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# Localising Agenda 2030: how regions can help meet the SDGs

EVENT REPORT



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### Harnessing Europe's regional strengths to support long-term sustainability

European regions and cities were quick to respond to the serious challenges posed by COVID-19, largely compensating for national governments' own dithering. Territories imposed lockdowns, shored up health services and helped to sustain local families and businesses. Though imperfect and variable, these remarkable policies underlined how regions can serve as the ideal platform for the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

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**Magnus Berntsson**, President of the Assembly of the European Regions (AER)

The **Assembly of the Regions (AER)** and **Friends of Europe** were delighted to team up for this very topical debate. The event, livestreamed from Brussels on 24 June 2020, featured five key speakers from international, European and regional organisations. With an interactive online audience, they discussed European territories' recent handling of the pandemic, the impact on lives and livelihoods, as well as lessons learned for building a more resilient global society. There was also significant input from the European Commission, underlining its determination to achieve a sustainable recovery with the full involvement of EU regions.

“COVID-19 is a unique opportunity for Europe to reconnect, rethink and refresh how we work politically,” remarked event moderator **Dharmendra Kanani**, Director of Insights at Friends of Europe. In his introduction, he noted how the pandemic seriously affected all our social, political and economic systems, while highlighting the vital contribution of regions and cities in dealing with the repercussions.

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**Dharmendra Kanani**, Director of Insights at Friends of Europe

So how can the EU and national governments ensure these territories are more systematically involved in Europe's sustainable recovery while implementing the SDGs? Do we need a new “policy localism”, as Friends of Europe is proposing, to enable region and cities to do their job more effectively with the bonus of making Europe more resilient to any future crises?

“The crisis clearly underlined the frontline role of regions and localities – such as emergency measures, lockdowns and recovery packages,” replied **Aziza Akhmouch**, Head of Division for Cities, Urban Policies and Sustainable Development at the OECD. She also welcomed the way cities had quickly built new soft mobility infrastructure, such as cycling paths.

These thoughts were echoed by **Magnus Bertsson**, President of the Assembly of the European Regions (AER), who remarked that the “pandemic wrecked society but offers an opportunity to start something new and a conversation on what society wants, especially the green and just goals, and in line with the UN 2030 Agenda.”

Bertsson believes the crisis is an opportunity to speed up the transition to a green economy in all sectors, including the digital agenda. For instance, COVID-19 exposed structural inequalities, both in and among countries, underlining the need for more European cooperation and solidarity. He concluded: “We need actions to build a fairer, sustainable, more prosperous and resilient new society and the only solution is to work together, with a partnership of multiple stakeholders, like the AER’s SDG Taskforce.” In his view, a partnership like this will be key to meeting the SDGs by 2030.

#### “No-one gets left behind”

Regions are ideally placed to support local development, especially as they work closely with citizens and local businesses. “They also have a holistic peripheral view and underpin socio-economic dynamism, so that no-one gets left behind,” said **Damià Calvet**, Minister of Territory and Sustainability of Catalonia (Spain) and Representative of the World Organisation of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG). He added that regions and cities are well positioned to push for resilience and sustainability, since they have a diverse and strong voice in global forums. Regions can also help widen the network of stakeholders, driving a more ambitious change to sustainability.

It’s worth noting how regions and cities have sometimes outperformed national governments in times of crisis. For instance, their recovery plans forged during the pandemic were typically bolder than the national equivalents. Some regions are also demonstrating good leadership, such as Flanders in Belgium, which is pushing the SDGs and fighting inequality. Yet regions may struggle to do their jobs, if they are stripped of competences and resources. Cities can also be more vocal on global sustainability, as shown by groups such as C40 Cities or the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate & Energy.

“ Before the pandemic, everyone agreed that Agenda 2030 was the main priority, but now there has been a shift from sustainability to health and jobs

**Raffaele Cattaneo**, Minister for Environment and Climate of Lombardy (Italy) and member of the Regions 4 Steering Committee

### Regions are at the heart of implementing the SDGs

All countries should adopt a territorial approach to the SDGs, which are powerful policy drivers for change in territories. According to Akhmouch, “All local thinking is closely connected to each SDG, such as air quality, transport and housing. 65% of the 17 SDGs targets can’t be achieved without local and regional governments, because national governments can’t act alone.”

She also recommended that the SDGs be used as a policy tool, rather than a compliance agenda, and called for detailed measurement of SDG performance by cities and regions. Cities like Bonn are developing ‘voluntary local reviews’, mimicking national ones, to track their SDG progress as part of an effort towards shared responsibility across government. However, Berntsson noted that local and regional governments are not always meaningfully engaged in the implementation, follow-up or review of these targets.

Regions do have key roles in the SDGs, but they also need a political vision for green recovery and they need people’s consensus. This was the view of **Raffaele Cattaneo**, Minister for Environment and Climate of Lombardy (Italy) and member of the Regions 4 Steering Committee. He remarked that COVID-19, which has killed some 16,500 people in Lombardy, has impacted the region’s development priorities: “Before the pandemic, everyone agreed that Agenda 2030 was the main priority, but now there has been a shift from sustainability to health and jobs.”

“ This crisis is a great opportunity for cities, regions and states to align fully with Agenda 2030, to work more multilaterally and to cooperate better for value-added sustainable cooperation

**Damià Calvet**, Minister of Territory and Sustainability of Catalonia (Spain) and Representative of the World Organisation of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG)

Cattaneo acknowledged this priority shift was understandable, but it could slow down Lombardy’s green transition. He picked out several SDGs as being most important for regions’ sustainable recovery: SDG 11 (sustainable cities and communities), SDG12 (responsible consumption and production), SDG13 (climate action), and SDG15 (life on land).

Talk then turned to the need for greater cooperation between all levels of government within a country, in order to solve sustainability problems. “This crisis is a great opportunity for cities, regions and states to align fully with Agenda 2030, to work more multilaterally and to cooperate better for value-added sustainable cooperation,” argued Calvet.

### EU Cohesion Policy response is closely linked to the SDGs

The pandemic has been disastrous and created Europe's worst depression in nearly a century. Some European regions most affected by COVID-19, such as Lombardy, have expressed the feeling of having been 'abandoned' by the EU. Yet the bloc and its executive have redoubled efforts to tackle the crisis and to accelerate sustainability in recent months.

"The European Commission says it has put together one of history's biggest recovery plans, based on a green and digital recovery," noted the moderator. But will this be enough and how can funds be directed to cities and regions, he wondered.

"The European Commission's crisis response has short-, medium and long-term phases, with the first two focused on jobs and business. Our longer-term response includes EU investment and a green recovery budget for 2021 to 2027, increased from €1100 to €1815bn, plus the new REACT-EU initiative totalling €58.3bn," replied **Wallis Goelen-Vandebroek**, Senior Expert to the Deputy Director-General for Implementation at the European Commission Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG REGIO).

“ We have reaffirmed the regional and local dimension of Cohesion Policy, because we know they play a vital role in adapting to the new circumstances

**Wallis Goelen-Vandebroek**, Senior Expert to the Deputy Director-General for Implementation at the European Commission Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG REGIO)

She added that the Commission is well aware that cities and regions are at the frontline of responding to the crisis: "So we have reaffirmed the regional and local dimension of Cohesion Policy, because we know they play a vital role in adapting to the new circumstances." A new Commission policy objective under the Cohesion Policy after 2020 is to reach citizens directly. For instance, 5% of the European Regional Development Fund budget is set aside for cities to manage themselves on sustainable urban development.

How important are the SDGs to the Commission? "Their achievement remains the key direction for EU Cohesion Policy, at all government levels," added Goelen-Vandebroek. She also said that today's Cohesion Policy response has close links with the SDGs, with 94% of resources dedicated to achieving 11 of the 17 SDGs.

The moderator welcomed this ambitious EU response to the crisis, but still had some reservations. How can the scale of these vast funds be effectively communicated to the public? Can regions and cities absorb all that money and make good use of it? And what's the best way to square the circle between local and national levels?

### Ameliorating regions' ability to use funds

"We know that absorption capacity can be problematic, but the European Commission is engaged in extra dialogue with member states and we hope to soon conclude a negotiation with the Council or partnership agreements with member states," noted Goelen-Vandebrock. Work is also being done to adapt and simplify use of EU Cohesion Policy funds. Lastly, the Commission has set just two minimum requirements for "going directly to EU citizens": it has created an integrated strategy and will ensure that EU investments are triggered by the participation of citizens and stakeholders, who are invited to develop local strategies.

During the online audience questions, an urban planner from the Italian region of Umbria said the EU was right to focus its Cohesion Policy on the SDGs. However, she felt that local government levels are often more estranged from the EU, which explains why the SDGs are sometimes not being well implemented by cities and regions.

“ 80% of the 600 regions in the 37 OECD countries have not achieved the suggested 2030 end-values for any of the 17 SDGs!

**Aziza Akhmouch**, Head of Division for Cities, Urban Policies and Sustainable Development at the OECD

Akhmouch, from the OECD, confirmed this: "Our survey indicates that 80% of the 600 regions in the 37 OECD countries have not achieved the suggested 2030 end-values for any of the 17 SDGs!" She added that most regions are especially lagging behind on SDG13 (climate action) and SDG5 (gender equality), while on SDG7 (affordable and clean energy), only 166 of 546 cities have reached the target of producing 80% of their electricity from renewable energies.

The debate also briefly covered the issues of citizen engagement and decentralisation, with many speakers calling for more of both. "Our last Friends of Europe annual survey found that EU citizens would like to be more involved in policymaking, though perhaps with a different model for interacting with decision-makers," said the moderator. **Mathieu Mori**, Secretary-General at Assembly of European Regions, added that the AER is busy triggering more regional dialogue, because regions need to have a more global impact on the SDGs.

The European Committee of the Regions (CoR) is also a natural and obvious partner for such dialogue, given its maturity and great potential. However, several speakers felt the CoR sometimes comes across as being too bureaucratic and out of touch with citizens. "The CoR seems to lack the spirit and essence of cities and regions, which is why Friends of Europe would like to see more localism when engaging with citizens on issues like the SDGs," said the moderator.

Kanani then concluded: "The SDGs are powerful policy drivers for change in the EU. But the challenge now is to share that power with citizens and to create alternatives for governance, democracy and accountability. This crisis is an opportunity to rethink our whole regional framework."

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