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March 16, 2023

Distinguished participants of the 2023 ESDN Conference,

In 2014, the parliament and government of the autonomous Åland Islands decided to jointly pursue total sustainability. The immediate question was of course, how? We quickly realized that our goal would require a fundamental transformation of our society, of how we live, work, produce and consume.

With this realization we also understood that the only way to succeed was to broadly involve whole of society in the decision-making process. Without commitment from individual citizens, the civil society organisations, business, public agencies and politicians we could only achieve incremental change, not the transformation that is needed.

From the local to the global, we face challenges in a world that feels increasingly unpredictable. The rapidly unfolding climate crisis, the immense biodiversity loss, security issues, the high levels of inequality, and weakening democratic institutions are defining issues of our time and requires resolute responses.

The UN 2030 Agenda is a global milestone effort for addressing the challenges. It is a uniting force, supporting international cooperation and partnership. But halfway to 2030, we can state that the 2030 Agenda does not have enough impact in real politics.

Something needs to be added. What is needed is nothing short of a fundamental cultural transformation, shifting away from a culture valuing material consumption into societies focusing on human well-being and respect for planetary boundaries. Such a cultural transformation should rest on core concepts of sustainability, which means an agreed scientific understanding of what sustainability entails.

As the SDGs are focused on solving global challenges, they also present an opportunity to go deeper and take a direct approach to what it is we want to achieve beyond the 2030 Agenda. That could be, to achieve the flourishing of every individual. A civilisation yet to be seen.

Flourishing goes beyond material well-being and happiness. It encompasses a sense of meaning and purpose, character and virtue, and deep social relationships. As a society, we can promote flourishing through structures we create: education, healthcare, security and participation – as well as the values we promote.

But each individual is also responsible both for our own flourishing, and for enabling the flourishing of others. It requires introspection, courage, tolerance, and openness.

Flourishing people paves the way for sustainable development. They are better equipped to contribute to their societies, form social connections, innovate, and create common solutions. Flourishing people understands that our own material and spiritual well-being is ultimately dependent on nature.

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Effects of failing to solve global challenges are felt on the local level. Addressing these challenges also locally is essential. By taking the local, bottom-up approach we can recognise the diversity of challenges and the different context, while tapping into local potential and knowledge. Involving communities in the decision-making process builds trust and social capital, allowing for truly transformative action where no one is left behind.

Our own context on the Åland Islands is in many ways special. Åland is an autonomy within Finland, situated in the middle of the Baltic Sea. Our history involves one of the few successful settlements conducted by the League of Nations, and we act as guardians of the Swedish language in Finland.

All communities have their own history and context, connecting people to the physical place and to each other. This is an invaluable asset, that should be leveraged in the strive for sustainability and is an opportunity to create ownership in processes of transformation.

To create this sense of ownership, Åland's sustainability and development agenda was formed through participatory and deliberative processes. Hundreds of citizens and organisations took part in creating the vision for Åland "everyone can flourish in a viable society on the islands of peace".

The vision recognises the ultimate goal of enabling flourishing, while respecting the boundaries of nature and firmly anchoring our future to Åland's context and history.

The vision is a concrete example of a worldview different from the current paradigm. It is accompanied by seven goals to be fulfilled by 2030, giving the vision a tangible dimension.

Each of these seven goals is accompanied by a roadmap, outlining concrete actions. These roadmaps are continuously implemented, reviewed and annually updated, not only by public authorities but by involving civil society and business in a structured way.

We have the tools in place to measure progress, also when it comes to the level of individual flourishing. All these elements constitute an embryo of a framework for sustainable governance. With this framework, Åland has the past seven years taken the first steps to move beyond the 2030 Agenda and create a flourishing society.

There is obviously an interconnectedness between the local and the global. Åland cannot become sustainable on its own. We are dependent on all other countries around the Baltic Sea to achieve its good ecological status. We are dependent on all other countries in the world reaching net zero emissions to avoid rising seawaters and increasingly violent storms. Successfully tackling these challenges requires ordinary citizens to mobilize and demand change in their local neighbourhood, region or country.

Collective and individual action is one of four levers for change identified in the Global Sustainable Development Report 2019, but perhaps the most underrated one.

An administration seriously willing to accelerate the sustainability transformation should act as an enabler, creating the spaces for public deliberation and participation in decision making.

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Only through a strong sense of ownership can transformative strategies and policies be created and successfully implemented.

The process on Åland is one example of how to do this in practice. We have tested our way forward and are still testing. But as time is limited, it's important that not everyone has to start from scratch, and we recognise that similar processes are being developed and implemented in other regions and other communities.

We therefore call for the building of a coalition, consisting of actors working with moving sustainability beyond the 2030 Agenda - by focusing on flourishing and creating ownership of the transformation.

Thank you for listening.