

Minutes opening plenary – ‘Sustainable Cities’

Green MEP Heide Rühle opened the congress stressing that if we want to green our cities, we need to ensure that economic stimulus packages, as well as EU funds, are oriented towards green sectors and sustainable development. The Greens are best placed to ensure this is realised in deeds and not just in words, so we need to work to ensure a good Green representation in the European Parliament through the coming elections.

Monica Vana, a municipal councillor in Vienna, highlighted the importance of the Green network of local politicians, which facilitates an exchange of the best practises and policies. This helps ensure that the best policies can be spread and implemented across Europe. Despite the fact that over 70% of EU decisions are ultimately implemented at local level, the involvement of municipalities in the EU decision-making process remains insufficient. We need to continue to build and strengthen the interface between local government and EU-level policy making. On the role of the Greens in the current crises, Monica Vana pointed out that the Greens have been highlighting the linkage between economic, social and environmental sustainability since the beginning and are therefore ideally placed to provide the solutions to the crises we are facing.

Werner Woelfle, a Stuttgart city council member, welcomed participants to Stuttgart. He highlighted some of the issues faced by Stuttgart and the challenges to making the city greener. He also highlighted the importance of the EU in providing a framework to address some of the problems in cities, like air quality or noise pollution.

It is impossible to ignore the crises we are facing, according to Green MEP Rebecca Harms. We are confronted with the issues in the media on a daily basis. The point that the crises also present us with an opportunity has also been constantly restated ad nauseum. However, despite all the rhetoric, the response (for example in the stimulus packages being rolled out) remains completely insufficient. As a result, there is a risk that this crisis will be followed by another, deeper crisis.

Any solution must start with a critical assessment of the flawed policies that led us into these crises. At present, many European politicians continue to bury their heads in the sand and blame the original US financial crisis. However, it is clear that reckless free-market liberal policies (in member states and at EU-level) – designed to maximise short-term gain for the few regardless of the wider economic, social and environmental costs – have failed.

The UN has stated the need to ensure that at least 1/3 of stimulus packages should be directed towards green expenditure designed to promote sustainable development. However, Europe falls far short of this. Even France, which has done the most, has only allocated over 20% to these areas but this is still far short of the UN target. We are being left behind by countries like South Korea and China, which are rolling out truly green stimulus packages.

Policies and the regulatory framework are also crucial. However, the EU seems to be falling behind here as well. Climate policy provides a perfect example. 18 months ago, the EU was seen as a global leader in the area, now the EU is drastically dismantling ambition on climate policy. Commitments are being scaled-back and this is threatening the successful conclusion of an international climate agreement in Copenhagen this year. This is all the more evident and galling because the US is finally on board and willing to proactively work towards an agreement.

It is no coincidence that the UN and other international organisations are stressing the need for 'green' reforms, policies, and stimuli. The Greens have a crucial role to play in realising a true Green New Deal. We have pursued the goal of sustainability for decades and have highlighted the linkages from economic to social to environmental sustainability. We have the solutions and we must be involved in ensuring that a real Green New Deal is implemented to respond to the current crises and transform our economies to a more sustainable path.