

## The role of the SDGs in the crisis recovery

21 October 2020 – 11.30 -13.00

### Video link

<https://euregionsweek2020-video.eu/video/the-role-of-the-sdgs-in-the-crisis-recovery>

**Bert Kuby, Head of Unit of the Commission for Economic Policy of the European Committee of the Regions (CoR)** recalled that the CoR, CEMR, EUROCITIES, PLATFORMA and Regions4 have been working on SDGs for many years now. Together they promoted the localisation of SDGs within the EU multi-stakeholders' platform on SDGs, also calling for a strong leadership of the EC on SDGs, coordination mechanisms within the EC, as well as an inclusive and participatory governance.

Since the entry into office of EC President Ursula Von den Leyen, the focus on SDGs shifted towards green and climate policies. However, the 2030 deadline to reach the SDGs still holds and binds the EU.

For their part, cities and regions continue to work on SDGs and this workshop is a positive dialogue between cities and regions and the EC highlighting the importance of SDGs as a framework for action in the post-crisis EU.

**Angelika Poth-Mogele, CEMR Executive Director for European Affairs**, moderated a panel of representatives of cities and regions representing the EU geographical and size diversity of LRAs.



## 1 – How has the pandemic affected your implementation of SDGs?

**Muhterem Aras, President of Parliament of the Baden-Wurttemberg region in Germany, member of the Greens political group and of the European Committee of the Regions:**

In Baden-Wurttemberg, sustainable investment is **more important than ever**. There is an agreement that public money will not be used to return to business as usual. However, the region wants to **use tried and tested instruments**, instead of starting from scratch. For instance: the **WIN network** gathers **200 businesses** committed to SDGs. They endorsed a charter with guiding principles for sustainability. In the time of the pandemic, many of these companies are offering one another contacts, skills and supports. Baden Württemberg also has a project on climate protection in businesses for them to use resources efficiently. The region offers counselling on this.

**Digitalisation** related to both life and work is a priority. The region offers support for **SMEs and Start-ups** to innovate in this field.

To conclude, **if anything, SDGs have gained more significance** because of the pandemic in Baden Württemberg.

**Miquel Rodriguez, Commissioner for the 2030 Agenda in the city of Barcelona and member of EUROCITIES**

At the beginning of the pandemic, the **priority shifted towards saving lives**, rather than using the SDGs framework. However, **once the health situation stabilised**, public authorities realised that the challenges that emerged during the pandemic were in the 2030 Agenda and SDGs (having adequate healthcare infrastructures, a resilient economy, digitalisation). Barcelona prefers to work on the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development rather than using the related SDGs. The **2030 Agenda** is the conceptual roadmap. The COVID-19 pandemic changed the priority order when working on the 2030 Agenda and SDGs, but it did not affect the commitment of Barcelona to reach SDGs. Barcelona used the 2030 Agenda **both to set up immediate and longer-term actions**. For short-term: to support self-employees and small businesses, reinforce social support, reduce digital divide, enhance digitalisation for SMEs. Over the long-term: the



**Barcelona Pact**, the political tool to set up the recovery, based on SDGs and the **triple sustainability motto: economic, social and environmental sustainabilities**. This includes energy transition, public-private partnerships for solar panels, a resilient and diversified economy, attracting new talents and skills, a digital transition for more and better jobs, promotion of **advanced technologies** and reduction of the digital gap.

### **Micke Larsson is the Senior Development and Sustainability Strategist of Åland Government in Finland and member of Regions4**

The pandemic acted as a **stress test** for the implementation on SDGs in Åland Islands. In **2014**, the Parliament of the autonomous region of 40 000 inhabitants unanimously decided that the region will become **a sustainable society by 2051**. The year after, countries of the world adopted the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs, comforting Åland Islands in its decision. Focus was on putting people in the driver's seat through a local multi-stakeholders' platform and the design of a strategy. It was a bottom-up, inside-outside process.

In March 2020, authorities realised that the pandemic will be here to stay and will have a massive impact on life and the economy. In April, the Council of the region, presided by its head of government decided that the long-term strategy of Åland Islands will still be reflected by SDGs. **The commitment to SDGs (and multi-stakeholders' platform) remains unchanged**. This was **widely communicated** to citizens and a newly created **Task Force** was tasked to elaborate a **report on getting the region out of the crisis based on SDGs**.

### **Tine Soens, Councilor of Kortrijk, Member of the Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities in Belgium, spokesperson of CEMR and PLATFORMA for the 2030 Agenda.**

The municipality has been busy connecting businesses to their customers, supporting schoolchildren in digital learning, providing shelter for homeless people infected by covid-19. It **kept using SDGs** the entire time. For instance, it took part in the **3<sup>rd</sup> Sustainability Week** organised by the Association of Flemish Cities, VVSG. **Local corona heroes** were celebrated, schools, businesses and administration organised different events on SDGs.

As for Barcelona, Mrs Soens confirmed public authorities realised that should the SDGs have been achieved, the impact of the COVID-19 would have been of



much less significance. Unfortunately, it is **now at the backseat at all government levels**. Likewise, local authorities who have been at the frontline to fight the pandemic should be in the cockpit to elaborate the recovery strategy but in Belgium they have never been involved in a national security council for example.

**Mindaugas Sinkevicius, Mayor of Jonava municipality, President of the Association of Local Authorities in Lithuania. Member of Platforma and of the Party of European Socialists Group of the CoR.**

SDGs are still important but the **focus is on the immediate threat** of the pandemic. The health impact is important but all sectors are also affected, such as education with an enormous need for digitalisation and online learning, which is a big challenge. Financial support for vulnerable and the organisation of testing are also immediate challenges. However, there is an acute awareness that things should not return as they were and that despite the current difficulties, even if the implementation of **SDGs** is affected, they **should be our plan for recovery**.

**2- How to make sure that this crisis does not cancel all our efforts so far? How to ensure that there is no backsliding on the implementation of SDGs?**

**Mrs Aras – Baden-Württemberg**

While all stakeholders should be involved in the implementation of SDGs, the political sphere should set the framework.

At EU level, there are billions of euros available for the recovery. Countries and regions like Baden Württemberg also engaged **large sums of money** to support their economy and society. This is about the **political choices** that policy-makers do to spend this money that will decide whether or not the recovery will be sustainable and SDGs implemented. What a region like Baden-Württemberg expects from the **EU** is **an accompanying role** to implement the SDGs. The European Commission should set up a **partnership with all levels of government**: national, local and regional. Baden Württemberg has **good practices at regional with industry that can be replicated** elsewhere. Such a partnership with all levels of government would ensure that all are on the right course of action. This should also **raise awareness on SDG with joint projects**



for instance. Baden Württemberg is organising the **sustainability days**, mid-September as part of the European Sustainability week. Despite the pandemic 1200 events took place, organised by businesses, NGOs, public administration or NGOs. One third of the event organised in Germany for that day were organised in Baden Württemberg. This helps **create ownership** and can be organised elsewhere.

### Mr Rodriguez - Barcelona city

The **2030 Agenda should be adapted** to the new reality. End of October, the city council approved the Agenda 2030 of Barcelona. It implements about 88% of the SDGs. The rest is beyond the competencies of the city. It focuses on the **triple sustainability** motto: **each policy and action should be checked against these three dimensions**, even if this is specifically environmental or economic, all three sustainability types shall apply.

The EU **Recovery and Resilience Facility** will need **to focus on sustainable projects** to guarantee the fulfilment of SDGs. Barcelona is going to create a **taskforce to push the 2030 Agenda forward**. It will be an innovative and participatory process, including not just the municipal administration. There will be an **innovation competition** open to people, public bodies, and businesses for ideas to face up these new challenges with the SDGs.

### Mrs Soens - Kortrijk

Kortrijk is a **smaller city** and rely on the **support from the Flemish association of cities**, VVSG. Two cities out of three in Flanders are using SDGs. Cities need to **keep showing the added value of SDGs** to people. They should stimulate sustainable and **cross-sectoral approaches** to achieve triple sustainability, bringing together different departments and **creating a shared language**. Higher levels of government should not impose a framework; this **should be locally agreed**. Organisations such as VVSG provide good support, an SDGs academy, webinars on how to translate SDGs, and help work with provinces and the Flemish government, including on monitoring.

Gent for example elaborated its Voluntary Local Review. Cities **show leadership** on SDGs. The 17 councillors of a small city in Flanders became ambassadors each for one SDG, choosing a godmother or father in the business sector to help create ownership on SDGs.



### Mr Sinkevicius - Jovana

The recovery phase will be for next year. It is time to build back better and **win back the momentum of SDGs**. This is a **shared responsibility with all institutions**, we therefore need to **work together**. **Thanks to the crises, there was a closer connection with the national government, at least in Lithuania**. We should also work better together with EU institutions to recover and build resilient communities.

Timing is never right with various crises – Middle-East crisis, migrant crisis, etc. There should be no excuse not to reach the SDGs. **The Recovery and Resilience Facility and the MFF are very positive**. They show the EU solidarity spirit, they are set to modernise EU economy. **SDGs in that context should be used** to build a better world, this is the right moment to do so.

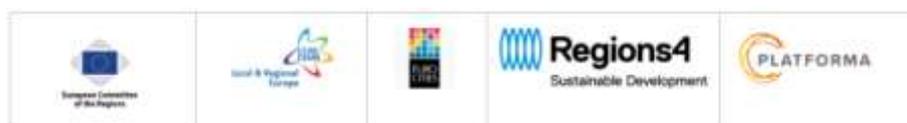
### Mr Larsson – Aland Islands

Aland Islands won the EU Sustainability Award in 2019. This was handed by Commissioners Timmermans and Katainen. It helped to build momentum locally and Aland Islands are still advancing in implementing SDGs. However the **EU Award does not exist anymore as is the EU multi-stakeholders' platform on SDGs** that was going with it. It is an important setback for the implementation of SDGs in the EU. There has been a big shift of priorities in the EU, not in line with local reality. **Local and regional authorities need coherence and continuity at EU level**. They need to see the EU and all stakeholders go in the same direction. **The green deal is a good news for climate, the RRF is excellent for solidarity, but this should not be at the detriment of strong policy framework like the SDGs that bring coherence to policy action through all levels**. The European Commission should take full responsibility for the implementation of SDGs. An **EU sustainability award in 2021** would be a first good signal.

### 3 – On the future: How is the 2030 Agenda helping you to engage with your citizens to ensure a swift and inclusive recovery?

#### Mrs Aras – Baden-Württemberg

Our **Sustainability strategy** is anchored in the SDGs and ensure consistency for policy action. It helps localise the SDGs and includes energy, climate, education



on SDGs, digitalisation and sustainable consumption. Sustainable investment in these areas is key for recovery.

At EU level there is the Green Deal and the digital transition. Citizens and stakeholders should be onboard of the whole process. Our Sustainability strategy is an **important platform for us to engage** with them, to reach out to businesses, young people and local authorities.

**One of the greatest lessons** of the pandemic is that it is important to **listen to businesses** and that it helped us to mitigate its effect. The same goes for sustainability and SDGs.

### Mr Rodriguez - Barcelona city

The 2030 Agenda has to be the framework for the recovery and economic transformation. Our city need to make its **digital and green transition** to build the resilience of our economy. There are a lot of uncertainty about tourism, SMEs and businesses, and restaurants and cafés activities. There are **major risks for cities to rely on services models of the past**. A digital and green transition will create and **attract new talents**. The **Agenda 2030 will help** Barcelona create this new reality.

### Mrs Soens - Kortrijk

**Digital education** is instrumental in leaving no one behind and staying on track for 2030.

**Partnership** is also important within and between countries. Cities need experts from socio-economic fields, waste expert. **Decentralised cooperation** is essential to help implement SDGs beyond EU borders. For instance, EU cities help in the area of public procurement.

The EU too needs to use its power abroad to push for implementation of SDGs. Internally, the SDGs should be embedded within the **European Semester**, and more integrated in the European Commission organisation and policies. **Cohesion policy** in particular should define SDGs contribution.

### Mr Larsson – Aland Islands

SDGs implementation in Aland Islands is a bottom-up and inside-out process: the regional multi-stakeholders' platform is open to all. The government is using



it as much as possible in order to engage with people and organisations. Open-minded and fruitful talks take place. This includes citizens' talks. Now **authorities are analysing the proceedings of these talks to set up the recovery plans**. One of the lessons of this process is that it is **more important to listen than talk to people**.

SDGs ultimately are just about **empowerment of individual citizens**. They also about **generosity**.

## EU discussion

**Bert Kuby, CoR**, framed the discussion, stating that the European Commission decided to implement the SDGs mostly via their **integration in the European Semester**, the EU economic coordination mechanisms. It started last year with the Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy (ASGS) replacing the first step of the European Semester, the Annual Growth Survey. This was a learning process for all involved and triggered optimism. However, this year with the launch of the **2<sup>nd</sup> ASGS, SDGs were mentioned only once**, and they were no words on monitoring of progress. How the European Commission is planning to implement SDGs and integrate them in the European Semester and the Recovery and Resilience Facility, two mechanisms intrinsically **linked for the EU recovery**? And how will the EC use the work done at local and regional level on SDGs?

## **Mrs Göger – Cabinet of Commissioner Gentiloni, Commissioner for Economy, in charge of SDGs**

From one hand, there is a risk of the implementation of the SDGs backsliding because of the crisis. On the other hand, the relevance of SDGs has never been so clear to everyone before.

The previous European model was based on competition, not sustainability. Now the EU needs to take resources and their limits into account. It has started doing so even prior to the COVID crisis when the EC President Ursula Von der Leyen took office. She decided SDGs would be implemented via their integration within the European Semester. This started in 2020. This included an SDGs monitoring exercise in February 2020.



In addition, **several EU initiatives are aligned with SDGs such as the Green deal, the Circular Economy Action Plan, the Farm-to-Fork Strategy, the Just Transition Mechanism.**

The crisis disrupted many initiatives such as the review of the EU fiscal framework. However, **the integration of SDGs within the European Semester is not put on hold. SDGs underpin the recovery plan with 90% of the 750 billion EUR for the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF).** The RRF requires Member states to operate their twin transitions if they want to access funding. Climate and digital targets as well as the European Pillar of Social Rights are key elements the **European Commission will look at when Member states will submit their National Recovery and Resilience Plans.** The European Commission will make sure that these plans are consistent and coherent. The European Commission will be not a mere financial intermediary. It is the guardian of consistency and alignment towards policy priorities that derived from SDGs.

There is **room for improvement**, notably on a **potential lack of visibility for SDGs** in the recovery effort. **The policy commitment exists but the tagging of individual SDGs should be improved. This can be reflected upon** as the RRF is still in the legislative process. **The European Commission needs to think how to ensure that measures of Member states that contribute to SDGs are be better flagged as SDGs ones.**

As for **governance** and ensuring **ownership** of measures contained in NRRPs, the European Commission issued optional **guidance and a template to Member states** to guide them for the drafting of NRRPs. This includes request to organise consultations and how and whether these have been organised. The objective of the European Commission is **to encourage national authorities to draft NRRPs with the support of parliaments and local and regional authorities** - by opposition to the Finance Ministry drafting them alone.

In the next 2 years, the European Semester will continue focusing on the implementation of the RRF. Afterwards, there will be no return to the previous European Semester.

**Bert Kuby, CoR**, took back the floor as the connection was interrupted. He asked how, once that SDGs tagging is done, to ensure policy coherence within the

European Semester? He also asked about the report on the implementation of SDGs to be published by the end of the year.

**Ivy Moraes for Regions4** concluded that cities and regions will continue to work together on SDGs. However, they need a coherent roadmap to keep localising SDGs.

Moreover, **regions and cities are policy-makers**, they have more leverage than stakeholders to work on SDGs, **the Staff Working Document on the implementation of SDGs should fully integrate this** recognition and endorse **multi-level partnerships** as a key for timely implementation.

**Masha Smirnova for EUROCITIES** had the final word on the EU discussion observing that SDGs are all the more relevant for the recovery and that **efforts to fight the pandemic** are not in contradiction with **work on SDGs**. On the contrary, they **mutually reinforce each other** to build back the EU better.

At EU level, **SDGs should be better integrated within the European Semester** - as foreseen before the crisis – in order not to lose our trajectory for 2030. SDGs are a key policy tool for policy coherence. **The European Commission should take a leadership role** in this and be a trendsetter for Member states on SDGs. In this endeavour, **the European Commission need to reform its governance of SDGs** and make a proper gap analysis to identify needed transformations.

The report on the implementation of SDGs should detail how the different dimensions of SDGs are integrated and deal with them all.

The **EC and CoR could also organise a joint Forum on the implementation of the RRF to monitor the involvement of local and regional authorities** within the NRRPs. This will help set up a structured dialogue in a spirit of shared responsibilities for a sustainable recovery.