



EUROPEAN ENVIRONMENTAL BUREAU
2016 Annual Conference

FROM SUSTAINABILITY TALK TO POLICY WALK:

STEPPING UP EU ACTION ON CLIMATE, BIODIVERSITY AND CIRCULAR ECONOMY

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Annual Conference Report



Organizers: EEB (Brussels) & UWD (Vienna)



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INTRODUCTION

After the adoption in 2015 of the global 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the historic Paris climate deal, 2016 and the coming years must be years of delivery – delivery of more ambitious EU climate and energy policies, and, more generally, of policies that mainstream sustainability and reduce Europe’s environmental footprint. This requires the systematic and comprehensive implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals – both at EU and Member State level – as well as concrete progress in developing and implementing specific policies aimed at protecting biodiversity, greening agriculture, promoting a genuine circular economy and eliminating environmentally harmful subsidies to mention a few. In short, the EU needs to undergo fundamental reform. To discuss these issues, the European Environmental Bureau and Austrian NGO Umweltdachverband joined forces to host the EEB’s 2016 annual conference in Vienna. The rich fruits of this partnership can be read about in this report.



TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	3
PROCEEDINGS	5
MESSAGE OF WELCOME	5
SETTING THE SCENE	6
KEYNOTE SPEECH	7
HIGH-LEVEL PANEL DISCUSSION: Overcoming the political obstacles to a sustainable Europe	8
PLENARY DISCUSSION: Translating sustainability principles into concrete policies	12
BREAKOUT SESSIONS	15
• PARALLEL BREAKOUT SESSION: Climate and energy	15
• PARALLEL BREAKOUT SESSION: Biodiversity	17
• PARALLEL BREAKOUT SESSION: Circular Economy	20
PLENARY: Conclusions and the way forward – closing keynote speech	22
CONFERENCE PARTICIPANTS	25
General Admission	25
EEB Members And Staff	28
Speakers	31
IMPRINT	31



PROCEEDINGS

MESSAGE OF WELCOME

Franz Maier, President of Umweltdachverband, opened the conference highlighting that it was the result of a unique collaboration between the European Environmental Bureau (EEB) and Umweltdachverband (UWD). He noted that nearly 200 European NGOs were represented by these two organisations and deemed the conference an “exceptional opportunity to engage and intensify cooperation” between these groups. He also underlined the importance of organisations such as the EEB that represent national concerns and interests at an EU level, pan-European environmental policies, and the role of NGOs in the formulation of these policies.

Franz Maier



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SETTING THE SCENE



Mikael Karlsson

Mikael Karlsson, President of the European Environmental Bureau (EEB), opened his speech by describing Europe as a “rich and wonderful, and yet puzzling continent” being both the “origin of invaluable social and technical innovations” and “a continent historically marked by warfare and violations of human rights around the globe”. While the bridge between Eastern and Western Europe was clearly positive, he underlined how the continent was “again showing internal tensions and disagreement”. This included the rise of “uncivilised populist elements” and a continual undermining of “the resources on which our children’s prosperity and wellbeing will depend”.

He questioned what it would take for Europe to choose “a morally responsible pathway for the future” based on sustainable development, though he agreed that all was not lost. There was, undoubtedly, an erosion of biodiversity, rising greenhouse gas emissions and unsustainable patterns of production and consumption. But, on a more positive note, world leaders were embarking on a journey towards the sustainable development goals and climate action, there was an increase in civil society engagement and an increasing number of companies were taking environmental challenges seriously.

Karlsson acknowledged the decreasing trust in European institutions and increase in populism, but insisted that these factors were no reason for them to turn their back on environmental policymaking. On the contrary, “those downplaying sustainable development goals and a circular economy, those closing their eyes to the value of biodiversity, those running behind in the fight against climate change – they will hurt not only public health and ecosystems, but also social and economic values, including by jeopardising competitiveness,” he said.

“Times are changing,” insisted Karlsson, citing the fact that “previous global antagonists such as China and the US” are working together on issues such as climate change. He called for European countries to collaborate on tackling “the most pressing problems of our time” via the rule of law and science-based policies”. Further “for those wanting economic analysis, the evidence clearly tells us that stricter policies are very often those that are most profitable,” said Karlsson. He warned that the stark choice facing Europe was between “being a loser that overlooks environmental destruction” with an over-large global footprint or “a winner, that works for preserving and rebuilding the natural capital for our children”.

Karlsson suggested there was hope that Europe and the rest of the world would choose the right path given that: “transformative change is – perhaps surprisingly – a common theme in human societies”. But he warned that change rarely happens spontaneously and that to make it happen, “comprehensive, coherent and coupled policies” are needed. This, he said, should include the development, adoption and implementation in the EU of “a globally leading strategy for transformational change that puts the interests of people and planet first”. In short, “a strategy for sustainable development that fully implements the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”.

“For me, and for the EEB, the choice is obvious,” concluded Karlsson. “We want the EU to rise to the challenges; we want to see a Europe that blooms and prospers... a continent marked by solidarity with our fellow beings and future generations, and with the environment, upon which everything else is dependent.” He ended by inviting all participants to join him and the EEB on that journey “during this conference, and in the coming decades”.

KEYNOTE SPEECH

Andrä Rupprechter, Austrian Federal Minister of Agriculture, Forestry, Environment and Water Management

Rupprechter took as a starting point for his speech last year's Environmental Encyclical given by Pope Francis, which highlighted the fragility of the planet, underlining how environmental impacts do not respect national borders and the importance of handing over an economy and a society to the next generation based on greater solidarity. Hence, the big themes of this year's EEB annual conference, namely climate change and sustainable development, "can only be achieved by a common effort by all" with "policymakers, NGOs and civil society working together".

As regards the Paris climate agreement, Rupprechter stressed Austria's support for its quick ratification, and noted support for it from countries across the board including India, and the importance of the EU leading the way on this and on the path to sustainable development. He highlighted the recent report entitled *Sustainability Now: A European Vision for Sustainability* drafted by Karl Falkenberg, Senior Adviser for Sustainable Development to the President of the European Commission, and its call for commitment at the highest policy levels towards sustainable development. Rupprechter said that the Paris climate agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) should be the "backbone of a new EU vision of transformative change...[that] respects the planet's ecological limits," and promised to try to get the Austrian EU Presidency to drive forward this vision in 2018.

Regarding another key theme of the conference, namely the circular economy, Rupprechter said it made an "essential contribution" to this vision, with its emphasis on waste, long-term life cycle thinking and by ensuring the best use of resources. It would be "beneficial for society, the economy and citizens," he said, adding that it would be important to make it clear that better waste management can "stimulate new business models".

As an Austrian, Rupprechter said it was easy to talk about biodiversity given that "nearly 30% of our territory is under various degrees of protection" and that Austria was committed to achieving its 2020 biodiversity targets. Likewise, 20% of the country's farms were organic. Regarding Austrian and EU reliance on bioenergy, he said that "sustainability" was key with an emphasis on local supplies. Nuclear power, was, however, in his view never sustainable given its "high risks and high costs".

DISCUSSION

During the discussion, **Mikael Karlsson** drew attention to the importance of "comprehensive and coherent policies" to address environmental problems across the EU and the concern that continuing sectoral divisions between, for example, finance and environment ministries, could cause environmental policies to lose ground because of decisions based solely on cost/benefit analysis.

Attracta Ui Bhroin from the Irish NGO An Taisce and EEB Vice President

raised the issue of nuclear power in relation to Austria's court case against the Commission concerning UK state aid for Hinkley Point, the nuclear power station to be built in the south of England. Rupprechter repeated his opinion that this technology was "not the way forward" given that it was "high risk"; its costs and the issue of nuclear waste made it "not sustainable".



Andrä Rupprechter

HIGH-LEVEL PANEL DISCUSSION: Overcoming the political obstacles to a sustainable Europe

Moderator: **Rosa Lyon**, Journalist, ORF – Austrian Broadcasting Corporation, Vienna

Speakers: **Ann Mettler**, Head, European Political Strategy Centre

Petros Fassoulas, Secretary General of European Movement International

Gabriela Fischerova, Director General for Climate and Air division, Ministry of Environment, Slovakia

Helga Kromp-Kolb, Head of Center for Global Change and Sustainability, University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences, Vienna

Benedek Jávor, Member of the European Parliament, Vice-Chair of the Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety, Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance

Rosa Lyon



Rosa Lyon opened the session by suggesting that nationalism and intolerance were winning over solidarity and that feelings were winning over facts, and highlighted the emphasis on protecting borders and shutting out migrants. “The EU seems to be disintegrating and people think that we need to solve more pressing problems before we save the environment,” she said.

Helga Kromp-Kolb began by highlighting the move from the anthropocene era to the holocene era as humans have become “the largest shaping force on Earth” leading to us to exceed the output limits of the ecosystem with our emissions, for example. The idea of limits was not new, she said, but the concept had been reframed and enhanced by Kate Raworth’s “doughnut economics” showing the interaction of social and planetary boundaries. This model puts the economy between these two boundaries and shows that for it to grow it either has to press in or out, thereby eroding ecological or human rights.

Kromp-Kolb highlighted that the EU had started as a peace project based around the economy, but said that its priorities were now going in the wrong direction from a natural scientist’s point of view. For her, the first priority should be moving to live within ecological limits. Kromp-Kolb agreed that people want a good life, but said that the economy is only supposed to make this possible. “We need a paradigm shift to understand where our priorities lie,” she said, insisting on the link between the world’s problems and our impossible quest to continue growing in a limited world. This paradigm shift should not just happen at the level of decision making, but also in universities so that graduates are aware of the problems we face and how to solve them, said Kromp-Kolb. “We cannot solve migration without solving our poverty or biodiversity problems,” she insisted. “We cannot just say we will solve one problem. We have to get students to understand that so when they become decision makers, that will understand how to make a sustainable Europe.”

Helga Kromp-Kolb



Gabriela Fischerova discussed some of the key challenges facing Europe, such as the migration crisis, the UK's Brexit negotiations and climate change. Despite these, she suggested that there were some glimmers of hope, for example, the ambition of the Paris climate agreement and the speed with which it is likely to enter into force. Fischerova also drew attention to the links between various issues such as climate change, agriculture, water, sanitation and the SDGs, and said that the transition to a low carbon economy might happen sooner than expected "not because of new EU legislation, but because people see this is the only way forward". But she admitted that there was "still a lot of work to be done," in particular, the need to provide more information and educate people around current challenges. Governments alone cannot bring about change, "actions must occur on the ground" at the level of cities and regions, she said.

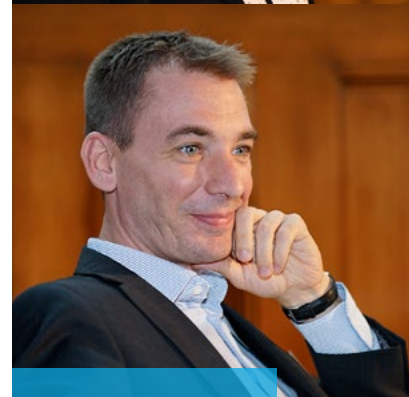
Benedek Jávor focused his intervention on the future of the EU and the need to "help the EU integration process survive". The EU is "not in a good shape and ... we see a lack of mobilisation for [its] future" with "too few people believing that the EU is what we need to promote and provide a better society". Instead of backing the EU, people are "spreading ideas of xenophobia, flexible solidarity, things that are the opposite of what is included in the [EU] treaties and in the minds of [Europe's] founding fathers." To change this we need "a mobilising, convincing vision of an inclusive and fair EU" for citizens today and in the future. He said that now was not the moment to call for treaty changes and new institutions. Instead, the focus should be on available tools, for instance, upgrading the targets in the EU climate and energy package. The EU is the number one region for environmental policymaking, said Jávor, but he lamented the "shocking" lack of enforcement in a number of cases and the fact "the EU sometimes does not have effective tools to enforce existing regulations". One way to help resolve this would be to have "more opportunities" for citizens' engagement. Another area for improvement is resource use, he said. "We talk as if protecting the environment is very expensive. I think we have too much money doing the wrong things. The EU needs to make better use of existing financial resources. If we use money in a bad way and then generate problems, then we demand money to use to sort it out." Further, he highlighted a lack of coherence regarding certain policies. For example, the EU Energy Union is "full of beautiful ideas" about how to push the energy transition, "but if you look at the list of Community interest projects it is all about gas, gas, gas".

Petros Fassoulas opened his speech by stating that the "UK referendum is a dirty by-product of our leaders' choices," not helped by the economic crisis that has blighted the last decade. He added that "lots of what is wrong at the moment starts at the national level" creating a "sense of insecurity and injustice among people". He added: "This cocktail of feeling short-changed is where the problem lies. People feel a fear in their hearts. They are afraid about their jobs and the future of their kids and the quality of their environment and security. They are looking for answers, but when they go to the well, they find that it is dry and they drink mud. We have been unable to provide convincing solutions." He added that: "The EU has been built on values like human rights and the rule of law, tolerance for everyone, religion and gender, and slowly those values are being compromised [through] a focus on economic growth and trade". He warned that by focusing on cutting red tape, we risk "shooting ourselves in the foot" by taking away what people actually want from the EU, such as environmental protection. "Today, we face a crossroads: our leaders are hesitant, stuck between the lies and false hopes of populists and the needs of our people – we need to speak out about what kind of future we want."

Gabriela Fischerova



Benedek Jávor



Petros Fassoulas



Ann Mettler



Noting that she was speaking from a “think tank position” and that her views were not necessarily official positions of the European Commission, **Anne Mettler** started by outlining the changing place of Europe in the world. “The world is getting bigger and we are getting smaller,” she said, noting that Europeans currently made up 8% of the world population, but would only make up 5% by 2050. With this in mind, she questioned whether “we can still convince the world to live by our standards, when 95% of the population will reside outside EU”. She suggested that the answer to this question could be yes, but that to do so Europe must not lose its global leadership. Ratifying the Paris climate deal and implementing the SDGs were therefore critical. Making sustainable development a “holistic policy” was also important, said Mettler. It cannot only be “environment ministries and NGOs” that are leading on this, we also “need to get finance ministers and heads of government involved to drive this change”. The EU is suffering a number of crises, including a rise in pollution, terrorist attacks, the financial crisis and the refugee crisis, making the EU vulnerable to shocks, she stated. “Sustainability will make the EU more resilient to these crises.”



DISCUSSION

Kromp-Kolb insisted on the need for Europe to reduce its resource use if poverty is to be tackled globally.

Fischerova acknowledged that the Paris climate deal “could be more ambitious,” but that it was the “utmost” that could be got and that it was an essential driver to lower emissions.

Jávor said he remained “optimistic” about the EU. There were currently “two mainstream discussions about future of EU,” he suggested. One was that: “there are some minor problems, such as the refugee crisis, but basically we can continue on the same path we have followed for the last 40 years”. The other is “about destroying the EU and getting back to the nation state”. According to Jávor, “both of them are wrong”. He called instead for a “third discussion about the future of Europe that faces up to the fundamental problems of the EU, such as too much corporate influence on decision making”. Likewise, regarding Brexit, Jávor said this was “the most important crisis in the EU”. He called it a “crisis of trust that we have to overcome” and that we can overcome “if we are brave enough”. Jávor said he was sure “we can provide good answers” to alleviate the fears at the heart of this crisis. Fassoulas insisted that “we need to be visionary and practical with an emphasis on better social protection and a welfare system that provides,” if the crisis in the EU is to be overcome.

Mettler reaffirmed her opinion that the SDGs can only work with a holistic approach. “If only some ministries and interest groups engage they won’t work.” Kromp-Kolb added that “we see lots of speeches and papers” and it was vital that “this broad agenda is translated into practical actions”.

Jávor underlined the role of civil society and said that Brussels “needs to be more open” to its involvement.

Mettler said that joining the Commission had been a “humbling experience,” in particular seeing how difficult it was “to reconcile different opinions” and that “no matter what we do, we [the Commission] will be severely criticised”. Mettler said she understood the critics, but that Europe is “starting to see the corrosive effects of criticism”. The “politics of truth” could be an antidote to this trend, she suggested, noting that part of her team’s role was to help the Commission to “speak openly to EU citizens about challenges so that we can have an informed public debate”.

EEB Secretary General **Jeremy Wates** asked Ann Mettler what civil society was doing wrong, given that it had failed to convince Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker to adopt more environmentally-friendly priorities. “The President cares about the issues you care about,” Mettler assured Wates. “Mr. Juncker cares as much as you do.”

PLENARY DISCUSSION: Translating sustainability principles into concrete policies

Moderator: **Rosa Lyon**, Journalist, ORF – Austrian Broadcasting Corporation, Vienna

Speakers: **Climate and Energy: What has Paris changed? Implementation and financing at the EU and national level**
Ulriikka Aarnio, International Climate Policy Coordinator, Climate Action Network Europe

Biodiversity: Will Europe's nature be more or less safe after the Fitness Check of the Nature Directives?

Andreas Beckmann, Managing Director of the WWF-International Danube-Carpathian Programme

Circular Economy: From incremental measures to an economic transition that respects planetary boundaries

Walter R. Stahel, Founder-Director of the Product-Life Institute

Ulriikka Aarnio



Ulriikka Aarnio opened the session, stating that “we’ve known for a long time that climate change is a huge risk and that it has the potential to destroy everything,” including our homes and natural resources. Nonetheless, “until recently there has been lots of hesitation and denial and an unwillingness to act,” she said. “Paris has given us the signal that the international community is willing to act,” argued Aarnio, insisting that the fact that “countries are rushing to ratify [the climate deal]” shows that “the world is acting”. That Paris is “legally binding” is also a “big deal,” said Aarnio, declaring the pledge “to pursue efforts to keep global warming at 1.5 degrees C” her “favourite” target. This means “net zero emissions by the second half of century,” she clarified. Countries should fully commit to this “inspirational goal,” said Aarnio, noting wryly that “we didn’t say we’d take man 95% to the moon”.

She also highlighted that we have the knowledge to act. “The IPCC [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change] has given us the numbers and we know how much more [CO₂] we can bump into the atmosphere.” Aarnio underlined that given the current rate of emissions, we have only five years before we reach the limits of our carbon budget of staying below 1.5 Degrees with a 66% probability. If we want to give ourselves a 50/50 chance of keeping emissions below agreed limits, we have nine years left if we continue to use the same carbon budget as today, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Action is therefore “extremely urgent” and means an end to coal use, the end of fossil fuel subsidies, greater energy savings, greater energy efficiency, enhanced carbon sinks, reduced deforestation and innovation, said Aarnio. Despite the size of the task, she ended on an upbeat note, insisting that the “big wheel/tide has started to turn and that governments and businesses have started to take action”.

Andreas Beckmann acknowledged that there were some “good EU policies” such as the biodiversity strategy and those addressing climate change and the circular economy, but that this was far from enough. “The EU is fiddling while Rome burns and we lose our nature,” he stated bluntly. Beckmann drew attention to the recent Nature Alert campaign led by NGOs including the EEB defending the EU’s Birds and Habitats Directives and the support for these laws from the European Parliament and the majority of EU member states. He highlighted that despite this, the Commission had still not released its report on the directives more than a 1000 days after it announced its investigation into them.

Beckmann reiterated calls from NGOs for the directives to be better implemented and enforced through increased financing, by integrating biodiversity across sectors, a Fitness Check of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and a new EU food and farming policy. The EU needs to “develop an integrated approach” to biodiversity, said Beckmann, which should include a Trans-European Network for Green Infrastructure (TEN-G) and a dedicated “financial framework”. The EU’s climate and energy policies also need to include biodiversity, said Beckmann. “Ninety-five per cent of people feel that protecting the environment is important,” concluded Beckmann. “We need to protect the natural heritage on which we all depend.”

“The circular economy has been with us forever,” said **Walter Stahel**. He explained the concept as that of managing stocks by preserving “their value, quantity and quality,” adding that “we don’t get richer by spending more”.

He highlighted reuse and extending the service life of goods and parts as central to the circular economy. “This means the smallest loop possible,” said Stahel giving the example of stand-up shipping containers and bank notes as products that are constantly re-used. Bank notes, he said, come “with all the signs of previous owners such as bacteria and drugs, but you don’t care because you trust the guy at the central bank that puts them into circulation”. Hence, “trust is a key element” of the circular economy.

Another important tenet is the need to adopt taxation systems to make them fit for purpose in this new world. At the moment we tax labour and subsidise resource consumption and this needs to change, said Stahel. He cited Sweden that had decided that from 1 January 2017 it would reduce VAT on repairs. This is a “very clear signal” of change, said Stahel, adding that research shows how the circular economy brings about “massive reductions in CO2” and an increase in employment. He also highlighted that by deciding to make products last, people go from being consumers to being users, and in turn, foster a local/regional economy. Furthermore, “it is cheaper to repair than to remanufacture, hence the return on investment is much higher from a recycling plant [than a factory that makes a product from scratch] and so it is better for bonuses!” Stahel also dismissed concerns that the circular economy could limit progress, drawing a line from the disposable rockets of yesterday to the reusable rockets of today.



DISCUSSION

When asked about the obstacles to change, **Aarnio** highlighted the fossil fuel industry, and said that it needed to be clear there will be “winners and losers” in such a huge transition. “Politicians need to woman up,” said Aarnio. She agreed that action to tackle climate change “is slow, but I think more and more we understand that we are all on the same boat and that it is sinking. Complexity has been the factor we fear and the scale [of the problem], but we are starting to face the truth, we are getting there slowly.”

Beckmann said he saw the lack of funding for biodiversity and to enforce the laws that protect nature as a significant obstacle.

Stahel also underlined the fossil fuel industry and called for its subsidies of four trillion dollars a year worldwide to stop. He also called for changes in the tax system. He acknowledged that tax is not an EU competence, but suggested that national governments that fail to adapt will become less competitive compared to frontrunners such as Sweden. He ended by calling for an understanding of the circular economy to be enforced by university courses. “We have to get circular economy knowledge into classrooms, universities, vocational training and board rooms. Not a single university except Strathclyde in Scotland is teaching the circular economy.” Stahel said this was “not an environmental issue, but one of competitiveness”.

Aarnio insisted that “everyone needs to do everything that is humanly possible” to tackle climate change and suggested that this was starting to happen. For example, around the issue of burden sharing, there was an “emerging understanding that everyone needs to do as much as they can”. She asked conference participants to imagine they were in a sinking ship and asked whether would they be waiting to be told what to do or bailing out the water.

Beckmann focused on the need to reach out to different partners, namely the farming community, when dealing with biodiversity, as farmers are part of the problem and part of the solution. “The farming community is not a huge part of the economy,” said Beckmann. A large part of its lobbying power is historical rather than economic. Things cannot go on as they are and I see space for a dialogue.”

Lyon ended the session by asking all panelists for a slogan that could bring about change.

Stahel suggested: “The circular economy is American - do it!”

Aarnio and **Beckmann** conceded they could not come up with something quite as snappy on the spot, but both agreed that positive slogans and stories were key to bringing about change and alleviating fears about the future. Beckmann added that within his lifetime there had been many miracles, not least the fall of the iron curtain, the significant increase in gay rights and recent outpourings of support for refugees. Hence, “a better society is possible,” he insisted. **Stahel** said that “motivation is key,” adding that “we have to make things sexier and visible; the linear economy is visible everywhere.”

BREAKOUT SESSIONS

PARALLEL BREAKOUT SESSION:

Climate and energy

Moderator: **Philippa Nuttall Jones**, EEB Communications Manager

Rapporteur: **Jonathan Gaventa**, Director of E3G

Speakers: **Angela Köppl**, Researcher, Austrian Institute of Economic Research

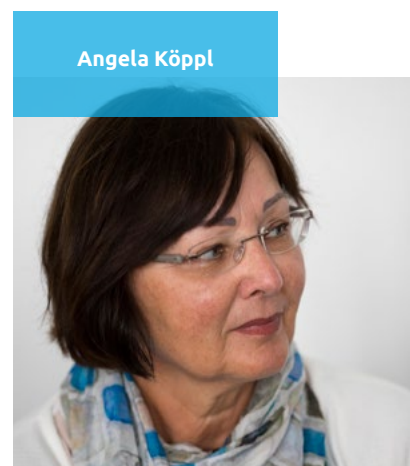
Veronika Galeková, Director, Slovak Association of Photovoltaic Industry

Matthias Buck, Senior Associate EU Energy Policy at Agora Energiewende

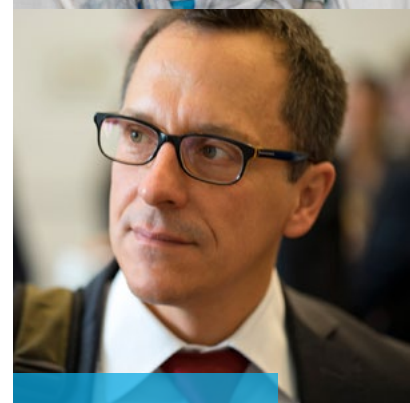
Joined by the Climate and Energy plenary speaker
Ulriikka Aarnio



Philippa Nuttall Jones



Angela Köppl



Matthias Buck

Angela Köppl highlighted that more action was needed in all areas of EU energy policy. Ratification of the Paris climate deal was the first “touchstone,” but it was also important to keep other challenges at the forefront of policymakers’ minds, namely avoiding locking in investments in fossil fuel technologies and creating exit strategies for these industries. Likewise, public budgets that are dependent on revenues from fossil fuels would have to be readjusted, said Köppl. She insisted that the energy transition requires a new mindset with a focus on energy services rather than simply energy supply and the understanding that the energy system also includes infrastructure such as road, railways and buildings. Guidance for the transformation was likewise important, she said.

Matthias Buck highlighted that the EU 2030 targets remained below what was needed to meet the targets of the Paris climate deal and warned that this could lead to investments in stranded assets. Hence, he underlined the need to address coal. He conceded that ultimately it was a “decision of national sovereignty” whether or not to phase out coal, but suggested it was nonetheless impossible for the Commission not to take a position on the issue. “Can coal subsidies still be acceptable?” he asked, suggesting instead that, for example, allocation of EU funds through the Multiannual financial framework (MFF) could be used to support phasing-out coal and to address related socio-economic questions, in short to “help national governments to make the hard choices”. Buck also called for the EU Emissions Trading System (ETS) to be reformed to ensure that it too did not undermine the phase out of coal. Citizens should be playing a key role in the energy transition, highlighted Buck, saying they should have the “right to self-produce and self-consume energy” as part of the Renewable Energy Directive (RED). The question of state aid also needed to be cleared up, said Buck, stating that “DG Competition has created a lot of uncertainty in clean energy investments in Europe as they have questioned the eligibility of state aid instruments”. Hence, the “2030 package needs to provide a stable approach for energy efficiency and renewables”.

Veronika Galekova



Veronika Galekova cheerfully said that her home country of Slovakia was “a good example of how not” to do energy with its continued support for coal. “Many post-communist countries’ politicians do not fully recognise the new situation” of the need for an energy transition, she said, underlining the recent announcement by the Slovakian government for its continued support of coal-firing plants in the country.

DISCUSSION

In line with Galekova’s line of thought, **Köppl** suggested that it was both the Commission and member states who were to blame for failures regarding the energy transition and that everybody needed to take stock of the new reality. “We face a big transition, encompassing all sectors and levels of society, but we still stick to [outdated] economic concepts and still suggest that if we put a green label on everything, everything will come out positive,” she commented. But more fundamental change is needed, she said. For example, “we are still focusing on electricity supply,” said Köppl “but we should remember that only 20% of energy consumption is electricity” and be open to the fact that the future could bring all kinds of “breakthrough technologies” that could change energy and electricity structures and use profoundly.

After discussions which encompassed subsidies, nuclear energy, population and communication tools, **Gaventa** wrapped up the session by calling for a focus on “talking about opportunities, not about problems” with an emphasis on emotions and the role of citizens. He underlined the need for the aim to keep global warming below 1.5, even 2 degrees C, to be “built into targets, international negotiations and instruments”. We should “stop spending money on the bad stuff, and assess long-life structures as they will shape our decisions for the next 40 years.” Within this, “treating our building sector as part of our energy infrastructure will be key,” he said.

Jonathan Gaventa



PARALLEL BREAKOUT SESSION: Biodiversity

Moderator: **Pieter de Pous**, EEB EU Policy Director

Rapporteur: **Luc Bas**, Director of IUCN European Union Representative Office

Speakers: **Wolfgang Suske**, Head of the office, Suske Consulting

Irene Lucius, Regional Conservation Director, WWF Danube-Carpathian Programme

Mohammad Abdel-Razek, Project Manager, GRAS – Global Risk Assessment Services

Joined by the Biodiversity plenary speaker **Andreas Beckmann**, Managing Director of the WWF-International Danube-Carpathian Programme

Wolfgang Suske stated that biodiversity protection and the success of the Birds and Habitats Directives was just one example of where EU integration can bring added-value and that as environmentalists we needed to be more vocal about this. In particular, Suske highlighted Article 6(2) of the Habitats Directive which requires that Member States avoid damaging activities that could significantly disturb protected species or deteriorate protected habitats. He said this article was a crucial part of EU environmental protection legislation. Austria spends €500 million each year on measures aimed at protecting nature on farmlands, mostly through the Rural Development programme under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Since 1995, 80% of all farmers in Austria have taken up these measures, but farmland birds have nonetheless decreased by 42% since 1998 and 83% of protected grasslands in Natura 2000 sites now have an unfavourable conservation status. For plants, animals and birds protected by these directives, the main threats include agriculture, forestry, tourism, and water engineering and management, he said. Suske cited an example of salt lakes in Austria which were losing water due to irrigation by nearby large-scale farms and said it was irresponsible to farm on such an industrial scale beside a Natura 2000 site. Suske stressed that there are many different types of farmers, ranging from those who contribute to the destruction of biodiversity through their farm practices to those who actively protect nature. Hence, for better or worse farmers have a huge influence on biodiversity. Suske suggested it could be beneficial to bring nature-positive farmers together as they too have fears about their income, are uncertain about whether they will get funding in the next period, and whether an area will be designated as protected or not in the future. He concluded by calling for much stricter implementation of existing rules for all activities which destroy and damage biodiversity and for stronger support for farmers who want to improve biodiversity.

Wolfgang Suske



Irene Lucius



Irene Lucius focused on connectivity and the need for a Ten-G infrastructure restoration agenda for Europe. She identified the main challenges for nature as a lack of clear site management objectives, enforcement gaps, a lack of policy integration and a loss of connectivity between different elements in the landscape. She cited, for example, former flood plains which have become monocultures, and which, if restored, would reduce flood risk and have a positive impact on fisheries, nature, tourism, and on local harvests. Lucius also discussed the need to protect virgin forests and migration corridors.



Mohammad Abdel-Razek

Mohammad Abdel-Razek explained how remote sensing technology can be used to detect grassland conversion and monitor grassland status. This tool could be essential to better implement and enforce legislation protecting ecosystems such as forests, grasslands, wetlands, and peatlands as it has the potential to develop monitoring and alert systems for land use change. Remote sensing is an excellent technology for detecting grassland conversion and monitoring grassland status, but it can also be complicated to use and understand, acknowledged Abdel-Razek. The technology summarises hundreds of images then uses a tool to provide geo-referenced sustainability information. It can be used for mapping supply chains, biodiversity and protection areas, carbon stocks, land use change, and social indices. Through a project being carried out with BirdLife Europe, GRAS is developing higher resolution images that are more reliable to detect grassland conversion on very small parcels. The aim is to iron out some of the tool's current limitations so that it does not, for instance, wrongly detect a football field as unconverted grassland. Abdel-Razek asked whether such a monitoring and alert system for Natura 2000 sites in Europe was not long overdue. He said that GRAS now needs to be scaled up with the development of an online platform and the integration of additional data.



DISCUSSION

Pieter de Pous suggested that environmentalists have reason to be hopeful given the progress made in other areas, but **Bas** questioned this optimism given that “so much money was being invested in biodiversity protection yet biodiversity continued to decline” and called for attention to the wider socio-economic context. He also warned about talking about the value of nature with the risk of it being viewed as a mere commodity.

Much of the discussion was focused on the relationship between agriculture and nature and the role of the CAP. A representative from the University of Vienna suggested for example, that environmental farm subsidies should be administered by DG Environment and then distributed by environment ministries and national environmental agencies. **Suske** doubted whether this would change very much. **Lucius** raised the need for sufficient staffing in national ministries to manage Natura 2000 sites and said it was deplorable that DG Environment had so few staff to investigate infringement cases. Equally important was much greater involvement of local stakeholders, she said.

Summarising the debate, **Bas** said that one positive outcome of the months of uncertainty surrounding the Fitness Check of the Nature Directives was that it had allowed NGOs time to collect evidence in support of the directives. He highlighted that there was strong agreement that agriculture was the biggest threat to biodiversity and that other drivers of biodiversity loss such as Invasive Alien Species (IAS), infrastructure development and artificial light, also needed to be tackled. He agreed that there was no one type of farmer, hence a one-size-fits-all approach for the future was problematic. Bas said that more work was necessary to engage farmers in achieving environmental objectives. Uncertainty about the future was particularly worrying for them and so clear incentives for more sustainable farming methods were vital, he said. Bas highlighted the need to manage expectations about the next CAP reform and that it was crucial to prove to farmers that the current CAP was not working and hence the need for a different approach. “We must be ambitious and we need the right arguments,” he said, adding that it was important to demonstrate that the CAP was not even sustainable on the jobs front. Regarding the GRAS remote sensing system, Bas expressed surprise that policymakers were not lining up to use this new technology and agreed that the benefits of it had not yet been exploited to their full extent. In general, we needed bolder language when talking about biodiversity, said Bas, musing over the idea of a “land use revolution”.

Pieter de Pous



Luc Bas



PARALLEL BREAKOUT SESSION: Circular Economy



Friedrich Hinterberger

Moderator: **Friedrich Hinterberger**, Founding President, Sustainable Europe Research Institute (SERI), Austria

Rapporteur: **Iain Gulland**, Chief Executive Zero Waste Scotland

Speakers: **Monique Lempers**, Value Chain and Commercial Director, Fairphone

Clarissa Morawski, Managing Director, Reloop

Stephane Arditi, EEB Policy Manager for Products and Waste

Joined by the Circular Economy plenary speaker
Walter R. Stahel

Monique Lempers



Monique Lempers explained that the Fairphone was “designed for longevity”. She insisted that durability was the key factor in reducing the environmental impact of products. Extending the lifetime of a phone by five years reduces GHG emissions by 30%, said Lempers. The Fairphone “is easy to repair because of its modularity,” she said, hence the part that is damaged or out-dated can simply be changed. Likewise, it is “drop safe” and therefore difficult to break. She recommended introducing certifications, labels and standardisation to ensure that other products and sectors follow the same path.

Clarissa Morawski insisted that “without basic environmental laws, we cannot move forward” and that there needed to be certain conditions in place to help transform our economy effectively and that these conditions needed to support each other. One of the key elements of this, according to Morawski, was the Extended Producers Responsibility (EPR), and a clear determination of who has responsibility for what. Industry tends to focus on dealing with waste in the ways that cost them least, she said, adding that this often means “exporting waste to developing countries”. To help tackle such issues, “we need to reduce taxes on labour and put them instead on resources,” said Morawski, citing deposit-refund schemes as economic instruments that “should apply to many more products than only beverage containers”.

Stephane Arditi insisted that “business as usual is not possible”. He noted that decision makers say that they are sceptical about the job creation potential of the circular economy, but “the current model does not work” and we will lose more if we continue with business as usual, said Arditi.



Clarissa Morawski

For the circular economy to work, “we need more businesses on board,” said Arditi, and we need product standards at EU level to avoid 28 different standards across the EU. Economic incentives and disincentives also need to be ensured and awareness about the circular economy raised. An EU-wide product policy is essential because of the single market and an open, product database, insisted Arditi. Implementation of this will be easier if it is more profitable to comply than not; legal uncertainties are avoided in policies; and compliance is used as a condition for EU funding.

Walter Stahel asked attendees in the breakout session to think of a Christmas tree. “After the feast what do you do with it? Burn it? Or rather you could: dismantle it gently, share it or upcycle.” He then asked “whose choice is that? Yours!” He also highlighted how the circular economy is local and can bring about positive results for job creation, the balance of trade and the reduction of GHG emissions.

DISCUSSION

The discussion focused on who was in charge of changes to the economy, with the panellists deciding that consumers have most power. They agreed that politicians should not wait any longer to push the circular economy and should work with others, in particular businesses, to make this happen. Discussions around the circular economy should not just be based on dry facts, but also on emotions, according to the group. For example, the emotional link to marine litter can trigger behavioural change.

When panellists were asked which was their favourite material for the circular economy, they made it clear that it would be wrong to arbitrarily favour one material over another. Instead of a preferred material, they highlighted the need to emphasise preferred functionalities and characteristics. **Stahel** said that any favourite material must have value to ensure a proper take-back scheme.

Morawski suggested that the word “recycled” did not always mean a lot and that the process was often in Canada called “recovery” because of the few environmental benefits. The need to be clear and coherent was also underlined during discussions about advertising and the need for “false green claims” to be tackled.

Summarising, **Iain Gulland** noted that power lies with the consumer, but that she needed to be educated to make responsible choices and given more environmentally-friendly product choices. Common standards and definitions would help, as would economic incentives. Embedding the circular economy in university courses would also be a great help in boosting it, said Gulland.



Walter Stahel



Iain Gulland

PLENARY:

Conclusions and the way forward – closing keynote speech

Moderator: **Jeremy Wates**, EEB Secretary General
Reports back from the break-out sessions



Jeremy Wates

Jonathan Gaventa from the climate change session said that his group had highlighted the importance of the way we talk about climate and energy and that rather than just stating facts, climate experts needed to reconnect with emotion to inspire citizens. He also underlined the added value of looking at climate change, the challenges and solutions, from an EU level. Gaventa noted the “tsunami of [climate and energy] legislation and policies,” but noted that despite this, “the EU is not on track to keep global warming to 1.5°C/2°C” and that we “need to build ambition” to make this reality. This should include a “coal phase out,” said Gaventa, highlighting that his group had underlined the need to ensure that EU funding was enabling this and not facilitating the opposite. “The Commission is amending some of its approaches,” he acknowledged, but suggested that it still needed to improve and “stop spending on bad bits” of the EU energy system.

Feeding back from the biodiversity break-out session, **Luc Bas** insisted primarily on the need to “work with farmers” and to “integrate them into the system to safeguard biodiversity”. A thorough assessment regarding the greening or not of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) needs to be done and then we can “use the proof to convince farmers to do it right next time,” said Bas. He followed up this conclusion during the question and answer session by highlighting the importance of working together to achieve common goals. For example, when asked about the possibility of increasing the amount of renewable energy in Europe while saving biodiversity hotspots and not harming them with large hydro dams, for instance, Bas answered that “there is enough space to have renewable and not harm wildlife”.

From the circular economy break-out group, **Iain Gulland** said that discussions had been about the barriers to change and how people were focused on them rather than the circular economy package per se. Despite this, the circular economy was already happening, as evidenced by the “great presentation” by Fairphone. To build on this, “we need to make conditions better for businesses”, make sure we have “the right targets and economic instruments” and ensure that the process of change is “backed up with hard evidence” so that the “consumer understands” what is happening. For example, we need to explain what climate neutral means, why it is important, how processes can be reshaped without “throwing the baby out with the bathwater” and the need for collective action. The move to a circular economy “is an opportunity for us to be braver,” he said. To encourage change, civil society should be providing emotional arguments to politicians, said Gulland, for example, around the creation of local jobs. He said that the break-out group also agreed that NGOs need to work with others to do this: “we can’t do it ourselves, we need to go out and collaborate.” He gave the example of how NGOs working on the circular economy are collaborating with designers, who are also “bursting to get out of silos and collaborate”.

A sustainable Europe in a sustainable world: Strengthening the environmental voice in global governance

Keynote speech (video address): **Erik Solheim**, Executive Director, United Nations Environment Programme

Respondents: **Elisabeth Freytag-Rigler**, Head of Department – EU Environmental Affairs, Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Environment and Water Management, Austria and Chair of the EEA Management Board

Céline Charveriat, Executive Director, Institute for European Environmental Policy (IEEP)

Eric Solheim opened his recorded address by thanking the EU and the EEB for leading on policies such as the Aarhus Convention and the Zero Mercury campaign. He said that such environmental actions meant that rivers were now less polluted and that such change could happen in most developed economies. Key to progress was a strong “citizens movement” and having businesses that were producing the necessary technology and operational answers. Solheim gave Germany as the “best example” of such policies and of having made the political decision to improve the quality of nature, which includes a “strong civil society movement, a strong green party and a strong dedication to move on the environment”. If this “can be replicated in the rest of the world, we can make huge progress,” said Solheim.


But he said that if this vision were to be realised, then we, NGOs and UNEP, for example, need to “change track” and to “speak the language of the people, not technical languages”. He said that for this reason, UNEP would henceforth call itself United Nations Environment and abolish its acronym. “We should be understandable for my mother and for my adult children. If not, how can we be understood on the streets of Warsaw and Madrid? Pollution is a central issue, horrendous plastic waste and food waste, we need much more sustainable consumption patterns, these issues are close to people and we can speak to them in a new fashion.” Solheim continued: “We really want to reach out to EU citizens and the world. Seven million people die every year because of bad air or bad water, this is the same as cancer. It must stop. We will link pollution and health, people do not want to breathe bad air.” He added: “We used to believe that the ocean is so big that you could throw anything into it and could fish any fish. But this is not the case, we must stop obscene plastic pollution and restore fish stocks and restore coral reefs, and green and restore marine national parks.” However, “we can only do this by working together,” he said, citing “many companies that are moving ahead such as Unilever, Kelloggs and Nestle” and noted that Total has said it will not drill in the Arctic “because of climate science” and instead it plans to be one of the three biggest solar companies on the planet by 2030. He suggested that NGOs were sometimes far too critical of business: “You need to name and shame the businesses that are a problem, but you also need to name and fame businesses that do the right thing”. Earth is a “beautiful planet,” concluded Solheim, praising the wonders of biodiversity and asking “How can we be the generation which destroys this?”. He urged conference attendees to “put pressure on businesses and government and work with them to make change”.



A portrait of Elisabeth Freytag-Rigler, a woman with blonde hair, wearing a green jacket, speaking into a microphone.

Elisabeth Freytag-Rigler

Elisabeth Freytag-Rigler agreed with the need to “speak to others” and for real change, noting that even if “we all had a Tesla [car] we would still have a traffic jam” and called for a move to an economy based on buying services rather than products. She highlighted the importance of business, NGOs and governments working together and suggested that the European Commission could facilitate a “peer learning exercise” in the context of Agenda 2030, for example. She also insisted on the importance of legislation and that “we shouldn’t only count on voluntary actions from business”.

A portrait of Céline Charveriat, a woman with blonde hair and glasses, wearing a colorful patterned jacket, smiling.

Céline Charveriat

Céline Charveriat was unflinching in her support for the SDGs and the need for the EU to stop suggesting that no-one recognises its actions and to focus instead on implementing these goals, in particular those related to sustainable consumption (SDG 12). Likewise, she highlighted the need for the EU to acknowledge its fair share in terms of emissions and climate change, to also take responsibility for emissions from the production of goods outside the EU for European consumers and to agree to take the necessary action. “We need to celebrate successes and to be truthful about the way we are going,” she said. Better communication and different narratives were also key, suggested Charveriat, noting that “only 10% of people are aware of what governments have agreed to under the SDGs”. She agreed that the role played by companies is “critical” and warned against seeing the business sector as “monolithic”. There are “obviously laggards and pioneers,” said Charveriat, urging NGOs to do more to differentiate between them and encourage change. She also called on the environmental sector to reach out more and work more closely with others, such as the human rights community. Regarding deregulation she said that there were “genuine problems” with regulation and that NGOs should have the “confidence to work with companies to define better regulation”.

Jeremy Wates drew the conference to a close by mentioning the elephant in the room, namely the UK’s vote to leave the EU. “Brexit is raising questions about the future of Europe,” he said. “Leaders are being forced to recognize the need for change but are often coming with the wrong answers, based on deregulation and ‘less Europe’. We need a new and positive narrative. There is a very negative discourse about Europe out there.” He highlighted that during the conference we had heard Ulrikka Aarnio, a climate campaigner being optimistic and Andreas Beckmann being similarly optimistic about the possibility of tackling challenges to biodiversity. Wates said we should “focus on this positive energy and try to build on it”. The way forward is largely set out in Agenda 2030, which has been agreed by governments a year ago and now needed to be “rolled out and implemented,” he said. It was disappointing that this crucial process was not even mentioned by European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker in his 2016 State of the Union speech, said Wates, but at the same time he welcomed the fact that the speech had not focused on the better regulation agenda as in the previous year.

“We are moving outside the safe operating space for humanity,” warned Wates, underlining that now was the time to “pull back from the brink” with “concrete” proposals and actions.

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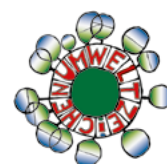
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