

Intervention of Mr Wim Dries, President of the Association of Flemish cities and Municipalities and mayor of the city of Genk at the SDG 11 panel during the HLPF in New York, Wednesday 11<sup>th</sup> of July

**INTRO:** First some elements of **introduction:**

I am Wim Dries, since 2009 mayor of the city of Genk, a city of 66.000 inhabitants in Flanders, the northern part of Belgium.

I am also president of VVSG, the association of all 308 local governments in Flanders, being cities and municipalities, and we deliver services (such as legal counselling, advice and training) to our members and at the same time advocate for their interests with the other tiers of government in Flanders and in Belgium.

**STATEMENT:** Some key elements with regards to the implementation of the SDGs and SDG 11

- **As to all the 17 goals:** Allow me to state that local governments are crucial to the implementation of all 17 the SDGs.
  - When I mention local governments, it should be clear I refer to the level of government that is closest to the citizens, namely cities and municipalities.
  - A recent OECD study on Decentralised Development Cooperation concluded that at least 65% of the SDGs and its targets cannot be reached without the active involvement of local governments. Almost all the goals and targets of the Agenda 2030 touch upon local governments' competences.
  - So the local authorities' are not only committed to focus on SDG 11, but on all 17 goals, be it on poverty eradication, on energy and climate, on water, education or well-being... they all involve the local governments
- **As to the Agenda 2030 itself:** We feel that the AGENDA 2030 is still too unknown! And difficult to have a long-term and quite abstract agenda translated into the local, regional and national political agendas. Agenda 2030 is still very much a UN Agenda... **it needs to be localized...** And this is the tricky part: Everyone talks about localizing the Agenda 2030, but no-one really knows how to tackle this... So let me share with you how we do this in Flanders:
  - a. **Through the promotion of a Declaration of political engagement** for Flemish Local Authorities called ***Global Goals, Local Focus***, signed by 1 out of 5 Flemish local governments. We try to have local politicians include the SDGs into their party political campaigns and programmes.
  - b. **Through a Pilot Experiment** with 20 municipalities to include the SDGs in each stage of the municipal policy plans that last for 6 years. At this very moment we are localizing the indicators to include them in the Flemish municipal context. After this year's experiment we will upscale the conclusions to all local governments in Flanders.
  - c. **Through Raising Awareness with local governments, the local politicians and the citizens:**
    - i. Our publication collects 50 good practices on how to give the SDGs a visual presence in your municipality
    - ii. We started a campaign ***"Sustainable Heroes in your municipality"*** through which the local governments reach out to their citizens and identify those

who can be the local SDG ambassadors within the municipal territory. More than 1 out of 5 Flemish municipalities will participate in this campaign that will culminate on the 25<sup>th</sup> of September, the third anniversary of the SDG summit.

- **As to SDG 11** on making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable, I would like to raise three or four issues:
  - **Participation is key!** Municipal policy cannot be implemented nor designed without the input and ownership of the citizens. But we need to think on new ways of participation, that create ownership for the city development projects and involve the inhabitants or the target groups from the beginning. Let me give two examples:
    - i. **Practice of Kortrijk:** On a population of 75.000 inhabitants, there was a decline in the figures of people living in situation of deprivation or poverty: from 18% to 12% in three years. This is reached because of a new poverty policy including energy efficient housing programmes, outreach approaches, streetworkers and bridging facilitators between schools and social workers.
    - ii. **My own city of Genk:** Masterplan LO 2020 and reconversion of Nieuw Sledderlo: from the beginning 12 ambassadors from the districts were appointed and through a lot of workshops, citizens and inhabitants in the districts were able to participate both in the large term vision of the masterplan on themes such as housing and mobility and on the concrete implementation of the plan in the different districts. We regard participation not just as a tick-box exercise of putting the spatial development plans for consultation, but believe that the inhabitants also give valuable input in each stage of the district development.
  - **Smart cities** can be seen as new means to achieve SDG11: in Belgium we suffer from two very interlinked problems: air quality and mobility issues.
    - i. **Practice of Bonheiden:** Small municipality with a lot of passing traffic installed 30 km cycling streets in this legislative period (in which cyclists have the priority, cars cannot overtake them). But this was not enough to change the mentality. Through cooperation with the schools, a chip was installed in the children's bicycle wheels and a receptor at the school gate. Each time a child entered the school with his or her bike, this was registered. Every amount of kilometers registered equalled a certain amount of coins that could be exchanged in children's games in the Market Fair. The results were stunning: children begged their parents to go to school by bike (because of the game coins). In a couple of years, the number of bikers doubled, the number of children going to school by bike multiplied by 5, the number of traffic accidents on the risky crossroads diminished drastically.
  - **City-to-city cooperation is a means for strengthening local governments:**
    - i. In Flanders, the local governments embark upon a municipal partnership to strengthen and support the institutional capacities of their peers in the Global South. As VVSG, we support 32 city-to-city cooperations on very important themes such as municipal waste management policies, and they are linked with SDG 11. At this very moment a delegation of my partner city

Francistown in Botswana is visiting my home city in Genk. We already have this partnership since 14 years and cooperate through colleague-to-colleague exchanges on issues such as waste management, city planning, education and health.

- ii. In that respect I would also like to stress the importance of decentralisation processes to grant the local authorities not only the competences, but also the means and resources.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:** I would like to make three or four recommendations – the guidelines for the lead discussants asked to be frank and clear, so I'll try to be both:

1. **Always include local governments!** A full recognition of the important role of local authorities and their representative association remains key! And I have to conclude: this has not yet been accomplished! We should have a seat at the table of the Agenda 2030, not only in the design, but also in the implementation and monitoring. Let me ask you: how many Voluntary National Reviews that will be presented next week at the HLPF will fully reflect the perspective of local governments, their representative associations or their contribution to the SDGs?
2. On the other hand, SDG 11 cannot be accomplished through local governments alone, but can only be achieved through cooperation and **multi-level governance**. This recognition should be within all levels of government and is key to the success of the SDGs:
  - within the multilateral organizations, through **representative umbrella organizations**, such as UCLG (United Cities and Local Governments) and its regional sections, such as CEMR (Council of European Municipalities and Regions) within the European Commission.
  - Within the national states and regions, through the national or regional **local governments associations**.
  - Principle of **subsidiarity** should be built in in every intervention/programme! As the sphere of government that is closest to the citizens, local authorities are best placed to address their needs and priorities. Yet sometimes prejudices or weak local governments offer an easy excuse to by-pass the local authorities and create parallel systems.
3. In Belgium (and in Europe) it remains quite a challenge to combine **the international dimension with the domestic agenda**. When we address city managers and mayors it is tempting to focus only on the domestic issues as they are linked with municipal competences. When we address people involved in international cooperation, it is sometimes difficult to convince that the SDGs are universal and not only confined to the area of international cooperation.
4. **Practice an Integrated and territorial Approach:** We all seem to agree that the SDGs push for a transformative and integrated approach, yet somehow I do have the impression that we still continue too much with business as usual. The SDGs demonstrate that we cannot tackle the challenges through sectoral interventions alone, but we need to radically transform our approaches into a territorial and integrated one. Only doing so, we can contribute towards transformed sustainable and resilient societies.