

Thirteenth Plenary session of the Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly (ARLEM) 7-8 November 2022, Izmir

Speech of Tunc Soyer, Mayor of Izmir Metropolitan Municipality

Dear Representatives of Local and Regional Authorities, Members of Arlem,

I am honored to welcome you to our City of Izmir, for the Arlem Annual Meeting.

This is probably the most beautiful picture on earth. It shows all our countries. It shows our cities, our desires and all our memories. This picture mirrors our past and future. It is our planet. It is, us.

On this planet, all natural ecosystems are interconnected and they nourish each other. Rivers connect mountains with the sea, forests breathe to cultivate our air, winds and insects carry the pollen of flowers to regenerate life. They all come together and make the web of life, of which, we are a part. Life on earth is based on the circularity of nature.

In this picture, you see our planet at night. It is somewhat different from the previous one. Here, we no longer see the circularity of nature. What we see here are centralized cities culturally and physically distracted from other ecosystems.

Cities of our era absorb air, water, soil, mines and biodiversity from our planet. In turn, they deliver plastic waste, carbon dioxide, wars and poverty that are all very far from enhancing the web of life. In our era, the circularity of nature gradually shifts to the centrality of cities resulting in climate emergency, plastic islands in oceans, loss of biodiversity and finally, the demise of our hopes. As cities break ties from the ecosystem they are surrounded by, we lose grip of the reality of life on earth.

Having said these, I also believe that cities are the only solution to heal our World in crises.

2007 was when, for the first time, more people in the world lived in urban areas than in rural landscapes. By 2021, 56% of the world's human population lives in urban areas, expected to increase to 68% by 2050.

Where we stand as human civilization, we clearly cannot reverse this trend. There is not even a small possibility to disperse our urban population across natural ecosystems.

There is only one way out:

We have to make our cities function as part of natural ecosystems. We need to find a firm answer to this crucial question: How will circularity in urban life be possible?

As a mayor of a city with over 4 million inhabitants, I know that this is not an easy question. Yet, if we are sincere about sustaining our presence on this planet, we have to strongly challenge ourselves to move forward for the unusual. The fate of our fabulous cities cannot be to act as cancer cells of this spectacular globe. We have to be brave enough to develop our cities as spaces that act as an integral part of the web of life. This is what I call, circular urbanism.

First declared during the Culture Summit of UCLG held in Izmir in September 2021, Circular Culture is a progressive concept based on harmony.

This concept considers culture as the mortar that binds a building together, or the drops of water that connect the roots and branches of a tree. Whatever we do in our lives, be it urbanism, science, art or politics, it does not matter. Culture is present in all of them. Culture is the mortar that holds it all together, the sap of life. Therefore, I consider circular culture as the essence of circular urbanism.

Circular culture rises on four pillars: Harmony with nature, harmony with each other, harmony with the past, and harmony with change.

Nature is not an “environment” that surrounds humanity. It is the life itself. We cannot define nature as if we are at the center of it. We should admit that we are only a part of it.

Today, we failed to develop cities that embrace nature as a whole. From here, the multiple crises of our era were born: The climate crisis, the biodiversity crisis, the plastic crisis and others. For this reason, the first pillar of circular culture is based on harmony with nature, growing our appreciation of nature-rights.

If we want to realize the transformation that the world needs so much, the second pillar of circular culture forms another basic starting point: Harmony with each other. This means democracy that secures equal citizenship for all, at every minute of our lives.

The third pillar, harmony with the past, highlights that it is not possible to design the future of cities without attuning to multiple cultures of the past. In an ever-changing world, former civilizations worldwide have cultivated and accumulated unending sources of inspiration for the future.

Heraclitus, an ancient thinker from Izmir said: “The only constant is change.” This saying prevents all possibilities that may turn culture into a dogma, an ideology or domination of power. This is why we take harmony with change as our fourth pillar to establish a more just city that is open to change in alliance with other cities of the world.

In a nutshell, circular culture goes beyond our daily practices that temporarily fix individual problems. Instead, it seeks a holistic transformation of our cities through fostering harmony between people and nature as well as the past and the future.

In Izmir, we adopted the four pillars of circular culture as a concrete strategy to nurture circular urbanism starting from the Mediterranean.

Numerous other local governments and networks across the world have also started to develop tools in support of cities with circular culture. Citta Slow, Green Cities, Biophilic Cities, National Park Cities, Rewilding Cities, Net Zero Cities, Fair Cities are only some of these.

I believe that we need to strongly pursue networks as such, in order to revert cities from being centralized spaces that cause harm, release carbon, and produce waste.

Having met today in the 8500 years old city of Izmir, I would like to voice the urgent demand for uniting and accelerating our efforts for growing circular urbanism in our region. As Representatives of Local and Regional Authorities in the Mediterranean, our responsibility is not only restricted to serving our citizens today. We also have to serve the next generations of our cities that will encounter the results of our decisions today. Our responsibility also overarches to natural ecosystems that make our urban civilization possible.

Using this opportunity, I would like to call to establish an Alliance for Cities with Circular Culture as a strong message from our meeting today, to the upcoming COP 27 in Egypt. Such an alliance can greatly advance and give synergy to our local, regional and global efforts on the way of transforming our cities into breathing landscapes for people and for the entire web of life.

Dear colleagues,

Nothing will ever get better by itself one morning, out of nowhere. If our world is ever going to change for the better, we will have to achieve it with our great efforts and with the decisive stance that we maintain despite all obstacles.

It is clear that our isolated efforts to solve the global crises will not work alone. Harmony among our actions is as crucial as harmony with nature. That's why our meeting is so valuable to inspire the urban world for establishing a global alliance of cities with circular culture, starting from the Mediterranean.

Once again, I would like to welcome you to Izmir and wish our network a most successful meeting.

I salute you.