

# : Conference Report

Bonn Symposium 2019

sef:

## Making the Case for Sustainability In Municipalities and Regions Worldwide

Mischa Hansel

Last year, millions of people all over the world marched in support of better climate protection and more sustainable ways of living and doing business. Many others still do not believe in the need for a fundamental transformation. Persuading people and organisations, then, is still a key task in embedding the SDGs at local and regional level. Which arguments and initiatives are likely to be successful in this context? Which new forms of participation do we need? These questions were discussed by municipal representatives from various world regions together with academics and activists at the Bonn Symposium on 27-28 November 2019. The event was hosted by the Development and Peace Foundation (sef:) in cooperation with the Service Agency Com-

munities in One World (SKEW)/Engagement Global gGmbH, the State of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) and other supporters.

### Municipalities lead the way

“Sustainability comes from the grassroots,” said NRW State Secretary Heinrich Bottermann in his opening speech. He drew attention to the major commitment shown by numerous municipalities in North Rhine-Westphalia. In other regions of the world, too, it is often the local authorities which, in collaboration with civil society and local businesses, are emerging as frontrunners in working towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Ashok-Alexander Sridharan, Mayor of the Federal City of Bonn and President of ICLEI, mentioned the efforts by US cities to abide by ambitious climate targets despite strong headwinds from Washington.

Mayor Sridharan reported on his attendance at the UN’s SDG Summit in New York in September 2019. Municipal representatives are now able to participate in international climate diplomacy, a development which, he said, is largely attributable to the efforts of Patricia Espinosa, the Executive Secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). However, he would like to see more involvement of cities and municipalities in the actual negotiations. As President of ICLEI, he himself is working towards a greater local authority presence in the international arena.



Bonn Symposium 2019 (l.t.r): Mayor Ashok-Alexander Sridharan interviewed by Moderator Patrick Leusch

At municipal level, it is important to send a clear message to citizens about the very high costs of inaction on climate change and make them aware that paying for effective climate action now is a much cheaper option. This would increase acceptance of the transition to sustainability. In order to avoid giving the impression that the public is expected to shoulder the burden on its own, the authorities must do more to publicise their own efforts, such as the measures they have taken to reduce carbon emissions from public buildings and official vehicles.

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### Towards a more diverse debate

Communication is key in promoting the transition to sustainability: this was a common theme running through the Bonn Symposium 2019. All too often, communication is a top-down process: local communities, especially in countries of the Global South,



Bonn Symposium 2019 (l.t.r): Luca Samlidis and Mithika Mwenda together with Moderator Merjam Wakili

rarely gain a hearing in the global sustainability debate. At municipal level, too, it is usually only a small and relatively homogeneous group of persons who sit in on local council meetings or make use of other formal modes of participation. These opportunities rarely reach representatives of minorities and people who are not part of well-developed networks. What can be done to change this situation?

“We must shift the narrative about climate justice,” said Mithika Mwenda, Executive Director and Secretary to the Continental Executive Board (CEB) of the Pan African Climate Justice Alliance (PACJA), a network of 1,500 grassroots initiatives across Africa. People affected by local climate change must be given a voice at the national, regional and international level. PACJA therefore makes targeted efforts to ensure that the viewpoints of indigenous communities, smallholders and fisherfolk are heard. It does so through actions such as the 6,500 km Pan Africa Cycling Caravan for Climate Justice and the submission of petitions to national parliaments. Luca Sam-

lidis from Fridays for Future in Bonn also underlined the importance of active grassroots engagement and democratic processes. In his organisation, the votes of the 600+ local groups belonging to Fridays for Future in Germany are what counts; these local groups then send representatives to transregional telephone conferences. Working groups at the national level are responsible for implementing the grassroots decisions.

Municipal representatives at the Symposium also emphasised the need to try out new and decentralised forms of communication. The culture of political communication has radically changed, as Andreas Hollstein, Mayor of Altena, pointed out. The days of party loyalty are long gone, and people are increasingly living in their own personal bubble. In light of this situation, political communication must be broken down to the neighbourhood level in order to have more direct relevance to people’s lives. A similar approach was recommended by Simon Kærup, Press Officer for the City of Copenhagen. It is, he said, vital to reach beyond the administration and seek dialogue at well-frequented locations within the city. One option is to set up marquees in pedestrian zones and invite local people to pop-up debates with councillors and officials. Another approach is to encourage passers-by to drop in for dinner with the mayor in a public space. This facilitates dialogue with people who would never normally come to City Hall or attend a formal meeting.

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### Reaching people with the right messages

But it is not only about broadening the sustainability debate: the local authorities’ PR channels play an important role in disseminating sustainability messages. Which images and narratives are effective in persuading people of the benefits of lifestyle change? What is the best way to “sell” sustainability and engagement for a sustainable future? Is there a successful formula for ensuring that local authority PR or civil society campaigns reach people who have, thus far, been indifferent or sceptical towards environmental and social transformation?

Rather than always attempting to confront people with shocking images or addressing cognitive dissonance, it is important to build positive emotions, according to Hassaan Hakim, Founder and Managing Director of YOOL, a Giessen-based advertising agency specialising in sustainability messages. To illustrate his approach, he screened the video “Wien packt was drauf” (Vienna is loading up), which features a good-natured cargo cycle courier transporting a pile of packages across Vienna in summer. Katrin Meissner, responsible for the BikeCULTURE (RadKULTUR) initiative in Baden-Württemberg’s Ministry of Transport, took a similar view: pointing the finger, she said, is counterproductive. Instead, a

positive sense of community should be fostered as much as possible. That is why the T-shirt-wearing Transport Minister makes an appearance alongside other cyclists in the initiative's main promotional video. RadCHALLENGE (BikeCHALLENGE) – a competition to find the local authority with the largest number of kilometres cycled – applies the same rationale, tapping into local citizens' sense of pride in their community. The element of competition and practical offers such as free cycle inspections are important as they give people the chance to try things out for themselves – the first step towards behavioural change.

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### Supporting new behaviours

Nevertheless, it takes time for a new behaviour to become routine – and people tend to slip back into their old ways, as Professor Sebastian Bamberg from Bielefeld University of Applied Sciences pointed out in his input on the findings of environmental psychology. And it is not always possible to dispense with difficult messages altogether, especially at the



Bonn Symposium 2019: Input by Sebastian Bamberg

start. We have to explain to people “that they have a problem”; in other words, that their behaviour does not accord with their positive self-image – and that is a thankless task, as Professor Bamberg explained. Campaign messages and other external interventions should always consider the stage reached by the individual in their process of changing and embedding (new) behaviours. A Berlin-based study led by Professor Bamberg revealed that advertising campaigns for local public transport had cost millions but had had very little impact. More generally, there is scope for local authorities' PR activities to make much more use of research findings in the field of psychology to encourage people to practise sustainable mobility, e.g. through personalised apps.

But do messages have to be negative to have an impact? Surely they should focus on the enjoyable aspects and on spreading a sense of positivity, one participant said. It is not always about having fun, Professor Bamberg answered. Taking the bus or buying eco-friendly clothing is rarely an enjoyable experience. As a general rule, he would caution against relying on messages that focus on gratification and reward. Nevertheless, it is entirely possible to feel positive about adopting behaviour that is true to one's own values and principles. Many people are happy that they are living their lives in accordance with their best intentions. This aspect should be emphasised in our messages as well.

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### Talking about complex challenges

Another topic raised in the discussion is just how abstract or focused communication about sustainability needs to be. Saying that you are protesting for the climate can downplay the human dimension, Luca Samlidis explained. “After all, the climate will save itself; we are protesting for our own future.” This prompted one member of the audience to ask why Fridays for Future does not focus to a greater extent on the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. The narrower focus on the climate is the right approach, Luca Samlidis answered. Of course, the movement does not ignore other dimensions of sustainability, such as the social justice aspects of climate action. But climate change itself is a complex issue and can only be covered by the media to a limited extent. Everyone knows about Greta Thunberg's trip by yacht and where she went. But comparatively few people are aware of Fridays for Future's set of demands to German politicians. Given this media reality, it is important not to overload the message.

Among attendees, there were divergent views as to when it is useful to refer to the SDGs. With stand-alone projects, such as RadCHALLENGE, the SDG “label” is not always helpful; if anything, it can detract from the core message. In her short input, moderator and communications expert Merjam Wakili provided another useful insight for this strand of the debate: messages are often abstract and complex because in “western” societies, at least, the necessary change is often discussed solely in terms of facts and figures – especially in businesses or public authorities. Storytelling, on the other hand, which is a common practice in many countries of the Global South, can introduce far more creativity and intuitive knowledge. The Lego Serious Play Method, which Merjam Wakili presented, relies heavily on storytelling and broad participation. It involves building individual models out of Lego on a specific topic and then discussing them in the group. Attendees were able to try this approach themselves in one of the workshops.

## Experimenting and identifying options

Methods such as Lego Serious Play that create “flow” and help people break with embedded routines can meet one of the core needs of many of the stakeholders who are working for more sustainability in cities and municipalities, especially in view of the frequent



Bonn Symposium 2019: Lego Serious Play

and seemingly insurmountable bureaucratic hurdles and political constraints that they face. Which strategies are available to end the impasse and create space for something new?

One option is to start by making niches within the city, such as unused public spaces, more liveable. This is the strategy applied by Ocupa Tu Calle in Lima, as its Executive Director Mariana Alegre explained. It might involve decorating a shabby school wall with small-scale works of art or giving a bland car park a new lease of life as a popular green space. These micro-interventions can be the start of bigger changes involving other stakeholders, such as the establishment of a new Department for Public Spaces within the local authority. It is not about taking control of the process oneself; it’s about opening the way for others, as Marina Alegre explained: “We need some quick and easy successes in order to start the process.” Some attendees pointed out that the involvement of government partners in pilot projects is a good way to start the ball rolling.

An impressive example of what can be achieved with perseverance and a willingness to take risks was provided by Wilfried Roos, Mayor of Saerbeck, a climate community in Münsterland. At first, this small municipality, with its population of just 7,000, was ridiculed for its visionary initiatives. However, local citizens then invested a total of 75 million euros in a bioenergy park, collaborating with all the political parties on the municipal council on achieving this shared goal. Among other things, the project was

instrumental in securing an amendment to North Rhine-Westphalia’s local government regulations, which initially blocked the energy generation plans. Today, the municipality produces a substantial energy surplus and aims to be climate-neutral by 2030. Saerbeck now attracts visitors from all over the world who are keen to find out about renewable energy and local climate action. Nine delegations have already visited from Japan’s Fukushima Prefecture alone.

## Overcoming constraints with courage and creativity

All these examples show that “socio-technical systems” are not as stable as we often assume, as Professor Bamberg pointed out in his comments. It is essential to start with a realistic assessment of challenges and focus on small and attainable goals. This helps to avoid frustration.

If this approach proves inadequate, civil disobedience may also be expedient. For example, an entire municipality, including the major, could set up road blocks to protest against nonsensical regulations that prevent construction of a new cycle path. Fridays for Future is increasingly considering civil disobedience, according to Luca Samlidis, as protests alone have not led to a radical policy shift. Further statements of intent from policy-makers will not help, given that not enough action is being taken to reach the goals that have already been agreed. What is needed is more awareness-raising and mobilisation of the public. Fridays for Future is opposed to violence on principle.

Overcoming political opposition and inertia is just one of many challenges. Often, financial constraints and lack of resources impede the realisation of the Sustainable Development Goals at the local level. However, even these hurdles can be overcome with commitment and creativity. This was evident from the input by Kye Dudd, Cabinet Member with responsibility for Transport and Energy in Bristol. With public funding alone, the city is unable to fully realise the vision set out in Agenda 2030. As very little support is forthcoming from the national level, Bristol has adopted a different approach which involves seeking long-term partnerships with business. Based on a set of targets defined in the City Leap Prospectus, companies worldwide have been invited to submit proposals for a decentralised green energy supply. The response to this invitation, which is radically different from traditional approaches to public procurement, has been overwhelming; in other words, the risk has paid off.

## Supporting a change of attitude in businesses

Many companies are quite willing to take risks and support unconventional approaches, as the input by Gero Böhmer, Group Director of Corporate Affairs, Politics and NGOs at Wilo SE, made clear. This



Bonn Symposium 2019: Cynthia Ngxesha

Dortmund-based company is a manufacturer of pumps and pumping systems and has subsidiaries and staff worldwide. Wilo SE is working with Baruth/Mark municipality on a development project in Mongolia. A local training centre was set up, for which Wilo SE provided modern water and heating systems. This lighthouse project has made many other local authorities in the region aware of the energy-saving potential of Wilo products, so the investment will pay for itself in the medium term, according to Gero Böhmer. Furthermore, it should already be clear to all companies that sustainable products and production methods are the way forward for global business. With the stepwise conversion of the Dortmund factory to carbon-neutral production, Wilo SE's current ambition is to establish a new gold standard for all manufacturing sites.

However, not all companies are quite so proactive, so financial incentives are required in order to promote more sustainable business practices. Public procurement has a key role to play in this context. More than 70% of our budget is spent on goods and services from the private sector, explained Cynthia Ngxesha, Senior Director of Supply Chain Management in Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality. The legal bases for sustainable procurement policy have long been in place in South Africa, but municipalities do not apply these provisions in a consistent manner. In order to support learning about best practices and embed sustainability more firmly in municipal policies, the Procura+ Africa network was established in

2019, enabling local authorities from various African countries to work together on these issues.

## Managing conflicts, strengthening the sense of community

Politicians and businesses cannot support the transition to sustainability by themselves, however: as the Saerbeck example shows, the transition relies on the local community's support and acceptance. However, there is often substantial local opposition, especially to the expansion of renewables. How should municipalities and regions respond? Which democratic processes can be used to reconcile the interests of individuals and wider society?

K. J. Joy, Founding Member and Senior Fellow of the Society for Promoting Participative Ecosystem Management (SOPPECOM) in Pune, reported on intense local conflicts in India over major infrastructure projects. Numerous indigenous communities have been evicted to make way for mega-dams. Participatory water resources management can prevent this serious misalignment between winners and losers. Joint resource mapping can be a useful tool in this context, enabling all stakeholder groups to develop a shared understanding of the problem. "Sharing knowledge brings people together," he explained. "People reappraise their views and interests if they are confronted with different experiences." When asked by the moderator what advice he would give to German municipalities in terms of managing conflicts over



Bonn Symposium 2019: K.J. Joy

wind energy and electricity storage installations, he replied that efforts should be made to ensure that local residents and communities share in the benefits of infrastructure to the maximum extent.

## New participatory processes

New participatory processes can also help to limit the influence of particularist interests while ensuring that they are not ignored altogether. Institutionalised forums and deliberative processes are important, said Sanskriti Menon, Senior Programme Director



Bonn Symposium 2019 (l.t.r.): Mayor Andreas Hollstein, Norma Tiedemann and Sanskriti Menon with Moderator Merjam Wakili

at the Centre for Environment Education, which is also located in Pune. This would prevent exclusion of weaker social groups and help to focus attention on shared values instead of personal interests. One attendee added that he had positive experience of face-to-face discussions between majors and civil society representatives. Involving randomly selected local citizens in deliberative processes has also been helpful. In addition to addressing the interests of local residents and other direct stakeholders, this approach facilitates discussion of broader public welfare issues. However, this is not without risks, said Hirotaka Koike, a policy researcher at the Institute for Global Environmental Strategies in Kamiyama-guchi, who advises municipalities on participatory urban development. Random selection often fails to adequately reflect the diversity of the local community, making planning processes less inclusive.

Another strand of the discussion explored the notion that public authorities and government leaders should engage with citizens on equal terms to a much greater extent. The people of Copenhagen are experts in living and dealing with the challenges faced by their city, as Simon Kærup emphasised. There are great benefits to be gained from utilising this type of expert knowledge. As an example, cooperative data-gathering by volunteers is the starting point for many urban interventions being implemented by Mariana Alegre in Lima. If municipal representatives leave their preconceptions behind when engaging with local residents and are receptive to the latter's stated preferences and proposals, remarkable results can

be achieved, according to Hirotaka Koike. However, K. J. Joy concluded with a word of warning: if citizen participation is decoupled from practical policy-making, people soon lose faith in the process.

## The future of liberal democracy

In essence, democracy is about persuading and encouraging people to participate. In many areas, however, democratic processes and institutions are facing an acute crisis of confidence which cannot be ignored. Making matters worse, democratic representatives, especially those who advocate for key sustainability goals such as refugee integration or climate action, are the target of verbal attacks and physical violence by far-right populists and extremists in many countries. The majority should not stand by and watch this happen, said Andreas Hollstein. On the contrary, civil society should protest vociferously against anti-democratic movements and give their backing to municipal representatives who are at risk.

Can a democracy whose foundations appear to be becoming less stable mount an adequate response to the challenges associated with the transition to sustainability? Must we radically reshape democracy in order to make it fit for this transition? Elections alone are not enough: in India in particular, there is great mistrust of elected politicians, as Sanskriti Menon explained. For that reason, it is important to supplement representative democracy with deliberative processes, particularly at the local level. However, many municipalities shy away from formalised and continuous deliberative processes, so there is still a lot of work to be done. Norma Tiedemann, a researcher and lecturer in political theory at the University of Kassel, agreed. Merely defending liberal democracy is not enough, despite this being an important objective in light of resurgent far-right populism. Instead, we should look beyond what is already in place and “explore, with an open mind, the broad spectrum of forms of democracy that exist all over the world”.

Norma Tiedemann drew particular attention to the urban movements, known as “new municipalism”, that emerged during and after the financial crisis, mainly in southern Europe and the Balkans. These movements organised themselves in councils based on direct democracy, campaigned for the re-municipalisation of energy, transport and housing and for other community-oriented goals and even managed to secure seats in local assemblies. But Andreas Hollstein was more critical of these movements. While he welcomed participatory processes – indeed, he himself had implemented a participatory urban development project in 2005 – he pointed out that someone has to moderate and channel the formation of the political will and ensure that relevant expertise is integrated into the process. Otherwise, only the loudest and most persuasive voices would be heard.

In response, Norma Tiedemann said that it is not about abolishing the public authorities. On the contrary, these authorities themselves are facing financial constraints and wish they could do more to enhance public welfare. Government institutions' scope for action has diminished; the market dominance in many sectors precludes the public from having a say. This is where the scope of liberal democracy needs to be broadened. Sustainability goals, too, can be achieved more effectively with community-based business models, such as energy cooperatives, or through reductions in working hours.

from climate networks to urban micro-interventions and energy cooperatives – had generated fresh momentum and demonstrated that Agenda 2030, rather than being a challenge for democratic processes, is in fact a great opportunity to revitalise democracy. In order to capitalise on this opportunity, local stakeholders must engage in dialogue on equal terms, cluster a diverse range of expertise and promote shared learning. The Bonn Symposium will continue to contribute to this dialogue between activists, policy-makers, businesses and academics now and in future.

The Bonn Symposium 2019 thus ended with an appeal for local-level engagement to be taken seriously, with trialling of creative approaches outside established structures. The sustainability-oriented grassroots initiatives showcased at the conference –

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