



**Contribution of the Union of Socialist Local and Regional Representatives in Europe (USLRRE)
to the Fundamental Programme of the PES**

Strong Cities and Municipalities

Municipalities and regions are the pillars of European democracy and society. They conform and organise the immediate living environment of people and at a time of rampant globalization, they preserve the local and regional identity as well as the cultural diversity of Europe. In this sense, they are a fundamental contribution to the development of societies in Europe, to the daily lives of people and to the unification of Europe. Local authorities have a special role to play when it comes to facing up to the challenges of our times.

The strength of local authorities is that they can react in a flexible way to the local and regional specificities. They are able to come up with a range of possible solutions to respond to a range of challenges. Decentralised self-regulation however requires of the cities, municipalities and regions involved that they also take up their responsibilities and show their commitment. Local self-governance serves the already existing strengths and creativity of people at local level. Europe needs these decentralised structures in order to make the most of its innovation potential and cultural diversity to the benefit of people. The big strength of Europe lies in its diversity of municipalities and regions. We should therefore call for as much Europe as necessary, and as much local, regional and national self-governance as possible.

In view of the different tasks that local and regional authorities carry out, they must have sufficient capacity to act and appropriate funding available for them to do their job. According to the subsidiarity principle, these tasks should be carried out, if possible, by the smaller unit and in a decentralised manner. This corresponds to the principle of local government in public affairs, which is not only laid down in the Lisbon Treaty but also in the European Charter of Local Self-Government of the Council of Europe, which all EU Member States endorsed. Local and regional authorities have to be the starting point for achieving important European development targets. Hence, the need for a European strategy to strengthen local and regional self-government.

Fair Economy

Fair and sustainable growth in a social Europe can only be achieved with strong municipalities, cities and regions. The 95,000 local and regional authorities of the European Union represent one third of public expenditure and more than two-thirds of public investment expenditure. Through their investments, their economic promotion and innovative infrastructure policies they can give a strong impulse for sustainable growth and make an important contribution to the safeguarding of jobs and the creation of new employment. They thus also act as stabilisers that counter economic crises. The fact that they are closer to the citizens is fundamental for their efficiency and for social justice.

They also play an important role in climate and environmental protection. In addition to the different tasks that local authorities carry out in the field of environmental policy, many local authorities and regions have been active in the fight against climate change for a long time. They have taken a variety of measures especially towards producing and using renewable energy, they have focused on making buildings more energy-efficient and have promoted the use of more environmentally-friendly means of transport. Local and regional authorities also have the possibility to support the development of sustainable housing and transport at regional level, which brings about a lot of opportunities in the fight against climate change and for environmental protection. Among these are mobility concepts in order to avoid traffic and to move to environmentally-friendly means of transport, such as local public transport. Local authorities know best how necessary it is to make sure that provisions for the protection of climate and for a sustainable environmental policy are consistent with local framework conditions. In view of this and of the different situations in the Member States, the 'one-size-fit-all' solutions proposed by the EU are not a meaningful option.

In order to efficiently counter the dangers of rampant climate change, it is necessary to have an integrated approach based on cooperation and the coordination between EU policies and measures and the national, regional and local levels.

The safeguard and improvement of services of general interest are a fundamental prerequisite for the creation of a social Europe. These services, which pertain to the public welfare, range from water and energy distribution and public transport to such areas as welfare, schools, health, housing, culture as well as the care of people in difficult situations and other social services of general interest.

One of the tasks of local and regional authorities is to provide citizens with equal and non-discriminatory access to a comprehensive range of high-quality and affordable services and goods that are necessary to them. These services guarantee the good functioning of public life, the necessary infrastructure, and the competitiveness of the economy and they contribute to preserving the natural living conditions for future generations. Services of general interest are an important basis for the development of the social and territorial cohesion of the EU and for job creation. They are a decisive factor to guarantee the social participation of people. It is essential to secure basic service provision to the population particularly in structurally weaker rural areas, i.e. equip them with the minimum infrastructure and offer basic goods and services. Citizens perceive any limitation on the capacity of local and regional authorities to take action to ensure the provision of services in the general interest as a threat to their basic way of living.

In accordance with the principle of subsidiarity, and respecting local and regional autonomy, as established by the Treaty of Lisbon, the decision as to whether and how local authorities provide a public service, or entrust this provision to a third party, must rest with the same local authorities, for it is they who are best placed to know what suits their citizens. But what is important is that these services pertaining to the general welfare should be provided to the population in a transparent way and under public supervision.

Equal Societies

Local and regional authorities play an important role in making sure that all citizens take part in the societal, economic and cultural life of the community on the basis of the principle of solidarity.

Local authorities are committed to fighting poverty and to helping people overcome practical cases of distress. In addition, they carry out an active social policy, for instance by offering a wide range of quality services in the field of care and education for children and youth, of integration of migrants, of employment and improved qualifications, culture, sports, leisure activities and health. It is therefore essential that citizens are encouraged to interact with one another, take charge of their own lives and take up their responsibilities.

A socialist local government policy is based on the fundamental values of freedom, justice and solidarity. It has the responsibility of providing everyone with an opportunity to live a life in dignity. Therefore, it is essential to create the framework conditions to guarantee economic prosperity, cultural diversity and social cohesion. One of the main challenges of a socialist local government policy is to reinforce social cohesion in society. We want all people to have a fair chance to take part in the life of the community.

The demographic change will lead to a transformed relationship between the age groups in our municipalities and regions. The ageing section of the population is growing and this trend will become much more pronounced in the forthcoming centuries. Our society is increasingly dependent upon the different generations working and living together in harmony. Greater importance will be attached to solidarity between the generations, mutual understanding and tolerance for the generations living together. In this case the increasing life expectancies are evidence of the successful march of progress. The years that people gain mean that the vast majority of the population lead more active and healthier lives.

We Socialists view solidarity between the generations as a kind of socio-political role model, in which both forward-looking policies relating to families, children and young people as well as a modern senior citizens' policy can be combined with one another. The quality of life in local authorities can be improved and important resources to overcome the challenges that go hand in hand with the process of demographic change can be gained by increasing solidarity between the generations.

The local level is an important player when it comes to overcoming the challenges of the demographic change in Europe. Local authorities can make an important contribution to a socially just demographic change in Europe because they are familiar with local conditions and issues, close to citizens, and they provide local and regional organisation and services.

The integration of migrants is one of the most important tasks our societies and political representatives are confronted with. It aims at allowing migrants to take equal part in the economic, societal, political and cultural life of the community while respecting everyone's cultural specificity. Integration is a horizontal part of every political field, be it education, youth, senior or urban development policy for a social city.

We socialists will also in future aim to provide equal living conditions in all parts of Europe. The regions of Europe have developed very differently from an economic and demographic point of view and consequently, social inequalities between regions and within regions and communities will increase. It is therefore essential that measures launched by local authorities for neighbourhoods and communities with more serious social, economic and infrastructural problems should succeed in order to preserve the future perspectives and opportunities of people living there.

European cohesion policies to promote structurally weak urban neighbourhoods and rural areas with socio-economic difficulties contribute significantly to European territorial and social cohesion. Local and regional authorities should be more involved as EU partners than they have been until now, in the preparation and implementation of structural policy measures. Due to their awareness of local conditions and issues, they can contribute significantly to increasing the effectiveness of structural policy measures.

Territorial diversity should be even more taken into account in European cohesion policy. Hence, we support a European spatial development policy that combines the development of a poly-centric urban system with a fair urban/rural balance, equal access to infrastructure and knowledge, and sustainable development to protect the environment and cultural heritage.

A Just World

A central concern of socialists is social and fair globalisation, so that all humans on earth stand to benefit. We, Socialists, are convinced that we can secure lasting peace by bringing about justice and fighting global poverty. The livelihood of people in developing countries and the environmental, economical and social resources have to be preserved and improved upon for the benefit of all humans and all generations. For this reason, we have always considered development cooperation to be an important pillar of our policy and we have promoted this. Europe's Socialists commit themselves to the objectives of global solidarity and sustainability for the purposes of the Millennium Development Goals and of the Agenda 21.

Many local authorities in Europe work in the field of cooperation to development in very different ways. They support local authorities and projects outside of Europe, by providing them for instance with technical know-how, by supporting them in building and improving their administrations or by bringing natural disaster relief – as in the case of the Tsunami. In this way, European local authorities contribute to the Millennium Development Goals.

Local and regional authorities can contribute significantly to the Millennium Development Goals through fair public procurement. Socially and environmentally responsible procurement of goods and services for administrations, schools, hospitals, nursery schools and events, as well as the use of energy-saving vehicles and energy-efficient measures, are very much in tune with the Millennium Development Goals; they promote humane working conditions and environmental sustainability.

Inter-cultural competence is a basic precondition to successful integration. Our local authorities are homes to people who have joined us from different nations. Many of these migrants come from developing or emerging countries and they are committed to improving the living conditions in their countries of origin. Apart from such commitment, many migrants are also active in their local communities in many different fields: in education, schools, clubs and organisations. In most cases, the potential of these people is insufficiently used at the local level. Migrants should be actively drawn in. To ensure active migrant participation at local level, firstly, the qualifications acquired in the

migrants' countries of origin should be recognised, e.g. through a quick recognition procedure for training qualifications and, secondly, migrants who need qualifications and practical assistance should receive these. Moreover, there is great potential for local development cooperation in local authorities working together with migrant clubs and organisations.

Active Democracy

Socialist local policies mediate between the various individual interests and population groups and bring together the forces in society needed to jointly and solve future-oriented questions. We especially defend the rights of those less able to express themselves in modern civil society. It is our goal to set up a communication structure that improves the dialogue with citizens and between the generations and genders. The aim should be to identify genuine opportunities for action, dialogue and active integration of citizens from a European perspective as well.

Democracy thrives on citizen participation. Citizen involvement is necessary and desirable. A strong local self-government allows for a greater degree of participation by the citizens and therefore contributes to the democratisation of Europe. The representative democracy model remains the starting point for an improvement of the participation of the people. According to this model, citizens send their representatives to the corresponding bodies at the various levels of public authority: the European Parliament, national parliaments and representations at regional and local level.

Foreign co-citizens should also be incorporated into the political decision-making process at local level. This will not only facilitate their integration, but will also encourage and promote the growing together of nations and nationalities. The introduction of the right to vote in local government elections for EU nationals living abroad is welcomed as a first step in the right direction. In the future all foreigners should be granted the right to vote at the local level within the limits of national legislation.

However, democracy is not only limited to formal electoral procedures. The citizen's right to exert influence on the shaping of policy can and must be made possible in other forms as well. The objective is to make use of the knowledge and the commitment of the people, who are themselves directly affected by the political and administrative decisions, to come to appropriate solutions. In this process the concepts of general interest and sustainable development will have to be identified.

Socialist local policies support plebiscitary forms of decision-taking processes, such as petitions for a referendum and public decisions. They are an important complement to representative democracy and so are the transparency of policies and administrative actions. Open government means for us genuine openness towards the interests of citizens, as well as obstacle-free and complete access to government information. Both are necessary prerequisites for an active democracy and a spirited civil society.

A modern European society requires the commitment of citizens at large. Politics and local government cannot solve all the problems by themselves. Taking up one's own responsibilities, interacting in daily life, supporting and helping one another, the variety of services offered by cooperatives and other societies who rely on the commitment of the volunteers who work for them. All this makes up the core of civil society, in which a personal fulfilment and solidarity reinforce one another.

To reinforce local democracy and citizens' participation, special attention should be given to underprivileged groups of society. For our own future's sake, the potential of young people should be better taken into account in the local government's policies. By improving and widening the possibilities to learn at school or through life-long learning, people can get a better grip of present political and societal issues and therefore, our fellow citizens will be more able and more encouraged to become politically active.

In local representative democracy honorary local politicians defend the citizens' interests. They are committed to the common good. This democratic tradition of local representation is the root of democratic involvement and of the decision-making structure. Honorary work in local parliaments is even an essential part of active civil society. It is for this reason that the basic working conditions of local elected representatives must be improved.

A stronger local participation in the European decision-making process is a fundamental prerequisite to the so often proclaimed 'Citizens' Europe'. Because of their knowledge of local conditions and problems, local authorities can bring an important contribution to the drafting and implementation of European legislation and provisions. Their expertise makes them the most reliable partners in order to define policies that are close to the citizens but also, for example, to draft and implement structural policies. They are in better position to assess if draft legislation and projects actually fit the needs of people in their immediate living environment.

Within the context of the tradition of municipal twinning, the cities and towns of Europe bring the citizens and the young of different countries together by setting up cross-border meetings and exchanges, thus promoting European rapprochement. It is for this reason that we, socialists, take it upon ourselves to strive that the framework conditions be expanded, and cooperation and partnership between towns promoted.

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