the final MFF through dedicated earmarking, governance safeguards, and recognition of their unique conditions and needs.

1.5 Conclusion: Towards Stronger Engagement and Support for Climate Resilience

Resilience in its broader sense has always been one of the main concerns of ORs to face their remoteness and insular challenges. When it comes to climate change, outermost territories have always been facing climate hazards and therefore developed many solutions and best practices which could inspire all EU territories[7]. Some key development like fostering integrated territorial approaches, investing in local knowledge and observatories, promoting regional cooperation, and ensuring policy and funding inclusion would help upscale them. With more support from EU programmes and initiatives such as the Missions, HORIZON, LIFE and INTERREG programmes, ORs could become leaders in climate resilience by acting as Living Labs, developing state of the art solutions with high replicability potential that can benefit the whole of Europe. For this to happen, it is key to give them flexibility, ensure beneficiaries are based in the territories and focus on leaving no one behind.

[7] For concrete examples of climate adaptation best practices developed by EU Outermost Regions, you can consult REGILIENCE dedicated webpage and Ecorys "Compendium of good practices and solutions of climate change adaptation in the Outermost Regions of the EU", developed in 2023 in the scope of an exchange programme funded by DG REGIO.

This policy brief has been co-written by representatives from Canary Islands, Guadeloupe, La Réunion and Madeira and with the support of the projects REGILIENCE, ARSINOE and TransformAr.

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Exchanges with and among EU outermost regions in the scope of REGILIENCE project have identified the common characteristics and challenges mentioned above. We welcome any opportunity to meet and discuss the conclusions in greater detail.

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REGILIENCE
Regional Pathways to Climate Resilience

About

REGILIENCE is committed to supporting the European Green Deal and the EU Mission "Adaptation to Climate Change" by fostering the adoption of regional climate resilience development pathways.

The project develops, compiles, shares, and promotes tools and scientific knowledge to support European regions in identifying and addressing their climate-related risks. We work closely with sister projects, such as ARSINOE, IMPETUS, and TransformAr to enhance the capacity of 7 focus regions to tackle the unavoidable impacts of climate change.

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