



Japan Local Government Centre, London

Monthly Report May 2011 (Germany) – Biennial conference of the German Association of Cities takes place in Stuttgart

Every two years, the German Association of Cities holds a conference to discuss the situation of the cities, elect a new president for a two-year term and hear from the federal chancellor, whose speech at this event has become a regular 'one to watch' event. This year's conference took place between the 3rd and 5th of May in Stuttgart, a city currently convulsed by the question whether to implement a large-scale regeneration project centred on the train station. It attracted over 1,000 delegates and guests from across the whole country.

The motto of the conference was a rallying cry directed at federal government: 'Solidarity and future – only with strong cities'.

Outgoing president, Frankfurt Mayor Petra Roth described the challenges cities and civil society face as 'climate change, demographic change and democratic change'. While the first two are quite obvious, the third refers to changes in the democratic landscape within Germany, which is experiencing deep dissatisfaction in the traditional party-led system and engagement by citizens in different political activities and increasingly vigorous protests, as well as to the popular uprisings for more democracy in Arabic states. She demanded from the federal government and the Land governments an acknowledgement of the important role that cities have to play in all these areas of life, and the necessity to allow adequate funding for the local level, while at the same time exhorting the cities to continue their activities in these areas. Particular demands from the cities were the involvement of the municipal energy companies in the transition to a more decentralised energy structure, and better representation of the interest and expertise of local government in the law-making process.

Chancellor Angela Merkel took the wind out of the sails of some of the prior speakers, because she readily acceded to the demand for more local involvement in current energy provision systems. She also confirmed the commitment of the federal government not to implement changes to the current trade tax regime without the consent of local government. Although this promise has been made before, the political climate has been such that it was not an entirely forgone conclusion, but confirmation by the Chancellor gave the cities much reassurance. Chancellor Merkel also acknowledged that the cities have to bear an ever increasing share of the social welfare burden, and that was part of the reason why it was decided to remove the responsibility for the 'basic income payment for older people' from the municipalities and return it to a federal responsibility. While she hoped for wide-ranging reform of local finance has not been achieved, the Chancellor expressed

hope that the second task of the Local Finance Reform Commission, namely to reduce the burden placed on local government through overregulation and indeed through the removal of tasks, can still be completed. Her speech was very well received by the assembled city representatives, contrary to some prior occasions where there was more tension between the local government level and federal government.

The five main discussion groups dealt with the important topics affecting society and the cities today: equality of chances in education, integration of different groups in society, issues connected to sustainable development such as demographic change as well as climate change, and the issue of local finance. The fifth discussion group dealt with the question of stronger involvement of the cities and their local democratic expertise and experience in international development work, in response to the recent developments in the Arab world towards more democracy. Although cities in Germany have been long involved not only with links to cities in developed countries but also to those in developing countries, an explicit demand to increase the role of city expertise overseas in not only building capacity for services but also for democratic structures - which after all is a vital ingredient of self-government – is a first.

The mayor of Munich, Christian Ude, was again elected as president. Between them, he and Petra Roth have alternated in leading the German Association of Cities since 2002.

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