



Earth's sustainability depends on cities: a talk with the mayor of Bonn

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a talk with the mayor of Bonn**

Intro [00:00:02] Welcome to OECD podcast, where policy meets people.

Clara Young [00:00:09] In 2015, the United Nations adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals. Quite simply, what this means is that if we organise our society and economy to meet these goals, we can provide for the needs we have now without sacrificing things like clean water and clean air that our grandchildren or great grandchildren will need decades down the road. The Sustainable Development Goals set out targets on things like eradicating poverty, progressing on climate action and making our cities and communities sustainable all over the world by 2030. Sustainable cities are key to the survival of our future generation, because one half of the world's population already live in cities, now in cities produce half of global waste, 80 percent of greenhouse gas emissions and over 70 percent of energy related carbon emissions. I'm Clara Young and I'm delighted to talk to Ashok Sridharan, who's been the mayor of the city of Bonn, in Germany, since 2015. Bonn is part of the OECD's Champion Mayor Initiative for Inclusive Growth, and we'll be talking about what Bonn is doing to turn itself into a sustainable city. So thanks for speaking to us, Ashok.

Ashok Sridharan [00:01:26] Thank you for inviting me.

Clara Young [00:01:27] I'm going to begin with the question that is on everybody's mind, which is the COVID-19 pandemic and how it's radically changed some very fundamental things. What effect has it had on Bonn's climate change agenda?

Ashok Sridharan [00:01:44] Well, not only on Bonn's climate change and I think all the cities and all the organisations dealing with climate change, but sustainability resilience and they were hit by the pandemic because many of the meetings, many of the conferences couldn't take place. Also, we do have the target to be climate neutral later in 2035. It needs, of course, preparation and during the pandemic it is quite difficult to do in-person meetings. So we had to fix new structures with video conferences, telephone conferences and meetings with people not in the same office, which took a while. It was a challenge, but I think we managed it quite well. We are on our way to climate neutrality and 2035.

Clara Young [00:02:32] So you have sorted out the logistics and you're well on your way now.

Ashok Sridharan [00:02:37] Yes, indeed.

Clara Young [00:02:39] Now, air pollution seems to be emerging as a factor that make people more vulnerable to the COVID-19 virus. And that's something that's been an issue for Bonn, right?

Ashok Sridharan [00:02:50] Yes, it's an issue for Bonn, but I think we do have quite clean air in Bonn. Many people who work in Bonn, they do not live in Bonn, so we do have to see the area. We do have to arrange each county surrounding the city of Bonn, and we do have 100000 people coming to Bonn for work daily on a daily basis. And unfortunately, many of them come with their own motor driven vehicles, and that's why we are improving our public transport system. We are improving our bike lane system. We

do have bikes. For example, since 2018, we do have a new station within the centre of our working quarter in our city. We do have to improve this even more. We are going to have much more dense public transport system and we are building new bike lanes within our city and also to our neighbour cities in the Brunswick County. But we are also looking for new means to face this challenge. For example, an aerial railway. We are considering to build an aerial railway, crossing the Rhine to improve the system and to make it more attractive for all those people who are using today the old car.

Clara Young [00:04:23] Now, to work on this aerial train system, you would have to be working very closely with its surrounding counties. That's always a challenge. Those kinds of synergies, how is that going?

Ashok Sridharan [00:04:38] Well, this aerial system is first and foremost within our city boundaries. It's just in the city of Bonn and from the right side of the Rhine, from the east side of the Rhine to the left side of the Rhine. And we do have the very big hospital. It's all a university hospital and it's on the top of the hill here in Bonn. Therefore we consider it to build a real railway from this hospital. From this big hospital with a couple of thousand employees made decisions and people who are working in the care business and to get from there to the other side of the Rhine. We believe that the rail system will be very helpful.

Clara Young [00:05:29] Now how has it been like dealing with things like budgets and regulations across different levels of government?

Ashok Sridharan [00:05:36] Well, we get allowances because otherwise many things would not be possible and we get allowances from the state of North Rhine-Westphalia and also from the Federal Republic of Germany. The law was just altered because several railways were not able to be supported by the State Government or the Federal Government. But since January this year, this is possible. We think that we can get the decision of our city council approval of our city council and the first half of the next year.

Clara Young [00:06:10] So buy allowances, you mean planning permission?

Ashok Sridharan [00:06:13] No allowances, financial means. We get quite a lot of financial means from the state of North Rhine-Westphalia and the federal government.

Clara Young [00:06:25] OK. Bond has set as its goal of carbon emissions level of 111 tonnes by 2030. But right now, sixty four percent of your electricity is generated from oil and gas natural gas. What is Bonn's strategy?

Ashok Sridharan [00:06:44] Well, that's not absolutely accurate, because I think you're looking on Bowen and the Brunswick County. Our electricity provider provides 70 percent renewable energy to all households, and you can also get 100 percent renewable energy, which is a bit more expensive. So 70 percent is very good in Germany compared to other cities in Germany and other energy suppliers. But nevertheless, we have to improve this as well. We are working with solar energy, with wind energy and with water energy. But wind and solar is the best. And we, for example, we do have an energy agency which is there for the citizens of Bonn. They can go there and asked, Does it make sense to get solar

things on my roof? And it's the same with renewable energy. We do have deals to make heating, for example, which is possible, which makes sense in some parts of our city, not in all parts of our city. And these are fields where our cooperation with our neighbour county, with our neighbour municipalities absolutely makes sense because if we produce clean energy and we can spread it not only within our city boundaries, but also for our neighbours.

Clara Young [00:08:12] Bonn has been very successful on the biodiversity front. And I think it's about 60 percent of your land in your region is protected. Can you tell us more about that? How you managed to be so effective in that area?

Ashok Sridharan [00:08:28] Well, Bonn, it's an area which the Romans came here more than 2000 years ago. It's an area with many forests, with many parks. We want to try to not use the green land for our buildings. That's why we consider to get at more high buildings, for example, to save the nature. We do have and we are very green city.

Clara Young [00:08:55] So you are thinking about building Bonn up vertically because your population is also growing. And so there's always that trade-off between keeping land green as well as providing affordable housing.

Ashok Sridharan [00:09:14] Exactly. We are a growing city. We do have now 30000 inhabitants from, as I mentioned, one of 18 nations and we are still growing and that's why we have to consider new plans concerning housing but also concerning new offices. We want to bring this together to avoid additional traffic and to bring together working, living, schooling, kindergartens, shopping so that the people are here and do have very short distances from home to office and to the shops and to the kindergarten and to the school.

Clara Young [00:09:54] That reminds me of something that we've been hearing about lately, which is the 15 minute city. I know that Paris is modelled on that on that idea. Are there any cities with Sustainable Development Goals plan that you are looking at in particular?

Ashok Sridharan [00:10:11] Well, we are cooperating with Italy equally, it is an NGO and dealing really only with sustainability and resilience. Italy stands for local governments for sustainability and is a global network of cities, municipalities, regions with approximately one thousand eight hundred members. We also have some project partnerships with cities and the globe itself. Let's keep coast in Ghana, for example, we had projects concerning the repatriation of a lagoon. We do have a partner city in China, which is Chengdu. And where we change forwards exchange towards concerning sustainable tourism. We do have a partnership with La Paz in Bolivia, where we had projects concerning weather forecasts and resilience concerning heavy rains. So we are working together, we are learning from each other and we are exchanging our ideas and thoughts.

Clara Young [00:11:18] Why is Bonn participation in OECD's champion mayors for inclusive growth been so important?

Ashok Sridharan [00:11:26] I think the membership to champion mayors Matters is very important because we have to be the front runners for the stop of the climate change, for resilience and for sustainability. And if the exchange works, if we exchange ideas on that level, I think we could get a really good example for all the other mayors around the world to also engage themselves in this field.

Clara Young [00:11:53] Are businesses actively involved in bar in bonds carbon transition strategy?

Ashok Sridharan [00:12:00] Yes, of course, because it doesn't work with all the businesses and it doesn't work with all the people. That's why we had to involve them. We have a new project which is called Drop What? In German drop outs. We are cooperating with the great employers here in Bonn, and they get, for example, they get bikes, electric bikes, but they get push bikes and to invite their employees to use the bikes instead of motor driven car. And these are the things we are considering, but we are also considering to make Home Office more practical with the digital means we have. And with fleets, for example, and especially large across DHL, our front runners concerning either vehicles, they have an own either vehicle to deliver their posts, for example.

Clara Young [00:13:05] We've seen with the pandemic that working from home has been essential. And will that be continuing in our firms supporting that?

Ashok Sridharan [00:13:16] I hope so. We have doubled our home office capacities during the pandemic. We have a very strong IT sector here in Bonn and to many of them, worked from home because maybe they had their children at home and I would like to support that this continues also after the pandemic.

Clara Young [00:13:40] Your father was a diplomat. Did you grow up talking about politics around the dinner table? How did you get into local politics?

Ashok Sridharan [00:13:52] My father was working for the embassy. He came here in nineteen fifty seven because he was working for the Indian Embassy. And then he met my mother, so he left the Indian Embassy and went to India. And my mother was working for Lufthansa, so we were an airline family. We talked about politics because I was always interested in politics. Bonn is the former capital of the Federal Republic of Germany. So I grew up in the former capital and I met politicians almost daily, and so I was very interested in politics. How did I got into politics? I studied law, I was mostly interested in public law so, in administration, public administration and legislation and all this stuff. And after my first exam, I worked for a member of parliament who was the Head of the Legal wing of the Christian Democrats. And so, I came into politics and I'm still there.

Clara Young [00:15:00] What's the rule that you see cities like Bonn and regions having? So at the local level, on a global issue like climate change?

Ashok Sridharan [00:15:14] I think that without cities, climate change or sustainability will not be reached. We do need the cities because that's where the people live. That's where the things are being done. And therefore, I am very thankful to Patricia Espinosa, the Executive Secretary of the Climate Secretariat of the United Nations, because she invited cities and regions to the Cup. And I think this is very important and

should be even more important for the future. We should be on every table when there are meetings, when there are discussions concerning sustainability and resilience because we are the ones who can get it done and we are the ones who are prepared to support whenever we can and, we can and we want to.

Clara Young [00:16:16] Well, thank you very much for speaking to us, Ashok.

Ashok Sridharan [00:16:20] Thank you, Clara for this opportunity. It's a pleasure.

Clara Young [00:16:24] and thank you everybody for listening to OECD podcasts. I'm Clara Young to find out more about what we've been talking about. Read the OECD report *A Territorial Approach to the Sustainable Development Goals in Bonn*. It comes out in October 2020.

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