

Key message and impressions from the Student Ambassadors at ICLEI World Congress 2021-2022 in Malmö

Our key message is **meaningful inclusion**: *Involve the youth of today early and in the design of a sustainable urban future. Give young people a chance to be part of the dialogue and make our voices heard.*

As Student Ambassadors, we were given the task to be the eyes and ears of the ICLEI World Congress 2021-2022 at The Malmö Summit 11-13 May. We were supposed to reflect on our experiences and address the following questions:

- *What is our new vision of a sustainable city or town? How have we changed our concept and priorities for a sustainable city or town in light of recent hazards and risks, including, but not limited to, the COVID-19 pandemic?*
- *What is needed to realise this new vision? Which obstacles and challenges do we have? How can we ensure this new vision is brought about equitably and includes all persons?*

During the congress, we as Student Ambassadors participated in all the sessions and talked to many people from all over the world about their vision of a sustainable city. In many ways, their answers converged but the answers also differed. It became clear to us that there is no blueprint for a sustainable city that fits everyone and everywhere. What also became apparent, is how that vision has changed in the face of the pandemic. COVID-19 has opened our eyes to social problems such as the right to a home or feelings of loneliness in a city. Indeed, pandemics have historically driven paradigm shifts in urban design. Since COVID-19 interest in digitalization and sustainability has increased and we have found new ways to use street spaces, green areas, and residential areas.

We see this congress as a great starting point for bringing together different knowledge and people sharing success and struggles to learn from each other. We have met many brave and ambitious decision-makers, politicians, activists, planners, non-governmental organisations, private sector leaders, international organisations, and researchers, talking about action and giving examples of how to move forward. We were also happy to see representation from all over the world. This congress has consolidated our belief that cities are the right actors to address the concerns of local citizens and for demanding more political action from national governments as despite the Paris Agreement being negotiated at a national level, cities are predominantly involved in its implementation. We see a commitment to bottom-up approaches, for incorporating communities, and citizens, but also to find more science-based approaches. However, we also saw a need for greater multi-level governance. To our understanding, many expressed a lack of communication between national and local governments. This hinders actions taken by sub national actors and reduces the effectiveness of what can be achieved. To continue on a path with too little communication is not sustainable, and there is a need to find solutions across disciplines, sectors, and levels of government.

1. Reducing Emissions

Reducing emissions was one of the three key focus areas of the congress. During the sessions, we saw evidence of new and innovative technologies, models of collaboration, and approaches to circular economies. Energy efficiency and new technology are at the top of many cities' agendas, to facilitate reaching their climate goals. There is a need for partnerships, collaboration, and innovation and action plans that can link climate emergency declarations to tangible actions. It is not just about switching to renewable energy; it is about diversifying energy sources.

One example of new technology is Google EIE data. Collaboration between the public-private sector is one approach for cities, and particularly intermediary cities, to advance climate agendas, and we heard an emphasis on this for accelerating climate action in cities. Such innovations fit well with the city of Malmö's aim to map and generate data for its urban flows. On the other hand, a general expectation of having new inventions as quick fixes to problems of the present and the future can be sensed. E.ON "ectogrid" is another example of innovation. The ectogrid is composed of the same components as conventional energy solutions but the difference lies in the approach to combining them. A new configuration that allows flexibility and goes further to achieve real benefits is needed because currently non-renewable energies fuel the development of renewable energies. Collaboration with the private sector has been tried in for example the City of Barcelona, where Energy Service Companies (ESCOs) have been leveraged to achieve the city's emission reduction targets. Reflections on how to decarbonize the energy grid include an emphasis on a more efficient, equitable electric grid.

Reflections:

- *We would like to see evidence of how learning from these partnerships has been gained and how successful models can be replicated in other cities.*
- *We need to rethink conventional systems, change settings that are obsolete, or simply understand that some systems are more complex.*

2. Resilience and Health in Harmony with Nature

The second key theme of the congress was resilience and health. Health equality in communities is a challenge, and something governments across the world are struggling with. However, the key to achieving this is through the empowerment and involvement of local communities. A specific struggle in reaching equal health is the four-year turnover of politicians. Four years is usually too short for health initiatives to show impact. The role of nature-based solutions (NBS) was discussed in a session about coastal cities and their struggles to become resilient. For example, the City of Cape Town emphasised how important the coastline is for the city's GDP whilst the city of Tallinn together with a representative from the Philippines highlighted how nature-based solutions (NBS), help conserve and increase biodiversity. For example, through a restoration project of Mangrove forests in the Philippines, the fish stock has increased as a result. However, one of the biggest issues highlighted was a lack of finances and cities have found it hard to engage investors since NBS often take a longer time to pay off financially in comparison to hard infrastructure solutions. Access to finances was not only discussed in relation to NBS during the three days of the congress. Rather, this seems to be an issue that many cities relate to and struggle with. What concerned us as student ambassadors, was that during the congress we could see a rise in the power amassed by the private sector. Technology seems to be a field receiving waves of investment, and technological solutions can do good for sustainability. A business model for nature, and for conserving or reintroducing biodiversity looks like it is harder to find. Nature is not a technological quick fix, instead, we need to re-learn how to introduce it in our cities. The Malmö summit has shown a great interest in partnerships and wanting to share learning.

Reflections:

- *We believe that through the involvement of local communities, it is possible for citizens and locals to work with politicians to continue to implement sustainable initiatives.*
- *We still see a huge gap when it comes to financing sustainable solutions in cities globally, but it is especially in the global South.*
- *We see this is an issue that deserves more attention and there is a need for further discussions on how this can be addressed on a systemic level.*

3. Equity

The final themes focused on equitable urban development. There seems to be a general consensus that current development has to be people-centred and social equity must go hand in hand with other city development goals. However, we still thought that equity was under-addressed in many ways during the congress. For equity to be promoted in cities there is a clear need to systemise approaches to including vulnerable groups and communities. Evidence of cities taking a learning stance for example in Olympia shows that cities are trialling new approaches to some success. However, the climate crisis is also a social crisis, and a clear need to put people at the centre of policies to avoid maladaptive approaches. Best practices from Vitoria-Gasteiz, Merida, and La Estrella (Antioquia) shows that co-creation and emphasis on data are needed to create climate secure decisions. Without this focus, climate policies can inadvertently damage vulnerable populations. For example, taxes are one approach to encourage divestment from fossil fuels, but prior to doing so we need to cushion poorer populations, or better, make vulnerable homes more energy efficient. What we learned during the congress is that data can bring an equal foundation for our planning. The work on localising the SDGs could be one way to link social and climate issues and ensure monitoring is in place.

In the global South, the question of equity is a much bigger challenge than in the global North. That gap is something everyone needs to participate in to reduce. It may be hard to think of equity on a global level because our conditions are so different. Perhaps the solution is that we should be better at pointing out the huge gap in society and talk more about it on a global level. When social sustainability is in phase with the ecological system, we can move forward to reduce climate change at a much higher rate. Decision makers should put more pressure on banks so they can offer better loans for cities to transit and become more sustainable. Together we can build a more equitable finance system. Transparent approaches to data can also help to visualise our knowledge gaps and identify areas for further research. We need to share our knowledge and resources with countries and cities that need to transition into sustainability.

Finally, we heard good examples of how to invest in soft solutions and the payoffs of doing them. For example, better schools for children have in specific examples increased children's grades by 40%. Another example is flexible business models, which can increase local businesses to establish themselves in the cities and invest in young labour ensuring a future in the labour market. We also heard good examples of how to cooperate and involve young people in the decision-making process in different ways. Most of them were from the age of 13 to 30 years old. Even the youngest children can contribute with thoughts about our environment that adults perhaps cannot grasp.

Reflections:

- *We were missing the bigger discourse about the differential impact of climate change which is and will be much greater for some parts of this world, especially the global South.*
- *We saw that their need for adaptation is thus much greater yet often the financing is not there to implement adaptation plans. As a result, next to representation we also need earnest pledges of partnership.*
- *We question why we do not include even the youngest children in the decision-making process of cities?*

In addition to attending the congress itself, we also attended as hosts for the mobile workshops:

The Mobile Workshops

1. Urban Food - Through this workshop, we learned that with internal support, project engagement, a lot of dialogue, and network, more projects like Botildenborg can be created. In an old orphanage, Lena Friblick has created an oasis that not only has urban farming but creates job opportunities, a social net, education, and an incubator for new ideas. If the commitment of the municipality is there, unused sites can become a testbed for urban farming. Furthermore, we heard how programs like the organic school food system and other interesting projects are implemented.



2. Net Zero - The second workshop made a number of stops around Malmö. The first stop was Sege Park, to see innovative solutions such as electric vehicle charging, solar cells, rainwater recycling, and smart solutions to optimise energy flows. Other stops included the Elinegård district, to see cooperation and joint work between various Malmö city administrations, architects, and landscape architects. The fourth location we visited was the terrace at Hyllie, which is the first climate-neutral office building that aims to achieve net-zero carbon dioxide emissions from its own operations by 2045. Then finally in Lindängen, we witnessed the need for innovation since much of the climate impact of a building comes from the construction process and construction materials.



3. A City for All - The participants were happy to walk around Malmö and be able to *feel the city* in its many different environments. They valued the vibrance and liveability of the city. The attitude of the municipality towards green infrastructure, like managing of trees and water in the city was impressive. The participants recognize their own challenges and how they can manage them through small interventions. Many cities do not have what Malmö has, which is clean streets, tulips, and flowerbeds paid for by the municipality, bike lanes and pedestrian lanes, and less space for cars.



4. Community Participation - Workshop four took participants to Lindängen, a neighbourhood in the south of Malmö. The neighbourhood has been characterised as being socioeconomically disadvantaged with high rates of unemployment. The focus of the mobile workshop was on the work of civil society actors in the neighbourhood on resilience, community building, health literacy, co-creation, and participatory research. Participants who stated they came to see the frontline of Malmö's challenges were impressed by the transformation of the neighbourhood as they could see first-hand the success and learning of community participation.



5. Partnerships for Socio-economic Improvements and Lasting Change - We were welcomed to the office of BID Sofielund, an organisation activating community engagement through partnership. The many voices of Sofielund were heard including property owners, local businesses, an energy company, researchers, an art-network, a civil-service employee, a police officer, and a municipal politician. As one local stakeholder said "*Teamwork has led to empowerment among those who live here*". We also visited "Naturmolnet", a place for meeting, playing, gardening, and engaging in the community, created mainly by local children as well as other stakeholders through the BID process. The workshop gave insight and recognition to creative and concrete activities for working with the community.



6. Designing Streets for Active Mobility - The mobility workshop consisted of cycling around Malmö to visit different places to see the city's work with sustainable mobility. There were five stops during the tour which showed examples of mobility infrastructure such as bus stops and mobility hubs, although the main focus was the bicycle infrastructure. Throughout the whole workshop, the participants were interested in potential conflicts between pedestrians and cyclists. The workshop was very practical and aspects such as transport justice and affordability were not discussed to the same extent. The workshop was well received by the participants, and many appreciated that the bike tour provided them with the opportunity to see and explore the city of Malmö.



7. Energy System Transformation - Hyllie - The workshop visited Kretseum centre where some lectures and fruitful discussions from E.ON, MKB, and the City of Malmö over *fika*. We then visited the water park, and infrastructure across Hyllie to discuss their energy systems and solutions. The lectures focused on the smart grid system and the city's vision towards 100% sustainable energy consumption. During the tour, we learned about Hyllie's pioneer social housing project, the water park, and a number of energy production units such as solar panels. Participants asked many questions and had a deep discussion about the role demonstrative elements play in raising community awareness about their use of energy resources throughout the year. The participant feedback was very positive.



8. Learning from the Sea - This mobile workshop took place at Naturum Öresund which is financed by the City of Malmö. It is located at Malmö's beach, Ribersborg, just next to the sea. The visit was arranged like a regular visit would look like for one of the many school classes that the centre hosts every year. Many of the discussions among the participants revolved around the Malmö area, how the centre teaches school classes, who else benefits from the centre, and if any type of research is being conducted within the centre. Participants enjoyed learning about the sea and the hands-on approach.



9. Social Enterprises and the Inclusive and Circular City - The mobile workshop took place at Yalla Trappan and Matmissionen. Yalla Trappan is a work integration social enterprise and women's cooperative that is run by a non-profit association in Rosengård in Malmö. Matmissionen is a social food store and that does good for both people and the environment. At the end of the visit, many expressed their curiosity about the vulnerable groups in Malmö and it raised questions about social exclusion and health inequalities. Moreover, the participants were discussing implementation and lessons for their cities.



10. Sustainable Neighbourhood Regeneration - This workshop introduced participants to the Eco-City Augustenborg. In the late 1990's the neighbourhood was refurbished with a high density of blue-green-grey and nature-based solutions to mitigate flood risk. When Malmö suffered a major flood in 2014, Augustenborg withstood the event without damage, thanks to its sustainable open stormwater management system. After a short presentation about the area's history, the participants took a tour, exploring green roofs, permeable parking spots, open stormwater trenches, urban gardening lots, and much more. The shown solutions not only retain stormwater and slow down runoff but also give the area a lush green aesthetic the participants enjoyed.



11. Sustainable Transformation of Industrial Harbour Areas - The workshop introduced the history of Malmö's transformation from an industrial city to the diverse current situation, the visit presented Bo01 and its emblematic position as part of the city's transformation and one of the most reputable Swedish models for sustainable urban planning. The social sustainability is still an important role model. Questions regarding construction, management, and accessibility were raised. Some visitors realised how much we have developed in the last 20 years in e.g energy efficiency standards applied for Bo01 and current standards implemented in new areas of the city, like e.g Nyhamnen that will be transformed in the coming years. Participants were impressed and excited about future developments.



12. Malmö Circular Resource Management - The Malmö-based companies SYSAV and VA SYD are both key stakeholders in the work towards a circular economy. Both share the core idea that waste is not waste but a resource. The highlight for many participants was the visit to the world's first automatic large-scale textile sorting plant, Siptex, which sorts textiles using near-infra-red light. The sorted textiles are either transformed into new threads or used in the furniture and housing sectors. Siptex is a step towards a circular flow of textile materials and opening a previously unattractive market. Participants raised cost as an issue and the need to lower our environmental footprint.



13. Urban Design for the Sharing Economy - The mobile workshop introduced the participants to the new development of Sege Park in Malmö. This neighbourhood, which will be finalised in 2026, will be a future model for living sustainably in the city: It facilitates the residents in reducing their CO2 emissions. The participants got the chance to talk to different developers and ask about challenges and opportunities. In the end, the participants were quizzed for the knowledge they had gained, and the lucky winners won extra *fika*.





Aline Regnell - Lund University
Alp Kadioglu - Malmö University
Carin Andersson - Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences
Ghada Ahmed Mahmoud Shaaban - Lund University
Illia Tsarenko - Malmö University
Jamila Gysin - Lund University
Linda Lemheden - Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences
Louise Uddenäs - Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences
Minja Sillanpää - Lund University
Mutaz Alabtah - Lund University
Philipp Westhauser - Lund University
Sofia Ritthammer - Lund University
Thomas Norman - Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences
Vinícius Ferreira de Oliveira - Lund University
Wendy del Carmen Hernandez Madrigal - Lund University
William Lewis - Lund University