

One City Can Make a Big Difference

Secretary General Gino Van Begin is the head of ICLEI, the world's largest international association of local and metropolitan governments dedicated to sustainable development. *urbanDNA* met with him at his office in Bonn, Germany.

Text: Rhea Wessel Photos: Johanna Ruebel

Based in Bonn, ICLEI - Local Governments for Sustainability — operates roughly 130 projects a year in seven project areas that, taken together, help a city become sustainable: the low-carbon city, the resilient city, biodiversity, the resource-efficient city, the green local economy, happy and healthy communities, and smart urban infrastructure. As an independent, non-profit organization, ICLEI is based on the idea that voluntary, local initiatives designed and driven by communities can provide an effective and cost-efficient way to achieve local, national, and global sustainability objectives. ICLEI recently signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Siemens to advance sustainable infrastructure solutions in cities worldwide.

Why is sustainability important to you?

Gino Van Begin: I became interested in sustainability at a very early stage. I was lucky to grow up in a residential area just outside of Brussels, close to the forest. But more than my contact to nature, it was my contact to children from many different nationalities — whose parents worked at international organizations — that shaped my thinking. I began to look at the environment not from a certain locality but from a global perspective, and I think that is what definitely shaped me.

I was studying law in Brussels in 1987 when the European Union received the first mandate for environmental legislation. I was very pleased to help start drafting European environmental law, such as legislation about hazardous waste.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, I had the chance to support countries in the Commonwealth of Independent States in building environmental competences. I went to Russia and worked for seven years in St. Petersburg and Kaliningrad.

I was part of a project in which we advised on how to best use European funding for environmental projects



Supporting local governments:
Secretary General
Gino Van Begin
outside the ICLEI
headquarters in
Bonn, Germany.



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Gino Van Begin, ICLEI Secretary General



and how to implement those projects. For example, many industries in or around St. Petersburg were discharging their emissions directly into the Neva River. The environmental department there wanted to contain that pollution, and we provided technical and administrative support. We also helped St. Petersburg dispose of oily wastewater after bus washes.

How does your work in Russia compare to what you do today?

G. Van Begin: The projects in St. Petersburg consisted of engineering and technical support. At ICLEI, we advise on policy. We help city councils and mayors or governors to understand the needs of the city and to solve them with holistic strategies and integrated approaches. Let's say you need energy in your city. But you also need to reduce poverty and waste. We will work with your city to use waste to produce energy. We also connect leaders, bringing them together to share experiences about concrete projects, and we represent cities at international organizations. When I started at ICLEI, we had seven offices. Now we have 17 offices and 280 staff members. We raise all of our funds ourselves. More than 1,000 cities pay a membership fee, but that income stream only accounts for about 8 percent of our total budget. We've got to find funding for the other 92 percent.

With whom do you work within local governments?

G. Van Begin: In the 1990s, ICLEI often worked with the city heads of environmental departments. Then we saw a shift in the first decade of the 2000s. Increasingly, our contacts were mayors or deputy mayors for energy, the economy, or the environment. Today, sustainability has become a mainstream agenda, and city managers and mayors – top-level decision-makers – are the ones making sure sustainability is part of their program. A lot has changed now that sustainability is seen as a valuable pursuit. But we are not out of

trouble. This planet is not headed down a good path. Yes, we must remain positive and optimistic, but our problems are very urgent.

So many people have tried so many approaches. Why are you optimistic?

G. Van Begin: I am inspired by global action that can be taken at a local level. My experience with projects at ICLEI has shown me that we really can impact behavior. For example, at our World Congress in 2009 in Cape Town, we launched a project for local action for biodiversity. Interested cities pulled together, and ICLEI helped them define action plans for biodiversity to help fight climate change. About 30 cities now have a plan. Another project was focused on revitalizing a neighborhood and reducing traffic in a residential area in Korea – not for one day, but really changing habits for one month. We'll be presenting this project at our next conference, which happens to be in Seoul in 2015. The project targeted a neighborhood in the old part of Suwon, Korea, featuring a castle, winding streets, and a city wall. About 4,000 people live there. Residents agreed to park their cars outside the city quarter for one month and only move about using non-motorized modes of transportation. In return, the mayor promised to plant trees and repair streets. One thing was clear: All the young people – especially the children –

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took ownership of the streets. The community flourished in amazing ways. During the month, the mayor moved his office to the area and NGOs were able to present various projects. The project ended with citizens voting to keep certain roads free of traffic for the long-term. It was really a participatory approach, and the mayor got reelected. We are now discussing with Johannesburg how to do something similar.

Can you tell us about the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Siemens?

G. Van Begin: I wanted to sign an MoU with Siemens because what's changing cities is changing business. For instance, any company that provides drinking water with long-term contracts is affected by developments such as climate change, rapid urban-

ization, and an increased demand for energy for a larger global middle class. More and more people understandably want to have a car and a fridge and clean drinking water. Companies will need to do more than think of their investment as a business. They must keep the entire picture in mind. One contribution we make is the fact that the Montreals of this world are speaking to the Cape Towns and explaining their strategies while the Shanghais are listening. This is changing the way business is done. My goal with the MoU is to have a regular dialog with Siemens on an established platform so we can share ideas on metropolitan solutions. We also envisage concrete pilot projects that address global warming through mitigation or adaptation. ▶

ICLEI and Siemens: Partners for Sustainable Mobility

Many cities pursue policies aimed at shaping urban environments with good air quality and an enhanced quality of life. With the number of commuters set to rise by 40 percent by 2030, sustainable mobility is a means of meeting these policy objectives, and as such forms the focus for a new partnership between ICLEI and Siemens. The partnership combines technical and policy expertise to support this move towards sustainable urban living. Pioneer cities such as Copenhagen and Singapore are taking the lead in implementing sustainable mobility in their cities.

With this partnership, ICLEI and Siemens want to make sure that sustainable mobility solutions become available to other towns and cities within their specific local context through the offering of tailor-made approaches. Sustainable mobility is embedded within the complexity of a city, where all stakeholders have a role to play. By joining forces, ICLEI and Siemens seek to work with cities to harness the interaction between these different stakeholders, to develop supportive framework conditions, and to advise on technological solutions.



Small Pacific islands and low-lying countries like Bangladesh will be among the first affected by rising global temperatures.

How important is technology in metropolitan solutions?

G. Van Begin: Technology is absolutely essential. But I get the impression that cities don't want to hear companies talk about their technical solutions anymore. Problems are no longer singular. They're multifaceted. The mayor of Dar-es-Salaam, for instance, was reelected on his record of building infrastructure, such as hospitals and roads. But the population there may have tripled during the time he was in office. So even with new roads, the city is still just as congested. It is my aim to see companies anticipate these trends and offer not just technology but solutions, and even capacity-building. In the end, cities are demanding industry best practices.

Creativity is surely a big part of it.

G. Van Begin: Definitely. For mobility, one good idea I've seen is to use cable cars as mass transit for informal settlements. In Bogotá, Colombia, for instance, people live in the hills, and these people need to get to the city. In Copenhagen, one out of two commuters cycles to work. Since the cycling paths are congested, Copenhagen is trying to get employers to allow people to work at different times and to provide showers at work. To build a cycling path is not

the creative part anymore. The innovation is in taking it one step further, as Copenhagen did, and working with employers to change behavior. I've also seen great ideas in urban agriculture that cut down on food transportation, such as seafood farming in large vertical basins in a building.

What keeps you up at night, Mr. Van Begin?

G. Van Begin: When I look at the map, I see that some cities just won't exist anymore as the global temperature rises, glaciers melt, and sea levels rise. Some cities will sink underwater. This requires a whole new way of thinking and planning. Imagine that we had to relocate Bonn to another place. How do you plan and execute that?

Which areas will be affected first?

G. Van Begin: The small islands of this world and low-lying countries like Bangladesh. First comes flooding, then problems with drinking water. And on it goes. There's also the problem of the build-up and release of methane gas from thawing permafrost in the Arctic. That is very dangerous; if the methane is released, it will be as if we have done nothing at all about global warming. Cities are trying to get a head start,

particularly by creating a green infrastructure. Some cities will need more trees to provide shade when temperatures rise. This is a much better alternative to air conditioning. Others will need to deal with flooding, perhaps by building water squares, which are plazas that can be used for collecting heavy run-off.

These are situations no one wants to face.

G. Van Begin: That's right, but those scenarios are not science fiction. There's no time to waste. In developing countries and emerging economies, it's incredible to see how fast cities grow. Today, some 3.5 billion people live in urban areas. That's half of the world population today. They'll be having children, so another 3.5 billion people will join our cities in the next 40 years. And they'll live longer.

That means we have 40 years to provide the same amount of water, energy, electricity, houses, jobs, infrastructure, etc. over again, in addition to what we already have today, for these 3.5 billion new people. We have 40 years to do what took us almost 4,000 years to achieve. ■

Rhea Wessel is a freelance writer based in Frankfurt, Germany. Her work has appeared in The New York Times and the Wall Street Journal.

About ICLEI:

- Founded in 1990 at summit of 200 local governments from 43 countries
- World's leading network of over 1,000 cities and towns committed to building a sustainable future
- Helps to make cities sustainable, low-carbon, resilient, and livable
- Focus on the green economy and smart infrastructure
- Next World Congress in Seoul from 8-12 April 2015 for mayors, local governments, NGOs, and others.