



**ELDW Annual Coordination Meeting 2021 - Online, 26 February 2021**

## Speech by Mihkel JUHKAMI, Congress Thematic Spokesperson on the ELDW

*Check against delivery - Seul le prononcé fait foi*

**Dear ELDW 2020 Participants and National Coordinators,**

**Dear Colleagues,**

Let me express to you my gratitude for being with you today, in these difficult times as we all are seeking to sustain local democracy. I also thank you, dear participants, for organising remarkable ELDW events in your cities, for encouraging citizens' participation and working to strengthen their trust in our capacity to deliver effective response to the pandemic.

In support of what my colleagues said, I also would be much happier to meet you in person in Strasbourg, even though the coronavirus outbreak has compelled us to discover and to use alternative digital options, as opposed to 'business as usual' conference set-ups. Even under this condition, I am glad to meet you and to contribute to the annual coordination meeting of the ELDW.

**Dear participants,**

The Council of Europe member countries, including my home country of Estonia, and indeed the whole world have been fighting against the COVID-19. Citizens had to be locked down in their homes, most countries stopped traditional education methods and switched to remote education. Local and regional authorities worked hard to provide health and other social services to citizens and to sustain local democracy and citizen participation during the pandemic.

The global health crisis has highlighted the importance of using digital technologies for engaging citizens and ensuring their access to local and regional services. These tools have also been used in organising the ELDW events, which gave local authorities room for action. So, participants of the ELDW also took advantage of digital tools and organised more than 500 activities during the Covid-19 pandemic, including more than 260 citizen participation activities and more than 125 information dissemination activities.

As the ELDW initiative has shown us since 2007, there are many new forms of engagement that indicate an amazing amount of innovative capacity and energy among both citizens and authorities. My country, Estonia was named one of the world's best places for working remotely even before COVID-19. Now, with this experience, Estonia is using modern technology to combat the pandemic without sacrificing democratic participation. As a Mayor of Rakvere, I am pleased to mention that my city has been actively using online applications and tools in order to engage with citizens and inform them about the local developments.

As a local elected representative, let me share my personal opinions about using online tools and the advantages of remote meetings, even after the pandemic will be gone.

Working from home reduces the number of cars on the road, thereby reducing overall greenhouse gas emissions, fossil fuel consumption, and energy usage. It also helps to reduce environmental and human health impacts as a result of decreased air pollution. This will reduce our carbon footprint and support our urban resilience goal to protect the environment. I am certain that the post-pandemic world will see the continued and increased use of online technologies, possibly a practical combination of traditional and new methods of doing business, as we have entered a truly digital era.

**Dear colleagues,**

In conclusion, I would like to congratulate each and every participant of the ELDW initiative and the partners of the ELDW for their efforts in 2020. I hope to meet you again, under the initiative's roof, and to welcome even more participants in our future meetings.

Thank you for your attention.