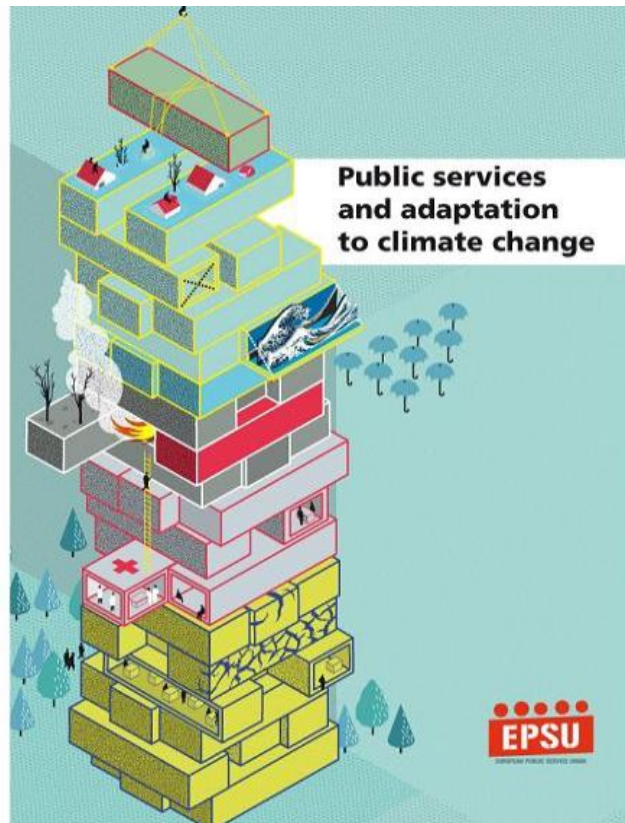


EPSU feature on adaptation to climate change



(19 December 2017) The heatwaves and droughts, storms and flooding that have hit Europe and other parts of the world this summer have left no doubt about the devastating consequences of extreme weather events linked to climate change. More than 1,200 people died in flooding across India, Bangladesh and Nepal. There is consensus among scientists that the effects of climate change, such as rising sea levels and warmer oceans, worsened the impact of the hurricanes that hit the Caribbean and parts of southern USA and killed around 200 people. Meanwhile, the wild fires that swept across central Portugal and claimed over 60 lives were the deadliest the country has ever seen.

Trade unions welcomed the agreement reached at the 2015 Paris Climate Conference (COP21) to limit global warming to well below 2 C. But even if countries fully honour the national pledges they made in Paris, the action they take may not be enough to prevent temperatures rising by 3.5 C by the end of the century and the impact of climate change will continue to be felt across Europe and elsewhere.

“The lack of progress and ambition in efforts to reduce or prevent emissions of greenhouse gases – or climate change mitigation – means that there is an even more urgent need for member states to develop climate change adaptation strategies to deal with the risks presented by extreme weather events including prolonged drought, more frequent and intense storms, and floods,” says **European Public Services Union (EPSU) General Secretary, Jan Willem Goudriaan.**

Adaptation involves anticipating the adverse effects of climate change and taking appropriate action to prevent or minimise the damage caused, or taking advantage of any opportunities that may arise. It includes, for example, using scarce water resources more efficiently and adopting building standards that aim to ensure that structures can withstand future extreme weather events.

As has been made only too clear over the summer of 2017, climate change brings an increased risk of damage to public infrastructure, including transport, energy and water, while storms, floods and fires can hit public institutions including hospitals and child and elderly care establishments, schools, libraries and museums, as well as homes. All require protection and investment. The European Commission Joint Research Centre (JRC) predicts that the average annual cost of flood damage alone across the European Union (EU) could rise from €4.5 billion to €23 billion by 2050.

In 2009, the Commission published its *Adapting to climate change* strategy white paper aimed at improving information and promoting action by member states, particularly the development and adoption of national adaptation strategies and action plans. Its strategic goal is to create a climate-resilient Europe.

But a new European Trade Union Institute (ETUI) report commissioned by EPSU, *Public services and adaptation to climate change*, describes the strategy as “little more than policy declarations and wish lists” and shows that EU attempts to ensure that adequate adaptation plans are in place have largely failed.

“The Commission’s adaptation strategy provides a framework and sets general goals, but it fails to set priorities or establish mandatory national targets and standards and it does not address the crucial role of, or the challenges facing, public services,” said EPSU General Secretary. *“While it provides useful tools for sharing knowledge and experience, these are no substitute for a comprehensive EU-level strategy.”*

The report also shows that the recording of weather-related loss and damage, critical for disaster risk management, is inadequate and presents a major challenge for cross-border co-operation within the EU. While there are 62 disaster-loss databases worldwide, collecting data on mortality, morbidity and physical damage across the social, infrastructure and productive sectors of the economy, only one of these is in Europe.

And while significant investment in preventative measures is required, alongside funding to ensure that public services including the fire and other emergency services have the resources to tackle major events like floods and forest fires, many local authorities are in the dire straits of austerity. The Commission makes clear that well-planned, early adaptation action saves money as well as lives, yet there is no EU-wide strategy for tackling the central issue of finance.

The report includes a review of national adaptation strategies and expert analyses of the plans. This reveals that there are gaping holes in member states’ policies. It found that only a minority of member states have ambitious and well-founded adaptation strategies with adequate financial backing. It shows that the majority of strategies do not clearly specify roles and responsibilities at different levels of government; the extent of any monitoring and evaluation is very limited; and while there is some evidence of joint initiatives between countries and cities, the systematic exchange of best practice on how to adapt to climate change is largely absent.

“Thousands of workers in the fire and other emergency services are called on to tackle major events like floods and the wildfires that swept across Portugal this summer, yet only three member states’ adaptation plans even mention emergency and rescue services,” said EPSU General Secretary. *“And while climate change has a major impact on workers and citizens, consultation over adaptation plans is largely limited to experts and scientists, with the social partners (employers and trade unions) overwhelmingly absent from this process.”*

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In addition, while public investment should play a central role in adaptation efforts, and public services should be at the centre of these, austerity policies across Europe mean that local authorities are being forced into public private partnerships which ultimately increase the cost to the public purse.

Later this year the Commission will review its adaptation strategy and EPSU will be pushing for this forthcoming review process to address the shortcomings outlined in its report.

“Public services need to be strengthened in line with the growing adaptation challenges,” said EPSU General Secretary, Jan Willem Goudriaan. “This includes recruiting new staff and equipping public sector workers such as nurses and doctors, firefighters and other emergency workers with the skills required to ensure risk preparedness in order to cope with enhanced climate risks.”

He added: *“We want to see the development of a coherent, European approach along with national plans that include concrete measures, financial planning and effective monitoring and evaluation. The EU also needs to recognise that public investment in public services is central to adaptation strategies.”*

The ETUI report commissioned by EPSU, *Public services and adaptation to climate change*, can be found below.

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