

Mainline Summary of the 26th EEAC Annual Conference

November 2018



The Network

The European Environment and Sustainable Development Advisory Councils (EEAC) is a network of advisory bodies established by national or regional governments. EEAC members offer independent advice to their respective national or regional governments and parliaments related to the environment and sustainable development.

The 26th EEAC Annual Conference entitled '*Towards a Sustainable Europe by 2030: Key leverages for transformation*' took place in Berlin on 11 October 2018.

The EEAC organised the conference together with the German Advisory Council on the Environment (SRU), German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU) and the German Council for Sustainable Development (RNE).

Introduction

Incentivised by the urge to act and the need to transform politics, society and the economy, the world signed up to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement. Realizing an ambitious and global sustainability transformation for the People, Planet and Prosperity with Peace and Partnership requires global action across all countries and policy areas.

In 2018, the world in general and Europe in particular will need to progress to implement and mainstream these agreements into concrete policies. However, this fundamental change remains too often an abstract ambition rather than an inclusive practice. The sustainability transformation in the European Union as well as in many of its member countries still faces too many lock-ins. To advance on our journey on achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within and beyond Europe we have to push key leverages for transformation.

The 26th EEAC Annual Conference was dedicated to identifying some of these key leverages and to foster our common European debate on the implementation of the SDGs in Europe. The rich diversity of EEAC's scientific and stakeholder councils met in Berlin and deliberated with experts from academia, society and politics.

During the conference, three breakout group sessions provided focal points for substantial debates on I) the institutional foundations for transformative governance in Europe, II) sustainable finance as a transformative lever for European Policy, and III) the radical changes, potentials and risks of digitalization for a Sustainable Europe. For more information on these three breakout groups please consult the conference information leaflet.

The mainline summary aims to give a glance of the matters debated. The EEAC Network would like to thank again the German Advisory Council on the Environment (SRU), the German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU) and the German Council for Sustainable Development (RNE), for their contributions to make the conference a success.

1. Opening

Following publication of the latest report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change ([IPCC](#)), leading sustainable development experts from the fields of politics, business, science and civil society spoke out in favour of even greater efforts to protect the global climate. “We must forge alliances,” said Arnau Queralt Bassa, Chairman of the European Environment and Sustainable Development Advisory Councils ([EEAC](#)), at the network’s [26th conference](#) held in Berlin

“People from all over the world must pull together because the challenges of the future are highly complex.” The event entitled “Towards a sustainable Europe by 2030: key leverages for transformation” was attended by some 160 delegates, who discussed how people could jointly work towards a more sustainable EU based on [the 2030 Agenda](#) and the [Paris Agreement](#).

“The EU missed an opportunity to incorporate the 17 global Sustainable Development Goals into its own strategy,” said Marlehn Thieme, Chairwoman of the German Council for Sustainable Development ([RNE](#)). She made the case for examining the barriers and obstacles to a more environmental and a more social lifestyle in the individual countries, in the EU and internationally. The German Council for Sustainable Development (RNE) is a member of the EEAC and was the joint host of this year’s conference together with the two other German members, the German Advisory Council on the Environment ([SRU](#)) and the German Advisory Council on Global Change ([WBGU](#)). Thieme spoke about political errors which, for example, prevented implementation of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals being expedited in the individual countries.

1.1. Relevance of the problem seemingly not acknowledged to date

Manfred Niekisch, ecologist and Vice Chair of the SRU, emphasised the cognitive and institutional hurdles with regard to implementing the 2030 Agenda: “The challenges are huge and we are making only slow progress,” said Niekisch. “Shortsightedness in our ways of thinking and policymaking are preventing us from tackling structural problems like climate change.” He argued in favour of new policies that more closely dovetailed the scientific findings and social discourse, an approach which he said should be pursued in all countries. Niekisch accused the individual countries of national self-interest, as demonstrated by, for example, the EU’s fisheries agreements and in EU agriculture. “There is no common strategy.”

Sabine Schlacke, Chairwoman of the WBGU, took a similar stance: “The IPCC report shows us what we need to do. The situation is serious – global warming can’t be allowed to exceed 1.5 degrees.” In their report, the experts called for the immediate decarbonisation of the global economy, arguing that were this to fail, the livelihoods of future generations would be at risk. “The EU must seek new allies in order to take the lead once again with regard to climate protection.”

In a welcome address given by video, Federal Chancellery Minister Helge Braun likewise stressed the need to take sustainable action. “We don’t have a second planet,” said Braun. More weight needs to be lent to the voice of the scientific community and it needs to be leveraged on behalf of sustainable development, he said. This is a view shared by Jean-Baptiste Djabbari, member of

France's National Assembly with the party [La Republique en marche](#). "Scientific findings must lead to political action," he said, giving the example of promoting a sustainable energy mix in order to supply the population with electricity. Alternatives to nuclear power and coal are needed, posited Djabbari.

1.2. Promoting green technologies

Imme Scholz of the German Development Institute ([DIE](#)) and member of the German Council for Sustainable Development (RNE) argued this means the focus had to be placed more on an economic approach. "The UN's Sustainable Development Goals could be one way of promoting green technologies," Scholz said. She encouraged government heads and representatives from the fields of science and politics to experiment and to not simply adopt fully developed policies.

In this context, Patrick ten Brink of the European Environmental Bureau ([EEB](#)) called for consideration to be given to more than just economic growth. "The focus needs to be on people's well-being, rather than growth – a change is needed here." He called for the creation of a European Commissioner for the future of the generations, who would maintain an overview of the environmental, social and economic aspects of protecting the planet and the future population. Ten Brink is hopeful that the new European Commission to be elected in summer 2019 will make the UN's Sustainable Development Goals a component in the future of the EU and of its member states.

For this to happen, people need to pull together within the individual countries too, stressed Lukas Köhler, member of the German Bundestag with the [FDP](#) and climate policy spokesperson for the FDP's parliamentary group. "All the ministries in Germany – not just the environment ministry – are important to implementation of the SDGs. We need to overcome this silo thinking."

French MP Djabbari has no doubt that economics and the environment go hand in hand and he criticised the USA's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement in this respect. "Together, we can achieve a great deal." For Djabbari, though, it's especially a question of greater social justice as well rather than just economic criteria and environmental aspects. Transformation in the direction of a more sustainable EU also needs to take this factor into account, he said. This applies to, for example, preserving existing or creating new jobs, combating poverty and bridging the gap between the rich and the poor, he argued.

2. Levers for greater sustainability in Europe

In the afternoon, the conference programme focused in particular on three levers with which transformation in the direction of a sustainable Europe could be turned into a success: reshaping political institutions in order to embed long-term and sustainable ways of thinking, using digitalisation for sustainability and a sustainable finance sector.

The first panel concluded that in order to achieve transformational change, environmental and sustainability aspects should be taken into account in the work of all administrative departments.

The introduction of future councils and ombudspersons for future generations could additionally elevate long-term, integrative thinking in the sense of the 2030 Agenda throughout institutions.

Experts on the panel on sustainable digitalisation emphasised that digital infrastructures should be designed sustainably themselves. In general, digitalisation as a whole should be leveraged as a powerful tool for achieving key societal goals like sustainable development.

At their turn, speakers on the sustainable finance panel pointed out that sustainable finance and its effect on sustainable business were now being discussed in many places. To increase the impact of the topic, the focus now needed to switch to communication and cooperation among those actively involved while also engaging new interested parties, they said.

3. Political commitment should lead to further action

In the concluding session of the conference, Cristina Gallach, [High Commissioner of the Spanish Government for the 2030 Agenda](#), and Miranda Schreurs, [Vice-chair of the EEAC Network and professor at the Technical University of Munich](#) provided analyses, feedback and examples of levers for sustainable development.

In her kick-off speech, Cristina Gallach provided insights in the governance architecture of the Spanish government to enhance concrete implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Not only will Spain implement a holistic approach – taking into account economy, society, and environment – but the country will also stress the importance of the 2030 Agenda in the European context via its voice in the European Council and other European institutions. Cristina Gallach repeatedly underlined the importance of both (sub-)national and European commitment to the implementation of the 17 SDGs. She called it ‘decisive’ that the next European Commission – from 2019 onwards – is a Commission of Sustainability.

Miranda Schreurs underlined the need for action, including an enhanced role for young people to join the transition. In a response from the audience, it added that the inclusion of youth is important. At the same time, it was pointed out that the current challenges are so serious that structural change is not only in the interest of future generations, but in the interest of today’s actors as well. The debate also included discussions about the institutional framework needed to enhance sustainability. Miranda Schreurs called for a holistic approach when visualizing future forms of institutions. “We should be aware of history, but when creating a vision for the future, be courageous and go beyond limitations”, she said.

In her concluding remark, the moderator Sandrine Dixson-Declève argued that multi-disciplinary solutions are needed. Councils on the environment and for sustainable development have a crucial role to play. These institutions need to translate scientific knowledge and societal positions into policy advice that includes action-oriented, multi-disciplinary solutions, and that is fit for purpose in times of crisis.

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