



“Expectations to Modern Local Democracy”

ERB Conference
Ronneby Brunn, 2 December 2002

Intervention by
the Commissioner of the CBSS
H. E. Ms. Helle Degn

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Honourable Chairperson,
Participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to thank the organisers for inviting me to address the Euroregion Baltic Conference here in Ronneby and the Regional Council in Kalmar County for hosting us.

Let me start my presentation with raising a few questions for considerations, which come to my mind about our common expectations to modern local democracy.

Firstly, how do we measure good and modern local democracy? The answer to this question should be considered from a number of angles: from the point of view of the citizens, the businesses, and the international society.

Local governance is in its essence a service - a service for the needs and benefit of local citizens. One good way to receive feedback from the citizens is to make use of opinion polls, which could keep up the knowledge, awareness and the important dialogue between the authorities and the citizens. Various opinion polls, where citizens have been asked about their expectations, single out the key values of local authorities. The most often mentioned are that people expect to be well served by their local democratic institutions, they demand more public reflectiveness, more openness and willingness to dialogue on the types of service. They need to feel respected, and there must be a common confidence.

From the point of view of citizens, the successful local governance is, not surprisingly, measured against the perception of level of corruption. Related to that is the amount of bureaucracy people encounter in their dealings with local authorities - their main service providers. If they are constantly caught in the machinery of bureaucracy, then the evaluation of their local governance tends to be rather low. The quality of the result depends on the quality of the decision-making process, which means fairness, transparency, correctness, trustworthiness, and last but not least, the inclusion of citizens as the consumers of democracy. Democratic deficit is also serious obstacle to modern democracy on local level.

From the point of view of business, the local governance is measured on how well it can facilitate the investments to the area. On the one hand, it means how the small and medium sized enterprises see the local government functioning; on the other, it also reflects in what conditions the local government has created for the successful professional people to come to the area. This includes the network of schools, hospitals, the functioning of local police, transparency, accountability and so on, without which the business also could neither want to settle nor to prosper for the common good.

From the point of view of the international society, the local democracy is measured by the degree the citizens are involved in the governance. What we need here is not the repetition of the Soviet system or the US system, but rather we have to create our own European model built around the citizen in our region.

Allow me in this context to quote Mr Andreas Gross and Mr Bruno Kaufmann in their Country Index on Citizenlawmaking 2002.¹ They have truly remarked that - "improving the performance and optimising the quality of direct democracy is not an end in itself. Its significance extends far beyond the democratisation of local, regional and national democracy. For only highly motivated and self-assured citizens, who have a positive experience of politics in the local, regional and national contexts, will have the courage and the self-confidence to demand the introduction of direct democratic elements where they are most needed" - in relation to a European co-operation, I would say.

The local democracy has by no means been a strange concept in the European Union. The EU Treaty stipulates as one of the basic principles of the Union - the subsidiarity, which is intended to ensure that decisions are taken as closely as possible to the citizen and that constant checks and balances are made as to whether action at Community level is justified in the light of the possibilities available at national, regional or local level. In the framework of the Intergovernmental Conference launched in February 2000, the Committee of the Regions has asked for the principle of subsidiarity to be amended to also formally recognise the role of local and regional authorities. In addition, the EU Convent is currently working hard on how to guarantee the involvement of citizens in the democratic construction.

The discussion on how to measure the good local governance naturally leads to the question of what needs to be changed to meet the expectations to the modern local democracy.

In this context, I would like to encourage the local authorities to make more use of public opinion polls and surveys made by various national and international institutions and organisations. I think that polls and surveys, such as the ones conducted for example by my Office and the Council of Europe Congress of Local and Regional Authorities (CLRAE) or the EU, could be an integrated part of the development of all modern local democracies. At least, they give certain general guidelines or starting-points that could prove useful when developing your own local authorities.

¹ Country Index on Citizenlawmaking 2002, A Report on Design and Rating of the I & R Requirements and Practices of 32 European States, Initiative & Referendum Institute Europe.

Another good advice is to dialogue more directly with NGOs or consumers' groups or organisations to set up practical solutions understood and respected by the consumers - citizens.

What to change? The modern local democracy is certainly to be transparent. As the objective of developing the local governance is to bring the administration closer to its citizens, it cannot be done without transparency. Equally important is to abide to the rule of law by offering services on an equal footing and not depending on who you know or what you can pay.

From the more practical side, local authorities should continue improving the local structures and investing into the well-functioning infrastructure. This, coupled together with the modern market-oriented management of local affairs, enables the changes to take place and development to go further.

But how to progress from where we have already come today? The pre-condition for progress is the region building and good network of local authorities. On the one hand, this means regional and national co-operation within the country; on the other hand, we also need strong international co-operation between local governments of different countries, as we can see for example within the framework of ERB.

To conclude, please let me shortly point to some of the recommendations given to the local authorities to create a genuine inclusive local democracy. A lot of important and useful work has been conducted by the Council of Europe Congress of Local and Regional Authorities. The country-specific recommendations, which give direct guidelines in the light of the conditions in a particular country, are complemented by recommendations of general nature. The CLRAE recommendations from the year 2002 on the institutional framework of local democracy, on the participation of foreign residents in local public life, on promoting transfrontier co-operation and others are to encourage all local democracies in their development. But also the recommendations from a few years back are equally timely also today, as for example, the recommendation on the financial resources of local authorities in relation to their responsibilities: a litmus test for subsidiarity, from 2000.

In my capacity as the CBSS Commissioner, I also am closely working with these concerns in all of the CBSS Member States. These 11 Member States have entrusted me with the Mandate, which obligates me to support the functioning and development of democratic institutions, in particular concentrating my efforts on democracy at national, regional and local level, good governance, local self-government and so on. My Office has, therefore, been heavily involved in monitoring the situation and development of the local democracy. Several surveys have been conducted on different issues concerning local governments over the past 8 years to monitor the changes that have taken place: including in 1996 the Survey on Rights of Non-Citizens Residing Legally in the Member States of the CBSS was published, and in 1998 Survey on Working Conditions of Elected Members of Local Authorities in the CBSS Member States was published.

In October 2000 the Survey on Local Democracy in all CBSS Member States was completed and represented. It is a descriptive and comparative report reflecting the situation in every CBSS Member State. The survey also contained a number of recommendations in which areas we need to see further improvement in all CBSS countries. Presently, my Office is concluding work on the follow-up to this last survey, which is mainly providing updated information with respect to the recommendations made in the survey, including the recommendations to ratify the Council of Europe Convention on the Participation of Foreigners in Public Life at Local Level; to give voting rights at local elections to foreigners and stateless persons, who have lawful residence in the respective member states, including right to stand for public office; to establish consultative bodies for foreign (non-citizen) residents at local level when the number of foreigners exceeds a certain ratio of the total population of the municipality; to guarantee that the local and regional authorities should ensure that the money received by elected members of local authorities more generally reflects their workload; and to introduce appropriate measures to promote candidates from under-represented segments of the population and to prevent early resignation of local elected representatives through measures such as special training courses, coaching or mentor systems, cross party discussion groups etc.

In addition, I would like to remind you that the importance of modern local democracy is high on the agenda of international financial institutions, such as the World Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the Nordic Investment Bank, the European Investment Bank, which operate in our region and provide investments and aid.

The World Bank, for example, has renewed its assistance strategy and expects a closer working relationship with the local governments which are assuming greater responsibilities for delivering services that have direct impacts on people's daily lives. Also the EBRD practices providing financing directly to a municipal or regional government level. In doing this, they seek the basic conditions to be met, which start most importantly with the requirement of decentralisation of the provision of municipal infrastructure and services. And in September this year I had the opportunity to have an interesting meeting with Mr Jón Sigurdsson, the President of the Nordic Investment Bank, who also specifically emphasized the utmost vital importance of first of all investing in democratic institutions on the local level and guaranteeing their effectiveness in countries seeking financial help from the Nordic Investment Bank, because the local authorities are to be seen as the increasingly more important co-operation partners for investors.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Keeping the abovementioned in mind, let me congratulate you on the achievements in the development towards the modern local democracy in your countries and let me wish you the strength and success in carrying this important process even further.

Thank you.