

Local Councillors meeting, 19th April 2009-04-20

Closing plenary minutes

Speakers:

Klaus-Peter Murawski

Ingrid Grischtschenko

Michael Stein

Boris Palmer

Moderation: Rebecca Haarms

What can cities contribute to the Green New Deal?

In this final session, the panellists discussed various topics, from the necessary political changes that would allow towns and cities to implement the Green New Deal, new political frameworks to strengthen local councils as a political force at the national level and how to enhance the social side of the Green New Deal.

Murawski identified one barrier for fast and successful Green projects as being the difficult access to the funding available in the stimulus packages, over which the counties (Bundeslaender?) in Germany had too much control.

Furthermore, there was a need for a third chamber (Kammer?), a chamber of cities in Germany that would be represented at a national level and be able to demand for more local powers.

Such a body exists at a regional level and was represented by Ingrid Grischtschenko. She supported Murawski's call and said that the experiences from this regional body had been very positive, and that it was very fertile ground for Green policies. Having a bureau in Brussels, it gives communes a representation at the level where they need to be present.

Boris palmer said that he felt little influence from EU regarding urban planning, neither positive nor negative. But he considered that it would be helpful if there was a discussion on EU level about settlement policy and urban planning, to avoid the fragmentation of the urban landscape into sprawling suburbs for living, far-away shopping malls and working places in a life-less city centre.

In order to asses the need of communes for future building needs, he suggested that all communes should create a "Flaechenkataster" (? translation?), so that they could identify in particular the amount of brownfield sites available.

Michael Stein, from the Union of Urban planners, was representing the branch that will have to put the plans for a Green New Deal into practice.

He considered that the capacities to implement the Green New Deal at a local level didn't exist anymore. After 20 years of neoliberal policies, there was only a skeleton left of the initial capacities. Lack of planners, lack of plans and lack of resources mean that in his opinion the communes are not able for the challenges facing them

and therefore are already now using EU resources for primary needs, like renovating schools and repairing roads.

While some intervenors from the floor disagreed with this view, as did Boris Palmer, Murawski agreed that in general the communes were understaffed and stretched far and thin. With another round of job losses expected for this year, the lack of planners in particular seemed to be a major issue to tackle. This could be traced back to the wrong political priorities, which gave a higher importance to saving jobs in the automotive industry, rather than supporting the health sector, which employs more people and has a higher social impact. From 2011 onwards this sector will come under huge strain, both from rising unemployment and because the health insurers will have to pay back to the government.

Yet, the "Abwrackpraemie" is very popular, while the Green alternatives are not picked up upon. To address this, first the legislative framework would have to change, so that renovating a house to a higher environmental standard would count as 'modernising' - and thus mean that the citizen wouldn't need to contribute high own capital to the renovation. Secondly, there would be a need to ensure that the costs of renovation would not harm the tenants.

The debate moved on to the question of how Greens could gain the majority. Boris Palmer made a passionate call for local politics free of ideology, that targets practical problems that shows that Green politics makes sense. This radical pragmatism, so Palmer, would be the key to success.

The social dimension, the need to be ready to answer the questions people will ask, was stressed many times in contributions from the floor. This proved yet again, that the social component of the Green New Deal needs to be stressed. Fortunately, as Grischtschenko mentioned, many aspects of it are inherently social, like secured personal mobility.

In conclusion, society needs to regain control over essential public services, be it mobility or water, and this should happen stronger through the towns and cities.