

Event Report

20th Breakfast at Sustainability's

European Cities and Citizens delivering on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)¹

Ranging from consumption and production to gender equality and biodiversity protection, the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by the United Nations in 2015 are at the heart of a new socially fair and environmentally responsible development model. The SDGs include all dimensions of sustainability and – even more importantly – they are universal: all countries, be they industrialized or not, now have to gear their policies towards this new prosperity model.

The aim of the 20th Breakfast at Sustainability's was to drive the urban sustainability agenda in the EU institutional arena and at the same time increase the visibility of local initiatives promoting different aspects sustainable development and citizen involvement. *What do SDGs actually mean for local communities and how can citizens and grassroot initiatives help implement them? Beyond the stand-alone goal on sustainable cities and human settlements (SDG11), urban experts agree on the importance of all SDGs for cities.* Action at local level, especially in cities where the largest part of the European population lives, is essential to promote sustainable lifestyles, change behavioral patterns and make SDGs more tangible. The conference shed light on the global vision for integrating the SDGs in national and local policies, but highlighted also local best practices and challenges that cities are facing in the implementation process. The event also drew specific attention to the role of technological and social innovations in drafting sustainable development roadmaps. Addressing social inequalities in cities was also seen as a key pillar in developing a local sustainable development strategy.

Implementation of the SDGs

Although the SDGs pledges are very promising and inspiring, we need to develop a comprehensive strategy for their implementation at international, national, regional and local level. The high-level goals are based on three dimensions that are equally important: economic growth, social development and environmental protection. Local authorities are the best suited actors to guide the implementation of the 17 goals because of their proximity to the population.

The lack of political will and a concrete plan for the implementation of the SDGs is leading also to very limited progress at EU level. As a reaction to this, an alliance of 70 organizations including the European Environmental Bureau (EEB) and Plan International launched an initiative called SDG Watch Europe. In

¹ The event took place on 2nd June 2016 and was organized by ICLEI (Local Governments for Sustainability), Heinrich-Böll Foundation and the European Economic and Social Committee in the framework of the European Sustainable Development Week (30 May-5 June). Guest speakers were: Marialuisa TAMBORRA, Deputy Head of Unit, DG Research and Innovation – Strategy, European Commission; Ruud SCHUTHOF, Deputy Regional Director, ICLEI– Local Governments for Sustainability; Tunç SOYER, Deputy president CittàSlow, Mayor of City of Seferihisar, Turkey; Lina FURCH, City of Bonn, Deputy Head, Department of International Affairs & Global Sustainability, Germany; Ola NORD, City of Malmö, Head of Malmö EU office, Sweden; Gil PENHA-LOPES, European Network for Community-Led Initiatives on Climate Change & Sustainability (ECOLISE); Leida RIJNHOUT, Director Global Policies and Sustainability at European Environmental Bureau (EEB).

a letter to the European Commission's President Jean-Claude Juncker they expressed their discontent, calling him to adopt an overarching strategy to guide the implementation of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda and integrate it in the work of EU institutions and different DGs within the Commission. Governance change and societal transformation that go beyond the "business as usual" are needed to accelerate their adoption at different levels. A socio-economic transformation should focus more and more on promoting local resources such as indigenous renewable energies and stimulating local sustainable economy. Technological innovations are already contributing to reducing the environmental impact of cities. Although innovation is essential, it should be seen as a means rather than an end. In addition, social innovation is fundamental for transforming the mentality of people and the involvement of civil society in the provision of services. The Basque Declaration launched at the 8th European Conference on Sustainable Cities & Towns is a step in the right direction. It outlines new pathways for European Cities and Towns to create productive, resilient and sustainable cities, and upscale local initiatives to an EU-wide action. ECOLISE, a network of organizations aiming to support and promote local communities across Europe in their activities to create a more sustainable and fair society, is another example for cross-cutting actions on climate change and sustainability. It serves as an innovative platform for replicating best practices and local examples in the field of sustainable energy, agriculture, and transport and citizen involvement.

Participation and International Cooperation

The conference shed light on the importance of citizen participation and cooperation between different state and non-state actors in order to implement the SDGs. Although NGOs took active part in the negotiation process leading to the adoption of the SDGs in New York, ordinary citizens should be also part of the decision-making process. Goal 11 ("Make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable") refers to the value of citizen participation. The city of Bonn showcases some progressive actions in this direction, such as the concept of citizen inclusion through city councils and public deliberations that have led to the establishment of guidelines for citizen participation and consultation. Bonn is promoting these best practices in its international city partnerships through sharing its experience with partner cities in different parts of the world. Nevertheless, one needs to include civil society on a much broader basis. The Global Sustainable Town Council of NRW (Die Globale Nachhaltige Commune NRW) is a network of all cities in the region of North Rhine-Westphalia supporting activities related to the SDGs. In the case of Malmö, a huge number of citizens (architects, city planners, entrepreneurs and craftsmen) have been involved in the transformation of the city from a polluted industrial city to a green sustainable city with sustainable transports systems and net zero-energy office and residential buildings.

As a next step, Commission's representatives will participate in the first STI Multi-Stakeholder Forum in New York from 6th to 7th June to develop an implementation framework for STI in support of the SDGs. The aim of this forum is to link existing STI platforms such as the S&T Alliance for Sustainable Development (UN agencies, WMO, Belmont Forum, ISSC and ICSU + WBCSD, SDSN) and its Future Earth initiative to the process. By the end of 2016 the Commission is planning to mold the architecture of the SDGs implementation, map existing policies in support of the SDGs and develop reporting and monitoring mechanism through Eurostat.

Technical innovation within the framework of economic development

In a world of limited resources innovation is key. Sustainability principles should be integrated in our economic system. According to a recent PwC study 71% of businesses are already planning to engage

with the SDGs and 41% of them are intending to embed SDGs into their business strategy. Agenda 2030 already includes a chapter on Science, Technology and Innovation (STI) and a new Technology Facilitation Mechanism that will consist of a UN inter-agency task team on science, technology and innovation for the SDGs, a collaborative multi-stakeholder forum on science, technology and innovation for the SDGs, and an online platform.

Sustainable development has been introduced as a horizontal element in the EU research and innovation programme. 60% of Horizon 2020 programme funding is dedicated to projects promoting sustainable development and 35% to climate actions. With a total budget of €77 billion for R&I for the period 2014-2020, it is the largest and most comprehensive programme of its type in the world. H2020 openness to the world provides an excellent opportunity for increased international R&I cooperation in support of the SDGs.

From the Commission's perspective, STI policy is fundamental for implementing the new "2030 Agenda" and keeping the EU as the global frontrunner of sustainable development. Therefore, public and private investments should be aligned with the SDGs implementation process.

Social dimension

The debate also highlighted that technical innovation is not sufficient to achieve a full transformation. It should be complemented by social and policy innovations to shift the governance model and translate the SDGs into concrete measures. Some speakers argued that we should not focus on economic growth, since it is not always in line with the SDG goals. In response to the series of crises the EU is facing, one can already observe various bottom-up initiatives that are emerging and promoting sustainable lifestyles. These initiatives contribute to spreading new sustainability business models that reduce the need for new products. Social innovation should also take into account social and gender inequalities - goals that are addressed by several SDGs. In cities, we face the problem of deep inequalities concerning education, living conditions and social fractures that can even lead to different life expectations in the same city. The example of Malmö city shows how these inequalities should be taken into account during the process of the city's transformation to provide better quality of life and more jobs for marginalized groups of society. In Seferihisar, a city close to Izmir (Turkey), a new sustainable agricultural policy has been introduced that encouraged the preservation of local seeds, empowered local producers and created better conditions for bringing local products on the regional and international market through a number of measures, such as the establishment of a farmer market to sell local products, the launch of an agricultural development collective that initiated online sales, greening the local production cycle, the creation of a renewable energy cooperation with the participation of the municipality and the citizens, and other measures. By creating women cooperatives to sell their products all over Turkey, they also addressed gender equality (SDG5) and good health (SDG3). The support for small local farmers tends to reduce inequalities and prevent huge companies from monopolizing the market.

Finally, the successful bottom-up initiatives aiming to implement the SDGs goals on a local level should be scaled-up globally. Further discussion should also address the challenges that local actors are facing in the implementation process in different national and local contexts, as well as the need for broader awareness-raising and participation activities.