

Round table on “let’s talk local: cities and citizens in the fight against climate change” – Congress event in the framework of the World Forum for Democracy

Opening Speech from Leendert VERBEEK (Netherlands, SOC/G/PD), President of the Congress

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Opening remarks – 5 minutes

Madam Mayor,
Dear friends,

I am glad that the World Forum for Democracy spotlight this month is on territorial environmental action.

In my official capacity with a regional mandate, I can assure you that handling and mitigating the climate emergency that we are facing at the moment, requires a response at local and regional level for it is at these levels that this emergency is felt the most.

It is also at these levels where action to save the environment can be the most concrete and bring tangible results. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe is organising this round table, in the framework of the World Forum for Democracy, to highlight such local initiatives from local and regional authorities, local communities and citizens.

The climate crisis and its environmental, social and economic consequences currently constitute a major challenge for our societies.

It is a key challenge for all levels of governance: global, national, regional and local. Yet, local and regional authorities have key role. They, and residents of their communities, are directly affected by the consequences of climate change, at times extreme and severe: for instance, drought, floods, or pollution. This is why many municipalities and regions today have developed initiatives in response to their citizens’ calling for a concrete environmental action – such as, for example, “climate-resilient cities”.

Local and regional authorities have an inherent role in tackling the climate crisis. They are closest to the citizens, and it is in our local and regional communities that actions will be taken. Even if decisions and strategies are adopted at the national level, they must be implemented on the ground taking into account local realities. If it doesn't work at the local level, it won't work at the national level.

Local and regional authorities also play a key role in raising people’s awareness and change their attitudes and behaviour, while maintaining our societies cohesive so people are involved and not excluded.

Our duty as local and regional elected representatives is to ensure that we provide our communities with the best possible environment both for the sake of saving the planet and protecting the health of our fellow citizens.

In order to succeed we need the commitment of all levels of governance and the active engagement of citizens and civil society as a whole. We also need to have enough policy space for local and regional authorities to decide which policy works best, and the necessary resources.

This is why we in the Congress underline the importance of the full application of the principle of subsidiarity in the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals, including SDG 13 which states to take urgent action to combat climate change. This importance is reflected in the new Congress priorities for 2021-2026, adopted at our session last March, which identify building sustainable communities as a major focus of our action.

Moreover, local and regional elected representatives can rely on the support of European-level organisations to defend and amplify their voice, make local initiatives in the fight against climate change visible and encourage such practices across the continent.

It is encouraging that cities and citizens are taken initiatives for sustainability and green transition. There are many good practices at local and regional level, some of which we will hear about today.

Dear friends,

Our message is clear: cities, towns and regions cannot be ignored if we are serious about working towards a sustainable future.

The climate crisis will not be resolved at one single level of governance, and we need more than just the sum of all the levels. We need cooperation among all the levels and all stakeholders, public and private and we need to link this global challenge to concrete, local measures.

I look forward to our discussion today on the good practices and actions of cities, citizens and civil society organisations in the fight against climate change.

Thank you.