

Report 2: Astrid Krisch, Session M. Environment, Energy & Sustainability



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This year's Regional Studies Association Annual Conference in Florence, Italy, was held under the theme 'Global Challenges, Regional Cooperation and the Role of Places' to discuss the role of places and regions in addressing current crises and global challenges. A key theme of this year's conference was the link between environment, energy and sustainability. In four parallel sessions, researchers presented their current work on various issues.

What stood out for me was the overwhelming focus on the link between environmental and social needs and goals and the balanced mix of different scales relevant to transformative change. For example, Beatriz Valcarcel-Aguiar

(Universidade de Santiago de Compostela) highlighted the need to consider not only economic interests when looking at how regions can transition to eco-efficiency but also environmental and social aspects. The research comprehensively assessed system transformations in Spanish regions to evaluate environmental and social outcomes. Antoine Decoville (LISER) spoke about the social acceptability of land protection policies through no net land consumption by 2025 at the European level, while Orti Rotem-Mindali (Bar Ilan University) highlighted the challenge of reconciling the ecological needs of protecting ecological corridors with the social needs of housing development in Israel. The issue of land use and related trade-offs between development and environmental protection was also highlighted by Kinga Emerdek-Ivan (Babes-Bolyai University) in her work on land degradation in Romania and the impact of development processes and land use policies on the scarce resource of land.

Michela Mari (Tor Vergata University of Rome) presented work on how environmental and social considerations can be integrated into the market logic of real estate in Italy. Similarly, Ziwei Lin (The University of Hong Kong) looked at the behavioural drivers of institutional investors in the real estate market in the context of disaster management and ecological crises in China. China was also the focus of You Zheng's (The University of Hong Kong) presentation on how to restructure industry towards less carbon-intensive modes of production without contributing to social inequalities in labour productivity across sectors. Relatedly, Dewei Yang (Southwest University) reported on the results of a study of regional energy industry transformations in China and how these transformations have affected regional economic, environmental and social welfare patterns. Fangzhu Zhang's presentation on China's urban environmental governance complemented these findings by situating region-specific developments within the larger governance structure and changes in the ideological orientation of China's environmental policy in recent years.

In contrast, Agata Stasik (Akademia Leona Kozminskiego) focused on the very local level of energy communities in Poland, examining how community involvement can be supported by energy policies at other scales and how EU policies can contribute to bottom-up developments for local cooperation. The theme of energy was also taken up by Clara Hormigos Feio (Joint Research Centre, European Commission), who spoke about the current status and technological potential of renewable energy sources in rural areas of the EU. The

link between social and environmental objectives was further highlighted by Cathy Lecocq (Ghent University), who presented work on whether and when SMEs in Belgium are supported to act in a socially and environmentally responsible way, highlighting the importance of a nuanced perspective to understand these links also for small and medium-sized enterprises. Another interesting perspective on the links between environmental and social considerations was provided by Massimiliano Rizzati (Fondazione Eni Enrico Mattei - FEEM) with research on the climate-health nexus, specifically the link between heat and mortality in Italy. This argument was also taken up by Elisa Baioni (Politecnico di Milano), whose work on the management of water resources in a valley in Algeria, one of the driest areas of the Aures region, highlighted the need to combine innovative technologies with social innovation to co-design sustainable responses to climate threats.

The variety of topics covered by the speakers provided an inspiring debate on how to deal with trade-offs between different needs and goals, how to effectively address environmental, economic and social inequalities, and which tools, policies and innovative approaches might offer a hopeful outlook for shaping a more sustainable environment in line with social considerations. As a bursary winner, participating in the 2024 Annual Conference provided me with invaluable experience and further encouraged my thinking to connect these complex issues in more detail.