



Towards Local Sustainability in Central and Eastern Europe

The Sofia Statement

Adopted on 14 November 1998 by the participants of
the Regional Conference on Sustainable Cities and Towns in Sofia, Bulgaria

I PREAMBLE

- 280 representatives of local authorities, local government associations, national governments, European Commission and non-governmental organisations convened in Sofia, Bulgaria from 12-14 November 1998 for the conference „Towards Local Sustainability in Central and Eastern Europe“. As the second in a series of four regional conferences on sustainable cities & towns being held in succession of the pan-European conferences in Aalborg, Denmark (1994) and Lisbon, Portugal (1996), the Sofia Conference is a milestone event of the European Sustainable Cities & Towns Campaign within Central and Eastern Europe leading up to the third pan-European conference to be held in Hannover, Germany, in February 2000.
- The participants pledge their continuous commitment to the principles of sustainable development, demanding that the human economy and development policies ensure health and quality of life within the carrying capacity of supporting ecosystems. They emphasise the vital role of local communities and local authorities in designing and implementing national and international strategies towards sustainable development, in particular the Rio Agenda 21, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, the action programme Health for All in the 21st Century, and the European Union’s Environmental Action Programmes.
- The participants share the concern about the global environmental degradation, which increases economic problems and social disparities, and has a global and local dimension. They regard sustainable development as the only way forward to avoid conflicts and ensure peace.

- The participants in the Conference express their gratitude to the City of Sofia and especially Mayor Stefan Sofianski from the City of Sofia for having hosted the conference, to the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives for their sound support to organise the conference in cooperation with the Council of European Municipalities and Regions and the Coordinator of the European Sustainable Cities & Towns Campaign, and to Directorate General XI of the European Commission, the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Bulgarian Ministries for Environment and Regional Development & Public Works, the National Centre for Territorial Planning & Housing Policy, the Sofia Office of UNDP, the Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe, the Civil Society Foundation and Public Service Reform Initiative / Open Society Institute for their generous financial support.
- During two days with plenary sessions and 16 workshops the participants have come to the following conclusions.

II OUR CHALLENGE

- II.1 We, local communities and municipalities and their associations in Central and Eastern Europe, are aware of the common European culture and history we share and want our countries to be integrated parts of a common Europe. As many countries in particular have applied for membership in the European Union we appreciate the benefits of EU accession. However, at the same time we understand that it entails new mutual obligations. For the applicants these are particularly the fulfilment of EU membership criteria and the adoption of EU legislation, the so-called *aquis communautaire*. Within this process, based on our own identity and specific experiences, we will try to learn from, and give valuable input into the future development of the European Union. We have to strive for a recognition and respect by Western partners of the diversity that distinguishes the countries of „Central and Eastern Europe“.
- II.2 We are glad about the move towards democracy and free societies that the changes of regimes in our countries have brought about. However, rapid transition to democracy, market-based economies, privatisation and radical changes in the structure and working style of the administrations are both, a challenge and a risk at the same time. We need to continuously motivate and empower people to take initiative and to play an active role within this new context. We appreciate the crucial role that non-governmental organisations have in local community development and public participation processes.
- II.3 We have to overcome the overwhelming problems inherited from the past. At the same time we must try to avoid unreflected adoption of appealing, but unsustainable patterns. Poverty, unemployment, poor housing and working conditions, air pollution and noise, degradation of land and habitats, and inadequate water management are posing severe challenges. Unequal access to resources and power during the phase of transition has increased disparities within our societies. Among those suffering most from this situation are women, young and aged people and minority groups.

III OUR STEPS TOWARDS SUSTAINABILITY

- III.1 Tangible improvements in many fields have been achieved by Central and Eastern European cities, towns and regions at an unprecedented pace. Many of them have made substantial progress in meeting EU environmental protection standards. 29

local authorities in Central and Eastern Europe have already adopted the Charter of European Cities & Towns Towards Sustainability (Aalborg Charter) and hereby made a commitment to engage in a Local Agenda 21 process and join the European Sustainable Cities & Towns Campaign.

III.2 We will strive to bring emerging market economies and steps towards privatisation in line with the principles of sustainability. New ownership patterns, more market competition, new styles of management of the municipal property, and foreign investments occur within our cities. We therefore need to establish framework conditions which ensure that this process will contribute to the development of stable economies, employment, quality of life and social equity whilst at the same time reducing the deterioration of the local and global environment. This will require institutional capacity building, education and training, and the use of a whole range of management instruments giving motivation and incentives to investors to 'go sustainable'.

III.3 We will undertake steps to create more sustainable infrastructures and services such as separate waste collection and processing, local heating networks based on co-generation, sewage treatment plants for the benefit of the whole population, as well as for the benefit of future generations. Sustainability requirements should particularly guide the efforts in the construction sector, this will include the refurbishment of the large pre-fabricated housing estates, where a large part of our population lives. These need to become liveable urban quarters featuring resource-efficient construction and facilities.

III.4. We will strive to stop the emergence of urban sprawl and the increase of road traffic,

leading to massive land use, air pollution, social segregation, and the death of city centres. Spatial planning, the creation of sustainable transport systems and inter-municipal co-operation will need to play a crucial role in this respect. Agricultural and land reforms must be linked to these issues, they should lead away from industrialised agriculture, ensure regionalised food supply of our cities and combat urban sprawl. Effective cooperative management systems for international rivers and lakes need to be established to protect them as ecosystems and common water resource.

- III.5 We will strive to build up democratic societies, to foster citizens' and stakeholders' participation in public decision-making, and to achieve policy integration, openness, transparency and accountability. Within our local administrations, we need to create appropriate structures to deal with this task. At the same time, we request our national governments to set frameworks that encourage such ideas. This should reflect the principle of subsidiarity and the provision of resources.
- III.6 We pledge our commitment to international partnership and cooperation between cities and regions. Those of us, which are not yet participating in the European Sustainable Cities & Towns Campaign, will seek to join the Campaign through the adoption of the Aalborg Charter. We also will seek to form and join international networks. East-East, East-West and North-South cooperation, mutual support and sharing of resources will be essential for our move forward towards sustainable development.
- III.7 Local Agenda 21 processes will give us the opportunity to develop a vision and long-term action plan towards sustainability which is based on, and involves the whole community. Local Agenda 21 should also strive to create accountable sustainability policies, and to monitor their implementation. Apart from Local Agenda 21, we should use the whole range of tools for local sustainable development, as being described in the 'Sustainable Cities Report', the Lisbon Action Plan of the European Sustainable Cities & Towns Campaign and the European Local Agenda 21 Planning Guide, to achieve progress.
- III.8 We emphasise the role of the young generation for building up our „new societies“. We therefore consider appropriate education as essential for preparing a new generation for mastering the tasks ahead.
- III.9 The adoption of European Union environmental legislation will provide us with opportunities to foster steps towards sustainability. We shall proactively use the

assistance offered by the European Commission to prepare our communities for the desired accession of our countries to the EU. In particular, we will work in partnership with the European Union to develop long-term strategies for sustainability.

IV OUR MESSAGE TO NATIONAL PARLIAMENTS AND GOVERNMENTS IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

- IV.1 We, local communities and municipalities and their associations in Central and Eastern Europe, call upon our national parliaments to ensure a system of governance that guarantees local self-government and allocates powers and resources according to the principle of subsidiarity. Cities can make a crucial contribution to the sustainable development of democracy, society and economy. In order to effectively fulfil these functions local government needs to be given its own revenue basis.
- IV.2 We ask our national governments to use the experience and insight of cities in designing and implementing national sustainable development strategies. We ask parliaments to make resources available to support local sustainable development projects, and to support national and regional networks of cities in their coordinating and capacity-building role.
- IV.3 We expect our governments to widely publicise the rights of citizens according to the *Aarhus Convention*.

V OUR MESSAGE TO THE „WEST“

- V.1 We, local communities and municipalities and their associations in Central and Eastern Europe, appreciate support received from governments, local authorities, non-governmental organisations, foundations and other organisations. This helped to build a basic capacity to meet the challenges of sustainable development. We continue to need support in the future.
- V.2 Western support is most welcome and effective when there is mutual exchange rather than a mere West-East transfer. We need to use the experiences of the West as a source of insight to set and achieve our own objectives and to develop capacity for self-management. Otherwise the mere call for compliance might not lead to effective actions.
- V.3 We invite Western municipalities to open themselves to increased bilateral and multilateral cooperation. We would like to work together in linking up actively with

the European Sustainable Cities & Towns Campaign, its coordinating networks

and their support projects.

V.4 In this regard we would like to see the Sustainable Cities Award for Central and Eastern Europe encourage local authorities by awarding initiative, creativity, innovation and substantial progress towards compliance with European Union standards.

VI OUR MESSAGE TO THE EUROPEAN UNION

VI.1 We, local communities and municipalities and their associations in Central and Eastern Europe, express our sincere wish that the European Parliament, the European Council and the European Commission encourage and support strong local self-government in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

VI.2 We ask the European institutions to support the development of local management capacity through training and exchange of experiences.

VI.3 We ask the European Commission to support the training of municipal officials and other stakeholders on the environmental *aquis communautaire* and its implications. Local governments can already accelerate the harmonisation process by creating management structures and capacity to implement and enforce EU-required legislation.

VI.4 We ask the European Commission to recognise the crucial role of local authorities in implementing and enforcing environmental law in the accession countries and to pay due recognition to this in the work of informal network for the Implementation and Enforcement of Environmental Law in the ten accession countries of Central and Eastern Europe (AC-IMPEL).

VI.5 We call upon the European Commission to strengthen its commitment and provide specific support to actively involve local authorities of Central and Eastern Europe in the European Sustainable Cities & Towns Campaign.

Editorial amendment:

The following statement proposed by the Roundtable on Cultural Heritage and Sustainable Urban Development could not be included in the Sofia Statement before its adoption. It is proposed that it will be regarded as an informal amendment to Section III:

We recognise that sustainable development is inseparable from the conservation of cultural heritage and its harmonious use for the attainment of a better quality of life and economic development.