

Europe Ambition 2030 speech Leo Williams, Director EAPN

Intro

Thanks to organisers – ASVIS, for the opportunity to speak to you today. My name is Leo Williams, I am the Director of the European Anti-Poverty Network, the largest European network of national, regional and local networks, involving anti-poverty NGOs and grassroots groups as well as European Organisations, active in the fight against poverty and social exclusion. I was also the co-founder and Director of Beyond 2015, which was a global civil society campaign of 1500 members in 150 countries aiming to ensure that the process to develop the SDGs were participatory, inclusive and responsive to the voices of those most affected by poverty and injustice.

I've only been with EAPN a couple of months now, so I am giving something of a personal view – and a view which is affected by coming from Brussels, just one day after the 'anniversary' of the Brussels bombing last year. Going past the metro station and through the airport yesterday, the scenes of such destruction last year, gave me pause for thought, and pushed me to reflect about the kind of Europe, the kind of world we want for our kids and our grandkids.

The anniversary of the BB is not the only impetus for such reflections – the Treaty of Rome was signed 60 years ago and has pushed European political leaders to consider our future, or 5 different futures. But these futures are not based on a common vision, a common narrative. And while the 5 futures are important, they are not going to capture the imagination of European citizens throughout the continent... So what is?

The transformative nature of the 2030 agenda –legitimacy

As we hear time and time again, Europe is in crisis. A financial crisis. A political crisis. And let's be clear - these are crises which are made by our global leaders - the unchecked neo-liberal free market model has led us to the crises of today, and current responses are. So is there any wonder there is a subsequent crisis of legitimacy, with many European citizens (especially the +100 million living at risk of poverty and social exclusion) feeling left behind and disillusioned with the European project?

And while EAPN has a history of actively engaging our members in EU overarching policy frameworks and discussions at EU level, the shortfalls in implementation and the low quality of engagement with civil society and people in poverty has left EAPN members, and civil society more widely questioning the usefulness of engaging with such 'grand strategies'. As one participant in our 2016 People Experiencing Poverty meeting highlighted, 'We can't eat paper'.

If there is one plan, one strategy, one framework that I have seen in my lifetime which isn't yet tainted by this question of legitimacy, it is the 2030 agenda and the SDGs – because of the unprecedented levels of participation in their design. This agenda took five years to create, via a High Level Panel, 89 national consultations, dozens of civil society national deliberations, 11 UN led thematic consultations, participatory research in dozens of countries working directly with poor and marginalised people, the Open Working Group, My World (tens of millions of citizens voted on their priorities), countless conferences, and a full intergovernmental negotiation process mobilizing the whole UN membership. Civil society had a seat at every step of the way. People felt listened to. This is the transformative nature of the SDGs – their **legitimacy**. But will our leaders ensure they deliver on its promises? Will they integrate it meaningfully at the national and regional level? How will they ensure that it is a positive force for people and organizations on the ground?

What this legitimacy means for Europe – a way to inspire the continent?

The European Union, and many European countries, played an extremely positive role in the negotiations around the SDGs and promoted several of the most progressive and inclusive concepts and commitments reflected in the 2030 Agenda. And European civil society has been extremely engaged in this process. At a time where we are seeing a crisis of legitimacy of the European project, perhaps the 2030 agenda and the SDGs

represent a way to regain this legitimacy, to inspire European citizens and to carve a pathway to a sustainable and prosperous future together. Let's be honest - many people know about the 2030 agenda and the SDGs, far more than will ever know about Europe 2020. And the SDGs are **visionary, aspirational** and **inspirational** – providing they blueprint to build a Europe, a world of which we can be proud! It is a framework to help inspire and motivate ordinary citizens.

A concrete example of this legitimacy

A couple of weeks ago, I was playing squash in my local gym. When I went in, I saw the 17 SDGs on the big screen at the entrance! This local gym had made a number of pledges related to the SDGs, focusing on their environmental impact, the way they treat their staff etc. In the 6 years I have lived in Brussels, I have never seen a gym, restaurant, coffee shop publicising Europe 2020. This legitimacy is because the 2030 agenda speaks to the real issues faced by people living in poverty in Europe - jobs, health, education, participation, dignity, inequality, social protection - and it has already engaged millions of citizens in the discussions!

The political dimension

And there is an opportunity. Europe 2020, the 10 year strategy from smart sustainable and inclusive growth, comes to an end in less than three years. Instead of thinking about complementarities, Europe needs to start planning for how the SDGs will be implemented in the EU, whether they will replace Europe 2020 in three years' time, and become the overarching policy framework for the EU. And here there is a real risk – if we ignore the SDGs and set up a parallel framework to replace Europe 2020, we risk a duplication of efforts, generating unnecessary burdens on EU, MS and civil society in terms of funding, implementation and monitoring.

On the other hand, if the SDGs are to be taken seriously, we must get the SDGs into the hard, political discussions **now** about beyond 2020 – both the political discussions and the financial discussions. If the next multi annual financial framework does not support the next overarching strategy, the strategy itself will be doomed to failure.

The role of non-state actors

Let's not forget, the primary role here is of state actors. In Europe, we have to remind them of this all the time – our governments negotiated the 2030 agenda, our leaders committed to implementing them at home, not just in poorer countries thousands of miles away. We have real challenges in Europe – poverty levels, rising inequality, lack of participation of people experiencing poverty in decision which affect their lives, Sustainable Consumption and Production, energy, climate change to name just a few.

And fundamentally, this is about **voice**, about **participation** - we hear time and time again that our leaders want a better connection with citizens. Civil society is a great way to do this, but the logical conclusion of this is to take participation seriously – governments need to prioritise participation of people experiencing poverty and their organisations, and recognise the costs of ensuring meaningful participation, at both the European and the national level. And for civil society, this means not just working in the Brussels bubble – it means colleagues working in Brussels, in Rome, in Budapest, in Paris, in Riga, in Stockholm, in Porto, in Madrid, in Bratislava, to remind our leaders of this, to push our leaders to make this a reality, to push this conversation into the difficult spaces, to engage in the financial and political spaces and to keep this on the agenda!

This is possible. Many people and countries in Europe have been suffering from difficult austerity measures for years now. But citizens have been demonstrating solidarity and political engagement and this connection between leaders and people are more needed than ever. Meaningfully integrating the 2030 agenda into our political strategies represents a strong way to build on this connection. Thank you.