

Dear conference guests, dear island friends,

I come from a small island in the Finnish archipelago, and like many people in this room, I spend quite a lot of my time explaining why islands matter.

Today I am sitting here wearing three hats.

The first is a big sun hat, representing ESIN, the European Small Islands Federation, and island communities across Europe.

The second is a rain hat, representing FÖSS – Finland's Islands, the national island association of Finland.

And the third is a traditional bonnet from my own island, Pellinge, in the eastern Gulf of Finland.

These three hats remind me that islands exist on many levels: European islands, national islands, and the island that you simply call home.

No matter which hat I wear, one thing remains the same.

People on islands work incredibly hard for something that many others take for granted: the possibility to continue living where we belong.

In fact, only last week, my own community fought to save our local village school. We lost the vote in the municipal council by a single vote.

That may sound like a local issue. But many islands across Europe know exactly what that feels like.

Because the right to stay is rarely about a single school, a ferry route or a health service.

It is about whether people can imagine a future on the island.

Many islands are governed from the mainland. Decisions are often made far away, by people who never take the ferry, never worry about the weather forecast, and never experience the consequences in everyday life.

That is why governance matters.

Communities need more than services and infrastructure. They need a meaningful voice in decisions that shape their future.

When we discuss resilience, sustainable development and demographic sustainability, we often focus on infrastructure, investments and policies.

But resilience ultimately depends on people.

Who stays on the island year-round?

Who checks on elderly neighbours during a storm?

Who runs local businesses, associations and services?

Who passes on local knowledge to the next generation?

For me, a truly sustainable island is an island where people can continue to live.

When local people can stay, sustainability has all three dimensions.

It is socially sustainable because communities remain alive.

It is economically sustainable because businesses, jobs and services continue to exist.

And it is environmentally sustainable because few people know, use and care for the sea and nature as closely as those who live there year-round.

I have yet to meet stronger advocates for nature and the sea than islanders themselves.

At the same time, islands across Europe are very different.

In the Nordic region, winter remains a defining reality. Ice conditions are changing, traditional ice roads are becoming less reliable, and weather patterns are becoming more unpredictable.

Finland is also somewhat unique because our islands are found not only at sea but also on large inland lakes. Most of them are small communities with limited resources and populations.

Solutions designed for larger islands do not always fit the realities of small islands.

European island policy must recognize this diversity.

And yet, I am optimistic.

Because islands are not only places facing challenges.

They are also places of innovation.

I recently read about a Croatian initiative helping island communities take ownership of their energy future. What inspired me was not the technology. It was the people behind it.

Across Europe, islands are pioneering new approaches to renewable energy, local ownership and community-led solutions.

What they have in common is not technology.

It is people.

Communities that decide to take responsibility for their own future.

Communities that work together.

Communities that refuse to give up.

That is why I believe the energy transition is not really about energy. It is about people.

The energy transition will succeed on islands when it strengthens the communities that make these islands worth saving in the first place.

Perhaps that is the most important lesson islands can offer Europe.

The goal is not to create islands with renewable energy.

The goal is to create renewable island communities.

Thank you.