



The full interview from ICLEI publication Connections #41, which focuses on the upcoming Rio+20 Conference.

Janez Potočnik, European Commissioner for the Environment is in the hotseat.

The European Union has been very successful in engaging directly with local governments, e.g. through the Covenant of Mayors initiative. Can you imagine a similar initiative on the global scale, e.g. to support the implementation of the future Sustainable Development Goals?

The Covenant of Mayors has committed to go beyond the objectives of EU energy policy, in terms of reduction in CO₂ reduction objectives, through enhanced energy efficiency and cleaner energy production and use. Over 2,800 cities have signed up so far. These cities have already understood the benefits that efficiency gains can bring.

The European Commission (Environment Directorate General) launched a similar initiative, The European Green Capital Award. This communication tool, launched by the Commission in 2010 and actively supported by the Committee of the Regions, aims to highlight that a successful future is inextricably linked to sustainable urban development. Each year, the title goes to a city that has a consistent record of achieving high environmental standards, is committed to ongoing and ambitious goals for further environmental improvement and sustainable development and can act as a role model to inspire other cities and promote best practices to all other European cities. The current holder of the title is Vitoria-Gasteiz, Spain. The winner for 2013 is Nantes, France.

The success of voluntary schemes like the Green Capitals Initiative and the Covenant of Mayors provide ample proof of the forward-looking ambition to be found in our regions and cities. I would certainly like to see similar schemes being set up on a global scale. The scope for mutual learning from experiences of cities and regions in countries at all stages of development is truly great.

The financial crisis is still the number one topic in Europe. Will it have a negative impact on reaching environmental and social EU sustainability goals? Will local and national governments attempt to make savings by compromising on sustainability standards?

We are not only facing a financial crisis but also a climate and resource crisis. These crises cannot be solved independently from each other. This is the reason that Europe 2020, the EU's structural economic strategy, aims to transform the European economy into one that is smart, sustainable and inclusive. If we try to solve the financial crisis without consideration to sustainability and inclusion

there will be negative trade-offs in the long run.

Green investment can provide an immediate economic stimulus, for instance, employment in the eco-industries in the EU has been growing by around 3 percent per annum over the last five years, and the potential for growth and jobs in sectors such as eco-construction and retro-fitting and in waste management are huge. We estimate, for example, that by just implementing existing waste legislation we could save €72 billion a year, increase the annual turnover of the EU waste management and recycling sector by €42 billion and create over 400,000 jobs by 2020.

But the potential goes beyond short term stimulus to longer term positive effects on competitiveness. Just as one example, ongoing modelling suggests a one percentage point reduction of resource use is worth around 23 billion Euros to business annually and up to 150,000 new jobs.

A zero draft of the Rio+20 Conference outcome is already available – can it really give us the future we want?

The zero draft is a start but a lot of work remains ahead. We have less than a 100 days before the world summit takes place in Rio de Janeiro in June. This does not leave us much time - and a lot remains to be done. As outlined by the European Council Conclusions, we need to ensure tangible operational outcomes for Rio. We need targets to drive the overall process and transformation towards a more sustainable world.

We also need to send a clear message that Green Economy as a means to address all three dimensions of sustainable development, and it is crucial for poverty eradication in practical terms. There is a persistent belief among some that green growth is an agenda to favour rich countries, or to put brakes on growth in developing countries. It is clear when you look at the global megatrends that future growth will depend on careful and sustainable use of our natural capital; and that is true for countries at all stages of economic development.

I believe we are in a position to develop global targets that can drive and accelerate progress: for example on sustainable energy, for which we already have targets proposed by the UN Secretary General, on improved water efficiency, on stopping land degradation and loss of ecosystems, on oceans, and on reducing waste and moving more to a recycling society. Targets on waste and all the other areas I mentioned need to be designed carefully so that the achievements can be measured in a transparent manner and related actions focus on achieving goals in all aspects of sustainability.

The EU is of course open and willing to engage in discussions with all countries and partners on how to further shape an agenda at Rio.