



For the attention of:
First Vice-President Frans Timmermans
European Commission
Rue de la Loi / Wetstraat 200
1049 Brussels
Belgium

date 28 October 2017
contact: Folmer de Haan
+31 (0) 6 46152496
f.w.dehaan@rli.nl

25th EEAC Annual Conference 'Towards the 2030 Agenda and beyond: European cooperation within a new citizens-science-policy interface' (Maastricht, 12th October 2017) - Main topics of concern of the chairs of the EEAC councils

Dear Mr Timmermans,

I am writing you on behalf of the European network of Environment and Sustainable Development Advisory Councils, to ask your attention for the celebration of the 25th conference of European national and subnational Environmental and Sustainable Development Councils. We really appreciate your initial willingness to join us at the conference, and understand the changes in your agenda.

The EEAC 25th annual conference is not only a cause for celebration, but an excellent opportunity to re-examine the challenges of 25 years of environmental and sustainable development policy-making, the changing interface between science, policy and society, and ways to enhance the implementation process of the 2030 Agenda in Europe. This letter describes the main topics of concern of the chairs of the EEAC councils.

Due to the relevance of speakers and participants to the Conference, and to the unique nature of our network (the only existing network of national and subnational advisory councils on the environment and sustainable development), we would welcome your response to this letter, be it written or as a video message at the conference.

We would also appreciate to find another opportunity to discuss with you about the possible contributions of the EEAC councils and network to the achieve the challenges we face in implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and looking ahead beyond the horizon of 2030.

1. A sustainable Europe: accomplishments, obstacles and challenges

Europe can look back on 25 years of successful environmental and sustainable development policy-making. The EEAC Network and its members have contributed to the development of environmental and sustainable development policies at national and regional level in Europe. Being responsible for advising their governments and/or parliaments, they have since long operated at the interface between science, society and policy.

However, there is no reason to be complacent: we face obstacles and challenges in all dimensions of sustainability that define a complex and uncertain future for all. In particular, we are concerned about the ongoing dramatic loss of biodiversity, the risks of climate change associated with the current emissions pathways, and the lack of progress towards greater social equality and more sustainable financial systems.

Many now share the view that we can only stay within the ecological limits of the planet if we re-shape our model of economic development from one based on the exploitation of natural resources to one that is circular, renewable and dematerialised. In addressing these obstacles, **we have to deal with strong vested economic interests and a very diverse range of political positions and interests** in the eastern, western, northern and southern parts of the EU, as well as with conflicts between the EU and other global players.

Europe has a clear cultural identity in the world that was forged during many centuries of common history. However, Europe's position is declining in importance, as other parts of the world grow in prominence. Europe faces important challenges, including an ageing population with severe effects on the social and financial system. The level of social and economic development across Europe is far from uniform and the impacts of global change and in particular of climate change is very diverse. While the world has never been more connected, a lack of trust, general insecurity and fear of job losses have cast doubts on international institutions and agreements.

In times of crisis, the short-term interests of affected groups and measures to further those interests preoccupy most political leaders, and draw attention and resources away from the longer-term Sustainable Development Goals. This could be observed in the wake of the global financial and economic crises post-2007, as well as after the European refugee crisis in 2015.

Nonetheless, avoiding similar events in the future require precisely those long-term strategies for sustainable development which are difficult to bring to the forefront under these conditions. In addition, the lack of balance as to the EU competences regarding the different dimensions of sustainability is a further obstacle regarding the fulfillment of the Sustainable Development Goals. **European cohesion and solidarity must remain a central objective in our joint efforts to implement the 2030 Agenda.**

The sustainable development transformations will not benefit everyone, as society's long-term interests do not coincide with the short-term private interests of many stakeholders. Fundamental changes mean that there will also be groups that will lose out, and that vested interests will make their voices heard. **The responsible government authorities must therefore ensure that the quality of arguments and not the volume at which opinions are expressed determines their weight in policy decisions.**

At the same time, in an early stage of policy development careful consideration must be given to the societal impacts of transformations in different regions and for different stakeholders. Therefore, the exchange of information, views and opinions between different political, societal and economic interests needs to be strengthened. Greater policy coherence is of the utmost importance, and scope is needed for social innovations.

The need for long-term strategies for sustainable development including a better scenario for young generations requires **renewed strong alliances between governments, the scientific community, stakeholders and engaged citizens**. These new partnerships are essential for the required transformative actions at environmental, social and economic level, which brings common goals and aspirations in a diverse Europe.

2. The changing interface between science, policy and society in the light of the 2030 Agenda

European diplomacy, science-based policy advice and political commitment made the Paris Agreement and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development possible. **The implementation of these policy commitments for sustainable development requires a strong evidence base.** However, we are currently witnessing a changing political and societal atmosphere in which established forms of scientific expertise and policy advice are more frequently challenged by critical citizens, and in some countries by the government institutions themselves. A general erosion of trust in traditional elites is sometimes coupled with deliberate misrepresentation of evidence by vested interests. Scientific advice is often considered authoritarian, overbearing and not in line with the objective of increasing economic prosperity.

One way to maintain an evidence-based approach while at the same time ensuring greater legitimacy of knowledge is to re-think the interfaces between science and policy: more transparent approaches to policy advice, more co-creation between scientists, policy-makers and citizens, new types of institutions to handle these co-creations (e.g. platforms such as IPCC and IPBES), co-regulation (e.g. round tables), and methodologies in which citizens themselves conduct research or contribute to scientific evidence.

A key task in this context is to collaboratively downscale the Planetary Boundaries concept to the European, national and regional levels, as environmental limits should support policy-making decisions at all levels. The EEAC councils are working towards better integration between expertise and values in their own operating procedures.

In a similar vein, the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) requires inclusive, effective and accountable institutions. Sustainability, the environment and climate change are political issues that call for informed debate at the political and societal level. Strategic governance could be strengthened through new interfaces between science, policy and citizens, and enhanced mechanisms for accountability.

At the same time, across Europe we see steps towards a more fundamental shift in culture in which scientists interact with citizens and policy-makers. Examples include efforts to involve citizens in scientific programming, and to ensure that scientific achievements are made more accessible to civil society and the public at large. Without

a minimum level of scientific literacy in society in general it will be impossible to achieve the SDG.

3. Implementing the 2030 Agenda in Europe

We need a people-centred and integrated approach to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as a new, positive narrative for the future of the EU. We welcome the fact that both the European Commission and the European Parliament have emphasised the importance of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. **We look forward to seeing all European institutions committed to making sustainable development the overarching policy objective of the EU, and putting this into practice.**

The European implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development builds on existing EU policies and measures, with the possible drawback of missing out on cross-sectoral issues and the fact that **'The whole is greater than the sum of its parts'**. The EEAC councils would like to discuss how a process at all levels – global, European, national and local – can guarantee that the SDGs will be translated *within* our own communities (EU, member states, etc.), *through* the impact on other communities across the globe, and *together* with those other communities. The EEAC network is well-equipped to contribute to that process.

Getting a grip on the reinforcing or conflicting nature of the SDGs is essential for a successful implementation process. During that process, we need a science-policy dialogue on the importance of interactions, to provide a starting point for policy-makers and other stakeholders to define their priorities and implementation strategies, but also to engage the policy community in further knowledge developments in this field. **Therefore, the EEAC network welcomes the multi-stakeholder platform on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in the European Union, as launched by the European Commission.**

The growing dynamism, turbulence and unpredictability of the present-day environmental and sustainability challenges call for an approach that is evidence-based, and that goes beyond the silos of policy domains and scientific disciplines. **The EEAC advisory councils – the stakeholder-based as well as the science-based bodies – are well-placed to provide this expertise, as they bring together knowledge from different scientific disciplines and practitioners' expertise and experience with addressing and solving the sustainability challenge.**

We look forward to exchange thoughts about your ambitions with respect to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, and about how the EEAC network and EEAC councils can contribute to an implementation process that respects the inclusive and holistic approach of the agenda at all levels:

- **How can the responsibility for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda be made visible at all levels, and how can the EU maintain a leading position in this process? Wouldn't an overarching implementation strategy send a strong signal to all involved?** The mapping of EU policies provided in Commission Communication (COM (2016) 739) creates an overview, but could this instrument also ensure the integrated implementation of all 17 SDGs, and a whole-of-governance approach? The revision of the Europe 2020 strategy could provide the momentum needed to integrate the 2030 Agenda approach. How can the Multi-Stakeholder

Platform set up by the Commission ensure the effective civil-society participation advocated by the EU during the UN negotiation process?

- **How can the EU demonstrate continued leadership in the world when implementing the 2030 Agenda?** Suggestions for such a programme include: quantitative targets and relevant indicators to ensure monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of the policies, adequate means to ensure the coherence of policies for sustainable development, and an orientation of all major policy areas towards attaining the SDGs. Of particular importance are the Common Agricultural Policy, trade policy, sustainable finance, implementing and mainstreaming a circular economy, development cooperation, and EU financial planning post-2020.
- **Ensuring policy coherence also includes financing the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.** The EEAC chairpersons would like to discuss how the multi-annual financing framework and a 'screening' of financial models as to their impact on the SDGs could facilitate an ambitious and effective implementation process. Sustainable finance is of the utmost importance, and needs to be addressed by Europeans working together. Finance plays a crucial role in creating a sustainable and resilient market economy, and supporting the transition towards truly sustainable societies. Sustainable financing presents a challenge to the business models of all sectors and for companies of all sizes, especially those with derived global supply chains. We would like to discuss how Europe can play a key role in setting an example of a sustainable market economy built on sustainable business practices and participatory approaches in accordance with the rule of law.
- **How can we meet the challenges of a transition towards a zero carbon society, within the present legal framework of the European Union, especially regarding the rules of the stability and growth pact?** How do these rules influence the capacities of Member States to invest and to encourage investments in the so needed transition?

We look forward to receive your answers on these questions, and would welcome an open, forward-looking and fruitful dialogue with you at moment that would suit our agenda's. We hope our 25th EEAC conference will bring more insights to the challenges we all face in implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

On behalf of the chairs of the EEAC councils,

Yours sincerely,



Arnau Queralt-Bassa

Chair of the European Network of Advisory Councils on the Environment and Sustainable Development (EEAC)