

High Level Conference on Environmental Protection and Human Rights – Strasbourg, France, 27 February 2020

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Debate on “ The role of elected representatives and civil society”

Strasbourg, France, 27 February 2020

Distinguished guests,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour to be here today and to address this very important topic from a local point of view. I am the mayor of the municipality of Middelburg in the Netherlands, and in this capacity, I am also member of the Congress of the Council of Europe which brings together local and regional representatives from all over Europe.

Today, about 10.000 mayors, signatories of a global covenant, are at the heart of a movement for climate change and energy, and many examples of climate emergency declarations can -unfortunately- already be listed.

I would like to start with a quote here from a comment made by Ban Ki Moon, which particularly resonates with me as a Mayor. The Secretary General of the United Nations declared, on 28 May 2013 at the meeting of the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Government for the new development agenda beyond 2015, and I quote:

“It is often said that like all politics, all development is ultimately local. The inputs of local leaders and municipal planners have never been more critical to guiding member states towards embracing policies that achieve green, sustainable and inclusive cities”.

I am well placed to confirm the relevance of this statement made by the Secretary General of the United Nations.

I would like to speak today about “localizing” SDGs and why localization matters - why, in the Congress view, local government and civil society response to climate change and sustainable environment is our best, if not, our last hope - and why Congress reviews its activities through the prism of the SDG’s, notably on sustainable environment.

Localization is a concept which refers to the process of defining, implementing and monitoring strategies at the local level for achieving global, national and subnational development goals and target.

Localization entails adaptation, which is also best observed at the local level. Global climate change is translated into localized phenomena in response to local geography and other environmental, economic and socio-political factors. As an example of adaptation, in my municipality of Middelburg, unexpected warmer night-time temperatures were quite recently observed as a result of natural variability, in all probability intensified by the urban heat island effect and climate change. We decided to apply some adaptation proposals utilising wind energy, new building designs, and blue-green infrastructure possibilities. Retro-fitting urban areas to be greener and more adaptive is an essential part of establishing climate-proof cities, new urban extensions and greenfield developments present the opportunity to do things right from the start. This is exactly what we did in Middelburg and we will continue to develop strategies in that sense.

In this regard, I would like to point out that the Paris Agreement represented a milestone for recognizing the importance of local climate adaptation. Until this agreement, such efforts were paid little attention by many governments and environment practitioners.

Indeed, local authorities are best placed to drive the reduction of emissions through their unique position of being able to shape policy on land, buildings, water, waste and transport.

Many cities and urban centres are already in the forefront of this adaptation and mindset change and are developing local solutions. City councils are taking initiatives in attempts to boost renewable energy, tackle energy security, lower bills, generate employment and ultimately achieve inclusive and sustainable development.

However, alongside local authorities 'action, we need the citizens' participation. We need an active engagement and commitment from civil society.

It is no longer sufficient to develop passive lists or reports to 'inform' citizens of changes in our environment.

We need to improve our engagement with citizens and find out how they can 'inform' us. Obtaining and using local knowledge will help us empower citizens, and it will also give us a better indication of what we need to do to be truly sustainable.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

To conclude, I would like to underline that environmental protection is part of good governance, whether it is implemented at international, national or subnational level, and all possible actors should be considered as key actors.

As members and committed stakeholders of the Council of Europe, we are all striving for good governance, based on shared values and principles, of which the right to a sustainable environment must be an integral part.

A safe, clean and healthy environment is essential for the enjoyment of human rights, the exercise of human rights is vital to the protection of the environment. This relationship of interdependence between the protection of environment, good governance and human rights will clearly be even more essential for the protection of people and the planet in the years to come. As local or regional representatives we have a responsibility and we are directly accountable to our citizens in that respect.

But we, humans, due to our contradictory nature can both be aware of the negative consequences of climate change and other environmental issues and, at the same time, can overlook the severity of the situation we are facing and the urgency, to not only act, but to act fast and with force.

We must overcome this paradox all together, at all levels of governance with the support and participation of the civil society.

And that is why I would like to pay tribute to the Georgian authorities who have placed the environmental challenge at the heart of their presidency.

Thank you for your attention.