

Conference Report

Bonn Symposium 2020

sef:

Reducing Social Inequality – Strategies at Local Level

Mischa Hansel

All over the globe, the coronavirus pandemic has revealed and exacerbated social inequality. At the same time, many local communities and city governments are developing new ideas and initiatives to maintain and strengthen social cohesion. How can we build on them to create fairer communities and reduce discrimination? What is our vision of social justice and equality for the future? These questions were discussed by more than a hundred local representatives and sustainable development experts from various regions of the world at the Bonn Symposium on 5-6 November 2020. The event – held online for the first time – was hosted by the Development and Peace Foundation (sef:) in coop-

eration with the Service Agency Communities in One World (SKEW)/Engagement Global gGmbH, the State of North Rhine-Westphalia and other supporters and sponsors.

A new perspective: social inequality in a pandemic

“Covid has changed everything.” Sentences like this have often been heard in recent months. But is it really the world that has changed, or just our view of it? The pandemic is not creating entirely new inequalities and injustices, said Serap Güler, North Rhine-Westphalia’s Secretary of State for Integration, at the opening session of the Bonn Symposium. Instead, it is amplifying existing social inequalities that we previously tended to overlook. An example is global lack of access to healthcare: this is a long-standing problem affecting large numbers of people, but the pandemic, has made the consequences for the whole of society very clear.

The opportunity and need to adopt a fresh perspective on social inequality, particularly at the local level, were the focus of many of the inputs at the Symposium. Dr Isabell Kempf, Head of the Bonn Office of the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), for example, explained how people in poorer urban neighbourhoods are suffering as a result of exposure to traffic-related air pollution and how this is increasing COVID-19



Bonn Symposium 2020: Isabell Kempf (left) and Merjam Wakili (Chair)

infections and their severity. This shows that we should engage in much more integrated thinking about environmental and social risks and address them at policy level. The pandemic has the potential to promote this change in how we think about these issues. In recent months, many new possibilities have opened up that would have seemed inconceivable before, observed Dr Jens Kreuter, Chief Executive Officer of Engagement Global.

The local level has a particularly important role to play here, for this is where social inequality in daily life is most apparent and where solutions have direct and tangible effects. Local authorities are also particularly good at experimenting and exploring new pathways, as the many practical examples presented during the Symposium showed. The lessons that can be learned from these examples and the question of whether the resulting change goes far enough sparked some lively discussions among participants.

Why local authorities can and must take action

Cities and municipalities can be a key factor in tackling social inequality, said Frances Stewart, Professor Emeritus of Development Economics at the University of Oxford. However, inequality should not be viewed solely in terms of income and wealth. Inequality has multiple dimensions and can be expressed in many different ways: in more – or less – health, education or political power. Major inequalities always have consequences. For example, they may mean that society is failing to use the talents of large numbers of people. If people feel that they are being treated unjustly, they may lose trust in society. In a worst case, this can erode social cohesion or become a source of violent conflicts.

Reducing inequality is therefore quite rightly one of the main goals of the UN Agenda 2030. A combination of direct and indirect policies is the best option, said Professor Stewart. Quotas for access to education or public sector employment are an example of a direct policy. Research studies show that these measures are very effective but are often resisted. Indirect policies which benefit all citizens irrespective of their group affiliation can be beneficial here: examples are improved provision of services and anti-discrimination laws. In Malaysia, for example, increased spending on education, combined with quotas, has produced very good results.

Keeping the ultimate goal in mind is also important. For example, human rights can provide a key point of orientation for tackling inequality, as Professor Stewart pointed out during the discussion with participants. However, reducing inequalities entails more than simply respecting human rights. Hu-

man rights merely define every person's minimum entitlement, whereas equality and inequality are relative terms, which is why they are so important for people's lives and for community cohesion.

Enhancing public spaces

The design of urban public space can help to level out some of these relative disparities. If streets and open spaces are freely accessible, this creates places for chance encounters that benefit everyone, irrespective of income or background. During the coronavirus pandemic, however, many playgrounds and parks were closed: the urban space was suddenly no longer available. This particularly affected



Bonn Symposium 2020: Presentation Kirsten Wilkins

tenants of high-rise buildings, who were deprived of their access to exercise and social contact.

What lessons can we learn from this? Public space is a resource for people who don't have other resources. Public spaces can serve communities in a variety of ways, from growing food to providing spaces for childcare, said Kirsten Wilkins from Open Streets in Cape Town. Local authorities and civil society initiatives can improve people's living conditions with relatively few resources. However, structural inequalities that have evolved historically, such as racism and extreme income and wealth gaps, cannot be solved simply by providing public space.

Public spaces in Cape Town are often places of fear; they are also dominated by cars. Open Streets tries to change this through its action days, which aim to give people an experience of freedom and empower-

ment. Its women-only bicycle rally is one example. “We create safe spaces for dangerous ideas,” said Kirsten Wilkins. Connecting with local people is essential and is the reason why there have been no incidents or other safety issues at any Open Streets events.



Bonn Symposium 2020: Presentation Frances Stewart

In many cities in the Global South, it is about creating free and safe public spaces in the first place, said Professor Astrid Ley from the University of Stuttgart’s Urban Planning Institute. In Germany, by contrast, the focus is on maintaining and expanding the existing public space. There are many civil society projects and “living labs” working on this issue. In Stuttgart, for example, there were major concerns at first about the idea of civil society initiatives repurposing car parks, yet in practice, local retailers have not experienced any drop in income as a result of the decrease in parking provision. For fear of losing out, people often lose sight of what is genuinely possible, commented Anne Pinnow from the Laboratory for New Economic Ideas in Leipzig. Real-world experiments can lessen these fears.

As the car parks example shows, this is not about public space in a legal sense, but about the space that is available for everyone to use. “Transformation through architecture” is possible away from streets and municipal squares: it can also be done in residential areas, said architect Sieghard Lückehe, Executive Director of the Urban Housing Association in Bremerhaven. Over the past two decades, his project “Against the stream – Wulsdorf as a social community” has transformed a depressed “problem area” into a vibrant neighbourhood with a sense of civic pride, whose residents enjoy coming together outdoors to work on small-scale horticultural projects. All this has been achieved without demolishing any of the old buildings and without significantly increasing rents (gentrification). As Sieghard Lückehe pointed out, tearing buildings down tears social networks apart.

Recognising and promoting diversity

But the public space is not only a space for encounter and support. The public space is where society creates an image for itself, in the form of street names, statues and memorials. Dr Marta Mazurek, a City Councillor in Poznan and Chair of the Equality and Diversity Policy Team, reported that until recently, roughly 500 streets in her city were named after historical figures but only 38 were women. A campaign was launched to address this situation and a decision taken to name new streets after women. This sparked a fresh debate on women in local history and present-day society within the city. As a result, women are now taken more seriously as potential leaders.

Inequality also emerges through socially constructed groups and the attributes assigned to them, such as those ascribed to men as opposed to women, as Professor Stewart had pointed out at the start of the Symposium. It is about the way we look at people, categorise and judge them, rather than something intrinsic about them. A positive relationship to one’s own group can also mobilise and shake up wider society. The global Black Lives Matter movement was mentioned by many of the speakers and participants as a good example and a cause for hope.



Bonn Symposium 2020: Sami Dzemailovski

Underlying this are painful experiences of discrimination and a grave problem of injustice, which can only be solved through a whole-of-society approach. This must include active measures to create spaces where everyone can unlock their potential, said Dr Prasad Reddy, Founder and Executive Director of the Centre for Social Inclusion, Migration and Participation in Bonn. A glance at many local councils or the leadership of local clubs and associations

reveals that there is a shortage of these spaces and that women and people with a migration background are underrepresented. In order to address this problem, Dr Mazurek created a city website which was used during the election campaign to present all female candidates on electoral lists. In addition, an intensive training course was funded from the local budget for women who were running for the local election for the first time. The result is that now the City Council in Poznan has the second highest ratio of women in the country.

It is also about changing some communities' self-perceptions, added Sami Dzemailovski, Founder and Chairman of the Carmen Society in Düsseldorf and a long-standing advocate for the interests of young Roma. Many Roma deny their culture for fear of discrimination. As a result, most people are not aware of the centuries of Roma history in Europe. The Carmen Society encourages young Roma to engage with their culture. It also works with the local authorities on projects to improve the educational and employment prospects of young Roma. The key to successful cooperation between the local authorities and civil society is communication: it is all about how we speak to each other. With support, said Sami Dzemailovski, we can do a lot to make change happen.

In the City of Braga, represented by Anna Ferreira, Head of Cabinet of the Mayor, this is the task of permanently employed intercultural mediators, who work closely with the local Roma community and other minorities. Maria Macher from Berlin reported on the work of the District Mothers in



Bonn Symposium 2020: Andrea Neidig (Interpreter)

Neukölln; these municipal employees engage with women from the Turkish and Arab communities, inform them about education, health and childcare and provide advice on interacting with the authorities. This initiative is especially effective because

the District Mothers come from these communities and have personal experience of their problems and needs.



Poetry Slam with Ella Anschein

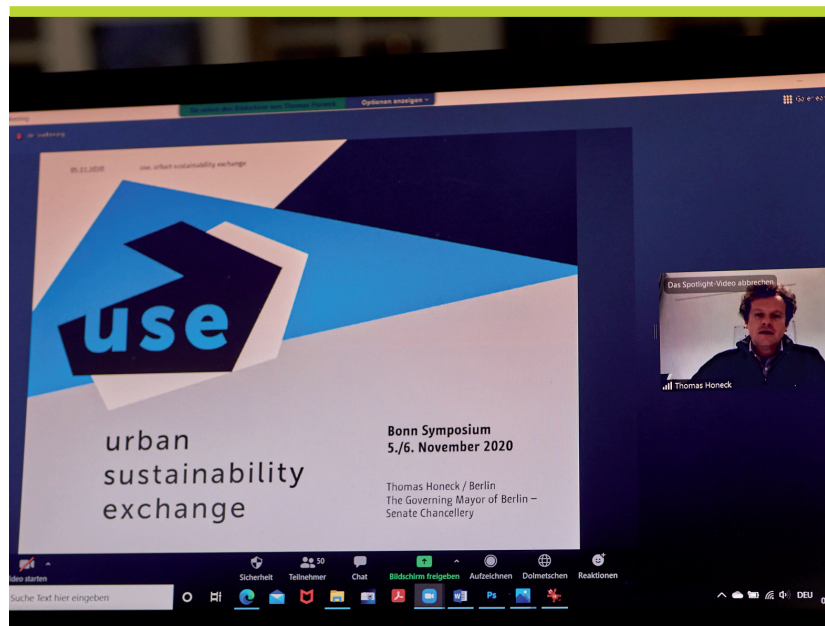
Linking environmental and social policy

There are many lessons to be learned from centuries of campaigning to end prejudice and discrimination and achieve more rights for women, for example. However, societies are undergoing rapid change, so the Symposium helped to turn the spotlight on new forms and dimensions of inequality that overlap with existing injustices. The work being undertaken by the local authorities will only be successful if they anticipate and understand these trends.

There are various megatrends that local authorities must help to shape in order to narrow inequalities in future. They include environmental megatrends such as climate change, where inequality could scarcely be greater: its impacts are most severe in human communities that produce the lowest CO₂ emissions. At the micro level, a similar pattern of injustice emerges with air pollution, as Dr Isabell Kempf explained: in London, 50 per cent of the poor areas exceed permissible air pollution limits, compared with just 2 per cent of wealthier areas. The richest areas own the most cars, but the most deprived areas have the worst air quality.

Dr Kempf called for the risks and social costs, which are very unevenly distributed, to be integrated into climate and environmental policy to a greater extent. This would potentially enable new alliances to form at the local level, e.g. between environmen-

tal campaigners and trade unions. For example, the Yellow Vest movement in France did not protest against climate change specifically, but aimed to achieve more equitable distribution of the costs of adaptation. Local authorities should therefore link



Bonn Symposium 2020: Presentation Thomas Honeck

climate action to a social policy agenda, for example by creating jobs for low-skilled workers in the green economy. The participation of women – e.g. in agriculture – can also be improved via climate programmes. What is needed is an integrated, collaborative approach that pools various authorities' budgets and responsibilities. There is potential to achieve major progress and bring about a holistic transformation here.

Ensuring positive progress on digitalisation

Digitalisation is another megatrend that has highly unequal distributional effects. Platforms for transport, delivery, guest accommodation and other services are putting pressure on the local economy in many areas. Is this encouraging dumping prices, precarious employment and other social abuses? Should municipalities be clamping down on these business models and regulating them more stringently? Or, rather, do digital platforms challenge unjustified privileges and offer people a wealth of new opportunities?

Tola Odeyemi, Head of Public Policy West Africa at Uber Technologies, highlighted the opportunities for developing countries in particular. Uber supports and links its platform with traditional forms of mobility, such as tuk-tuks and small boats, and brings them into the 21st century. It also creates fair

competition between traditional suppliers and new business models, offering prospects to young people in particular.

The potential of new technologies was also underlined by Klemens Himpele, the City of Vienna's Chief Information Officer. Local authorities should be using these technologies and assisting local citizens to use them too. However, effective regulation is required in order to curb abuses such as the illegal rental of subsidised apartments to tourists. It is also important to prevent delivery services and similar platforms from undermining workers' rights.

Gregory Randolph, Executive Vice President of the JustJobs Network, called for more differentiation here. In Europe and North America, the majority of jobs are found in the formal sector and a social security network is in place. In many countries of the Global South, however, the informal sector predominates; digital platforms offer scope to register and formalise many of the jobs that exist. The local authorities and platform operators can work together on this basis to establish social security systems. In other regions of the world, this approach could be used to adapt existing social security systems to digitalisation.

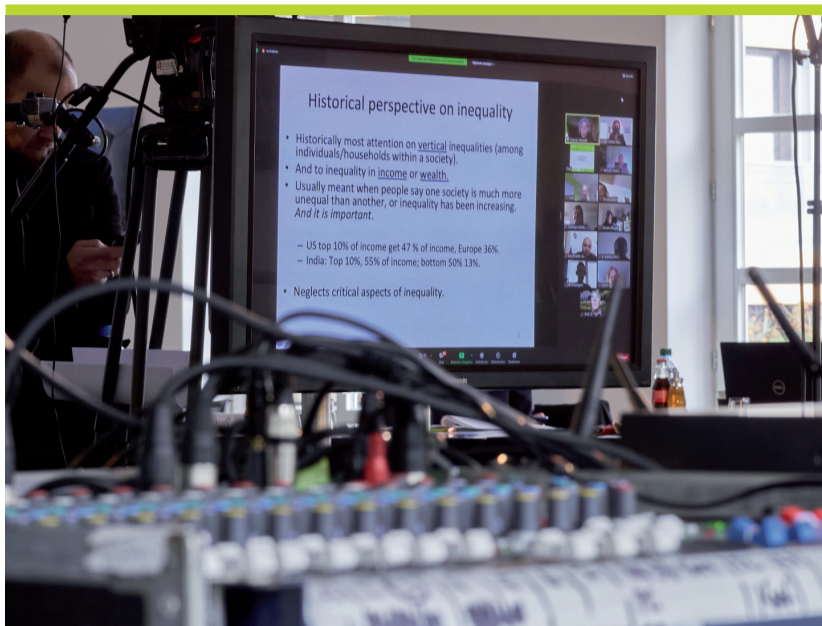
Nevertheless, Gregory Randolph also emphasised the ambivalent effect of digitalisation. Platform technologies not only make jobs more visible; to some extent, they reinforce inequality. For example, in many developing countries, it tends to be better-educated employed individuals who earn additional income for themselves on digital platforms; this is because using these platforms takes skills and expertise. In other words, the platforms reinforce inequality through education, rather than reducing it. So it is even more important for cities and municipalities to support their local residents in acquiring digital skills.

Using data to strengthen community wellbeing

Inequality in the digital age means that some people have access to data and others do not. The main problem for the local authorities, said Klemens Himpele, is that the platform operators do not share their data with the public sector. As a result, it is impossible to verify legal compliance and identify and take action against violations. It would be wrong to say that these technologies lead to a decline in social standards. The problem is lack of transparency. Local authorities are losing tax revenue because without cooperation from the platforms, they cannot localise exactly where a service is being provided and by whom. Legislation at EU level has a role to play here.

With regard to data, too, digitalisation is both a challenge and an opportunity. It offers local actors and initiatives many opportunities to collect and process data themselves and thus reduce social inequalities. This became apparent from many of the inputs at the Bonn Symposium. Examples are apps which increase women's safety in the public space or enable local residents to provide the authorities with reliable, up-to-date information about environmental pollution at the micro level.

The work being done by the Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity in New York City, represented at the Symposium by its Executive Director Matthew Klein, is one example of what can be done using



Bonn Symposium 2020: Studio Equipment

data and scientific methods. As he explained, fine-grained data make it possible to look more closely at generally positive trends, such as the decline in child mortality, and identify areas where action is still needed. For example, the availability and analysis of more fine-grained data revealed that child mortality was three times higher in New York's black population compared with the population at large. Without this information, it would be impossible to take appropriate action and target prevention and health care more effectively.

When it comes to practical action, too, his department works differently than conventional authorities, Matthew Klein explained. It is designed specifically to be a laboratory for innovation that can and should take risks, instead of always fearing failure and the associated political damage. "Do what works" was how he summed up its ethos. And of course, it is not just about taking successful programmes forward; it is also about scaling up or replicating them in other policy fields.

Money matters?

What is needed, then, is a willingness to take risks; this must be encouraged in order to tackle social inequality at the local level. But doesn't tackling the structural causes of poverty and lack of prospects require a high level of spending? Many participants at the Bonn Symposium pointed out that established structures such as the financial and taxation system stand in the way of change towards fairer communities.

But transforming life in an urban neighbourhood does not always mean spending large amounts of money. The transformation of Wulsdorf, as Sieghard Lücke explained, was achieved with very limited funds and very high impact. Whereas other municipalities have focused on buying back privatised real estate, which is extremely expensive, or have passed the high costs of renovation or new-builds on to their tenants, Wulsdorf has shown how, with a creative approach, it is possible to upgrade the existing building stock with effective micro-scale measures, such as the installation of external timber cladding.

There were more fundamental objections to the notion that underfunding is the main problem affecting efforts to address poverty and injustice at local level. We must stop thinking about money first and focus instead on the kind of measures that have been under way on a small scale for a very long time and are effective in producing a transformation, said Professor Derk Loorbach from the University of Rotterdam. Very often, we are caught up in our particular view of the problem. This is reflected in phrases like "problem neighbourhood" or "homeless young people". Entire industries, with their own programmes and structures, have sprung up around these dominant concepts, costing a great deal of money but often achieving very little impact.

In light of this criticism, views differed on whether the necessary change can be brought about by local policy-makers or whether it needs to be initiated externally. If we get involved in shaping the public sector and implementing local policies, said Matthew Klein, we can make change happen here. However, some of the participants were more sceptical. Our role is not to plaster over the cracks in the existing system; we should be changing the system itself, said Lino Zeddies, an activist and author from Berlin. While he and other participants recognised that within the local authorities, there are many committed individuals who are willing to embrace change, the organisational culture within the administration is not conducive to innovation or initiative, and institutional silos stand in the way of an integrated approach to environmental and social issues.

Making change happen in – and with – society

Where should change be initiated, then, and by whom, or what? According to Anne Pinnow, initiatives and experiments at society’s periphery can help us move forward here. This is where the usual patterns of thinking and problem-solving are challenged and alternatives are filled with life. There



Bonn Symposium 2020: Studio University Club Bonn

simply needs to be a willingness to fail and a recognition that the right solution is not always known at the outset, Lino Zeddies added.

These open-ended experiments can achieve sustainable changes in mindsets within business and the administration, as Professor Ley emphasised. The local authorities in particular can and should support these niches, said Anna Pinnow. However, we should not forget that anti-progressive forces, including the far right, are also able to occupy these niches, so local policies that welcome and support progressive initiatives have a particularly important role to play.

There are many lessons to be learned from projects such as the District Mothers in Neukölln and elsewhere on what this support might look like and how government, administration and civil society can work together to reduce social inequality. This is the only way to prevent the emergence of the kind of paternalistic dependency structures, especially in poverty reduction, that Kirsten Wilkins had warned about. Talking to people as equals and giving them a sense of ownership encourages them to take responsibility. It is about respecting existing social networks and finding the right language, perhaps via women who represent local communities.

Notwithstanding the many shades of opinion, the ideas presented at the Bonn Symposium highlight the need to pool resources and strengthen individual agency across communities. After the coronavirus pandemic, much will depend on our ability to keep open the opportunities that have arisen and to ensure that economic recovery results in improved prospects for everyone. The Symposium offered many insights into how this can be achieved despite budgetary constraints.

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