

Meet a 2015-er: Emilia Saiz

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— Emilia Saiz

<http://www.undispatch.com/meet-2015-er-emilia-saiz/>

This is the third installment of our "[Meet A 2015-er](#)" series that profiles the women and men who are helping to shape the Sustainable Development Goals and Climate Change negotiations as they take form later this year.

Today, we get another perspective from civil society. Emilia Saiz is Deputy Secretary General of [United Cities and Local Government](#) based in Barcelona, Spain.

What is United Cities and Local Governments? What kind of work do you do?

UCLG is a worldwide organization of all levels of local authorities. We represent cities, regions, departments, provinces, and our role is three-fold. We provide a voice for local government, internationally while promoting innovation and best practices exchange. We also promote local democracy and decentralization [of the decision making process]. Our membership is now in over 140 countries, [which is] nearly 260,000 local governments. We are the product of a movement that was born over a 100 years ago.

I am currently the Deputy Secretary General and have been working in the municipal movement for around 20 years. What I try to do is make the link between the membership, which are the mayors around the world, and our policy development and advocacy work.

How does that tie-in with what you do in the SDG negotiations?

We have been in the whole Rio process since the beginning. We've been one of the main critics of the Millenium Development Goals as well.

What our President, the Mayor of Istanbul, brings to the table of the High Level Panels and Open Working Group discussions is a global task force of local and city governments. We can be an important source for bridging inequality because we see it every day at the local level. But, in order to do that we need to make sure to work on local governance. Decisions must be made so that they are the closest to those involved. If we don't do that, it does not matter how many topics we agree on. We'll never be able to implement any [of it].

So you're an umbrella organization for local governments, but you're given NGO status at the UN?

Our motto is: we are a sphere of government, even though we are not acknowledged as such in the negotiations and are considered an NGO by ECOSOC. We are legitimately chosen by citizens [around the world] and representing their interests. We have great potential to catalyze change only if we take the reality of the local level into account.

We've made some proposals...which involve local governments be given a different status than NGOs. We've also tried to get recognized like the International Parliamentary Union has been, [under] an observer status. That very symbolic act would be a great step forward for us.



A delegation of UCLG World Secretariat paid a working visit to Guangzhou, China.

Would that signal an inclusion of local governments in the SDG negotiation process? Why is that important?

It's not just about involving our constituency in the process, but also for the multilateral institutions to make use of that talent, innovation, and problem solving skills that these local authorities use everyday. Mayors around the world don't wait until we agree language [at the global level]. The problems are there now. They need to act fast and deal with the floods, energy infrastructure, mobility of their citizens, that they get new people into their towns every day, that their service provisions need to be different. They deal with...the heart of the quality of life for citizens around the world.

It's very hard to leave this group out.

It's never good to feel left out! Do you feel that happened with the MDGs as many groups did?

Yes, but 85% of the MDGs contained tasks that we needed to do at the local level. However, at the end of the day our people and many national governments did not interpret it that way simply because our name was not there [in the discussion process].

So this time our constituency said, not again!

It is not about us wanting to have every single group represented in global discussions, but there needs to be a mechanism that takes into account that when there are decisions made about local governance and urbanization....you actually need that sphere of government in the discussion.

Has that changed in recent years? The UN has established UN Habitat to address the issues of cities separately.

I would be a fool if I did not realize that things are drastically changing. There is positive change in terms of getting more people to participate and in having cities acknowledged as very important actors. We're not complaining about that. I used to go to New York [Headquarters] with my grounds pass and could not get past any office, none would open up for me. This doesn't happen anymore, we are popular! There is hardly any document that you read that doesn't highlight sustainable urbanization and cities.

What is not happening yet is to actually involve local governments in the decision-making manner in an independent manner, not utilizing any political or national interest that might be going around. The reason for that is...you have huge cities with enormous impact on their national economies so even the friendliest of national governments are extremely careful about the [relationship with those cities] and the role they provide to local authorities. Very often you'll see the powerful mayors of large and capital cities will not often follow the same political stream of the national government.

If we continue working [like this] then the transformational role local governments can play will always be limited. We are not saying we want to substitute national government...but there should be some kind of mechanism where local visions can be taken into account in a much more direct manner.

What does that mechanism look like to you?

That's the million dollar question, yeah? I don't think we have it yet but there have been some proposals [like changing our NGO status].

Does it maybe involve some discussion on finance?

Local finance needs to play a totally different role in the agenda if we want these to succeed.

The Financing for Development meeting is set to take place this July in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Will they be talking about local governments there?

Not at all! That's one of the few places we are back 20 years ago. There is no mention of local governments at all. It's not only about the amount of money that you have, but about how you make that available. We are not saying at all that we want all the international aid to go to local governments, though we would love to, we're being realistic. [Laughing]

You make things happen in a much more efficient way. Any mayor in any African country will tell you the frustrating experiences they have had [when] a big donor comes in to build a totally useless facility in their town that they cannot use it! Very often they don't have a say in it.

What do you think of Goal 11 about making cities sustainable, inclusive, and safe?

You really feel like a lobbyist in those UN Headquarters corridors. But when you lobby, you need to compromise. So, Goal 11 is not very ideal but it is very important.

There is that ongoing discussion about 17 goals being too many. One way to go about reducing the number of goals is clustering many of them together, one of them being the goal about sustainable urbanization.

From our perspective, there was some hesitation at the beginning of the SDG negotiations whether we should be pushing for a standalone goal or not. [Goal 11] is the best that we got. It is not our ideal goal but we did decide to push for a standalone goal because we were concerned that if we did not have that, that local governments and mayors around the world would, once more, not identify with the global agenda. That's what happened to us with the Millenium Development Goals.

Why isn't it ideal?

We need more [language] on governance. For us local governments really tackle a lot of the underlying issues in providing universal, basic services. [An emphasis on] local governance would help us not to leave anybody behind. Our constituency needs to feel the ownership of this global agenda in order for it to work.

We have in our membership, mayors of over 200 cities which are each bigger than nearly 60 member states! These people are responsible for the daily lives of so many. They need to realize that there something at [SDG] table for them, that the vision that is being drawn in the multi-lateral process is something that they need to...and are able to contribute to.

It also contains some targets that are extremely specific, but leaves our constituency to ask – well why this one, which is OK to include, but not another one that my city needs?

But, you will not hear me complaining! We need that goal.



The Commission on the Status of Women is coming up next week. What are your thoughts on the SDG discussion on gender equality as a woman working in this field?

It's extremely disappointing that the Beijing+20 revision is actually not a revision but only a celebration. Maybe the underlying thought about that is that if we open it up, we might go backwards.

As a woman, we are very far from achieving equality. We are also in a very dangerous zone where a lot of people think equal opportunity is equality.

This is not true! Not in Europe, Africa, or Latin America, or anymore.

Having a law on paper, does not imply that the law will be applied. It does always address the heart of the issue, which can be behavior or social pressures. Female politicians have adapted to an 'old boys club' mentality in order to make it, including myself.

A big concern for us is female participation in local politics around the world. When I started working 20 years ago, it was 24%. It was much higher than the parliamentarians. Now we are down to around a maximum of 23%, but the national level/parliamentarians have increased [over those years].

We do need a goal on the equality in the SDGs...but gender equality is much, much bigger than sustainable development alone. The SDGs are everything yes, but this is about human rights. The discussion of gender equality should take place beyond the SDG.

What is your hope for the SDG final outcome?

That it is a very people-centric agenda. It should tackle the daily needs of citizens and shapes the future, for all of us together with no exceptions. We need differentiated responsibilities but one single agenda. I hope that it is no longer an agenda of global north vs. global south.

You cannot work in niches. You need to approach citizens' problems with an integrated approach. Sometimes it's easier to work in silos, but it doesn't make the results better. Sometimes you simply need to accept that some problems are complex, which need complex solutions.

You then can structure the argument in a simple way, but we shouldn't be afraid of people not understanding us. Any mayor in the world knows that their citizens are smart and if you have a good message, they will understand what you are saying.

About The Author



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Mythili is a freelance writer based in New York. Born in India, raised in States, Mythili attended the University of Maryland - College Park and for graduate school, Johns Hopkins University. She is currently an accredited member of the UN press corps.