

From global to local. Reflections on the UN's Sustainable Development Goals seen from a Danish island community.

By Inga Blom Thomas, Politician, Deputy Mayor of Ærø and UCL student.

First, thank you very much for the invitation to give a speech about the UNs Sustainable Development Goals. I am very honored to be here today.

I will also use the opportunity to thank University College Lillebælt and especially to thank the committee who has worked very hard and diligently to make this conference possible despite all the obstacles corona restrictions have caused. Furthermore, I would also like to thank you for choosing the UNs Sustainable Development Goals as the topic for the conference. We all must become much more aware of what the Goals are about and what we each of us can contribute to achieving the 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

I am convinced that a mentality change is needed on a structural as well as on an individual level to achieve the goals. A conference like this helps raise awareness of the sustainable development goals and helps to make the goals operational. There are no quick fixes to the issues raised in sustainable development that can be solved only by the individual country. If the change is to occur, it must take place on a global, national, and local level. Most of the goals address' daily life matters; therefore, it is highly relevant for a social worker to know and to be aware of the global goals in our social work.

In my speech from global to local, I will give you some reflections on the UNs Sustainable Development goals seen from a municipality perspective and a Danish Island community. I will to a start, provide a short introduction to who I am. As this is an international conference, I will also briefly introduce Denmark and give a presentation of the local community Ærø from which I speak. Followed by a more substantial explanation of the municipal tasks reflected in the global goals with examples from Ærø.

Who am I?

My name is Inga Blom Thomas, I am a UCL student, and I am studying to be a social worker. I am in the process of writing my final bachelor thesis. The topic for my bachelor is about the political decision that all young people in Denmark shall have an education. What does that mean for young people who are not ready or unable to take education on ordinary terms to meet demands to take an education?

Besides being a student, I am employed at Ærø job center and social office, and I work with social worker tasks. I am also a local politician and elected to the municipal council for a local list, and I am the deputy mayor of Ærø. I am married and have eight children. I have lived on Ærø since 2001, and I am, of course, as a politician is very concerned about our local community and in which direction, I would like to see development.

Denmark is divided into 98 independent municipalities, of which Ærø is one of Denmark's smallest. Besides, it is also central for the understanding of Ærø to know that it is an island community.

Denmark: A Nation of Islands

Denmark is, on the whole, a nation of islands. With more than 400 islands and islets of various sizes, around 115 of them are populated. Odense and UCL are located on one of the bigger islands call Funen. In contrast, Ærø is one of the smaller islands in the South Funen archipelago. Most of the islands in Denmark are connected by bridges or tunnels. But on Ærø, we are very proud of being an island with no bridges but connected to 5 different destinations by six ferries. One of the ferries is a passenger ferry serving an island community of 6 people. On Ærø, we think of water as more connecting than dividing due to our old maritime culture.

Ærø: An Island community

Ærø is an independent municipality with a population of 6000, which is equal to about 3 percent of the population in Odense. So, we are a tiny municipality, but it is essential to remember that we have all the same obligations and that we must manage the municipality according to the same legislation as larger municipalities. On Ærø, we have daycare institutions, primary schools, maritime high schools, navigation schools, home care, care centers, hospital, grocery stores, artisans, shipyards, maritime trading, farming, administration, energy office, and much more. Ærø has what it takes to be an independent municipality and an island community where everyday life can be lived. All this to give you an idea of the local island community from which I speak.

Municipal Tasks Reflected in the Sustainable Development Goals

The Danish municipalities are responsible for delivering welfare and developing local communities.

In Denmark, the public sector is highly decentralized and follows the principle of subsidiarity, 'what can be dealt with on a local basis is dealt with locally. Delivering welfare services in collaboration with citizens, mobilizing resources on a local level, and setting the direction for the development of local communities is done at a council level.

In 2007 we had a public-sector structural reform which meant that we went from 271 municipalities to 98. On Ærø, we went from two to one municipality. The municipalities grew larger and adopted more tasks from the regional and the state level.

I will now give you an idea about the municipal tasks reflected in the Sustainable Development goals. And I will in the PowerPoint highlight the relevant goals in relation to the discussed subject.

As a result of the reform, the municipalities took over several activities regarding environmental control such as e.g., protecting live below water and life on land (SDG 14, 15). Adult education (SDG 4), employment policies (SDG 8), specialized social services, including but not limited to fighting poverty, ensuring gender equality, and reducing inequalities (SDG 1,5,10). These new areas of municipal responsibilities add to the list of existing obligations, such as:

Health care including rehabilitation, home care, prevention of abuse, dental care, and promotion of health (SDG 3).

Social services such as care for elderly and disabled, psychiatric treatment, social psychiatry, placement of neglected children, and specialized education (SDG 1, 2, 3, 4, 10).

Employment stimulation targeted businesses as well as unemployed citizens whether or not they are part of an unemployment insurance system (SDG 8).

Integration of refugees and immigrants e.g., through introduction programs that focus on culture, language, and labor market entrance (SDG 1, 8, 10, 16).

Industrial and economic development at both a strategic and an operational level, aiming at stimulating growth (SDG 9, 11, 12).

Labor market involvement regarding the Danish model of flexicurity, active labor market policies, local employment strategies, operation of job centers, and actions based on agreements from the two- and tripartite negotiation system (SDG 8, 16, 17).

Administration and digitalization such as e.g., providing good administrative behavior through transparent and corruption less administration (SDG 16).

Technology and environment; covering supervision, sector planning, and preparation of regulations regarding constructions, roads, transportation, drains, recreational areas, drinking water, waste, and waste-water management (SDG 6, 7, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 17).

Managing the economy of the municipalities, based on local tax impositions, general grants from the state, and a system of financial agreements between the government and Local Government Denmark (SDG 8, 12, 16, 17).

Primary schooling is free of charge and compulsory to everyone within the schooling age (SDG 4, 10).

Childcare available to all citizens in urban as well as rural areas (SDG 5, 10).

The municipalities have no obligations to fulfill the UN's sustainable development goals other than the sub-elements laid down in Danish legislation. Nevertheless, in many respects, the local communities must translate the goals into concrete solutions and efforts. Here, as the local communities' leader, the municipality plays an essential role in leading policies, initiatives, and partnerships that can create positive change. I have tried by listing the many tasks a municipality is responsible for and reflected them in the sustainable development goals to give you an idea that all the goals are relevant for a municipality.

Ærø and the Sustainable Development Goals

A statement from KL – Local Government Denmark, an association and interest organization of all the Danish municipalities, shows that in 2020, 87 of Denmark's 98 municipalities have decided to work with the sustainable development goals. It makes good sense considering the municipal tasks.

Ærø municipality joined the UNs Sustainable Development goals in May 2019. The entire council voted in favor of the decision.

The approach to the decision focused on climate and CO₂, as well as the environment and pollution. The latter arose, among other things, from a local debate in which one of the local grocery stores had decided to abolish the use of plastic bags. The use of these plastic bags is an excellent example of how civil society is an essential player in working with Sustainable Development by showing in action how we can approach and achieve the goals. However, in the motivation for the decision in the council, the social goals were utterly absent. But the final decision states that Ærø municipality agrees with all the 17 sustainable development goals. The municipality will use the global goals in future work in solving the core tasks for the municipality. The goals will be incorporated into the development strategy as well as being the guideline for all departments' plans of action.

On Ærø, we are currently in the process of renewing our municipal plan for comprehensive planning. The plan unites the social interests in land use. It helps to protect the island's nature and environment so that community development can take place on a sustainable basis concerning human living conditions and the projection of animal and plant life. It is thus a plan based on the municipality's physical planning. As something new in our work, the sustainable development goals are now graphically highlighted on the front page of this plan.

We are at the beginning of the process of the initial work of incorporating the sustainable development goals into the strategic position. I look forward to working with the goals aimed at the social area. However, the process has been dramatically affected because the municipality's administration has been fully occupied with corona closure for over a year.

The precautions that have been necessary to take in the area of health, school, and employment, among other things, have been very time-consuming.

We do not yet have a statement or target for what we want to achieve and how we will achieve the goals. As previously shown, many of the core tasks in a municipality are very much in line with the sustainable development goals. Much of what we are already doing can be reflected in the global goals.

Based on our accounts for 2020, which is just passing through the political system, I will give some current, and concrete examples of what we on Ærø are doing that can be reflected in the sustainable development goals.

If we look at the distribution of how the municipality's finances are managed it is clear that the health and social tasks take up a lot of space in the municipal economy.

Many of the tasks we have to solve are tied to the legislation we administer according to. However, there is still room for us, independently in the individual municipalities, to prioritize solutions that make sense for our society.

Let us look at transport and infrastructure. Ferries are inevitably a major and sensitive topic in the local debate, which is very understandable in an island community that is completely dependent on ferries connected to the surrounding world. Nevertheless, something we can gather to be proud of is the electric ferry, Ellen. Ellen entered into service on the route between Søby and Fynshav in august 2019 and is an innovative electric ferry that can sail seven times longer per charge than any other electric ferry globally, making it a role model for future electric ferry operations. The idea of an electric ferry arose on Ærø and Ellen was designed and built by Ærø based businesses in collaboration with the Ærø municipality, EU, and some bigger companies in Denmark and Europe. This is an example that reflects a lot of the sustainable development goals (SDG 7, 8,9, 12, 13, 14, 17).

The health service in Denmark is highly centralized and specialized, and the nearest university hospital from Ærø is in Odense. This means that as a citizen on Ærø, you have to spend about 8 hours for 10 minutes talking to a doctor in Odense. That is why we at Ærø have been working for several years to get virtual consultations so that our vulnerable citizens do not have to travel more than necessary. A positive outcome of the corona is that the pandemic has helped our agenda of virtual consultations on the way. A health example that speaks into good health reduced inequalities, digital infrastructure, and partnerships (SDG 3, 9, 10, 17).

Because we are an island community, we have set aside funds for island support for young people who have to leave the island to take a secondary education elsewhere than Ærø. This is because the

young people on Ærø, in many cases, have to move away from home before they turn 18 and therefore cannot receive educational support from the state. To ensure that all young people from Ærø have the financial opportunity to take education on an equal footing with others, we, therefore, have funds set aside to support. It is an example that speaks both into quality education, reducing inequalities, and no poverty (SDG 1, 4, 10).

Another example is our food service which cooks for care centers and the elderly who cannot cook themselves. Since 2017, Ærø food service has worked to convert production to organic combined to minimize food waste, use of locally produced goods, and less consumption of meat. Foodservice has received a bronze medal and is now close to getting silver in the goal for the conversion. The reorganization has been possible, among other things, due to a passionate leader who takes the lead, political support, and good cooperation with local suppliers and the National Ministry of Food, Agriculture, and Fisheries. The example speaks into zero hunger, good health, responsible, consumption and production, and partnerships (SDG 2, 3, 12, 17).

One last example I want to give is about small jobs on Ærø, based on a request from the job center. The municipal council decided in the previous year to set up a pool of money for small jobs for the unemployed who are furthest away from the labor market and were mainly targeted at young people who may never have had a job. The small job makes it possible to make ordinary employment of up to 10 hours a week in a public workplace. The idea of the small job is to give the unemployed a connection to the labor market. Showing in practice what it means to be part of a community in a workplace and experience the joy of earning your own money. The project has only run one year, so it is too early to say anything about the result. The project's idea speaks into several sustainable development goals such as no poverty, decent work, and reduced inequalities (SDG 1,8, 10). In addition to the small jobs, we have a local community that to a large extent takes social responsibility and many private employers who are very accommodating to work practices.

As a small community surrounded by water and a high degree of social control, we have a significant advantage: we have almost no crime, gang crime, or ghetto problems. However, it can be difficult in our small community if you, as a vulnerable family, are expelled because there is a risk that a preconception of the family can stand in the way of a change for the individual.

How can we as social workers translate the global goals into our daily work?

I think we can do a lot if we are aware of how we, for example, organize social efforts while keeping the global goals in mind. A small example of this could be how an effort for young people to be supported into adulthood is organized. One goal could be helping the young people getting good eating habits following the global goals.

I have talked a lot about the political angle on the global goals seen from a municipality perspective. I think it is highly relevant for social workers in Denmark to be aware of the political agenda in the municipality they work. As a social worker in public service, you will be required to work in a politically controlled organization. We, therefore, have a duty to work following the political decisions made in the council. An awareness of the political agenda in your municipality also provides better opportunities in terms of getting through with financing new social efforts if they can be motivated into the current political agenda.

As I have shown, social tasks take up much space in the municipal economy. They should also fill in concerning the sustainable development goals. However, in the local debate, I still find that climate, energy, and environment are the dominating subjects that are considered most important. I agree that they are essential but essential as well are the social goals. Therefore, we, who are interested in social conditions, have a great task in making these goals visible on an equal footing with the other goals. That is why a conference as this is necessary. My understanding of Sustainable Development is that the goals can only be achieved if we succeed in making all 17 of them go hand in hand, both globally and locally.