

Policy area: Environment
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High-Level Sustainable Development Goals 2030 Conference

Background

Earlier this month the European Commission hosted a high-level conference on how to best translate the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals at European level. The conference followed the recent European Commission Reflection Paper '[Towards a Sustainable Europe by 2030](#)'. It gathered over 1000 participants and included speeches from senior speakers such as First Vice-President Frans Timmermans and Vice-President Jyrki Katainen at the European Commission, and Alexander Stubb, Vice-President at the European Investment Bank.

The conference focused on a need for a holistic approach to the issue, the need to speed up the process and broaden the debate, for example focusing more on the social sustainability.

See below for a breakdown of the key ideas raised at the Conference, a recording of which can also be accessed [here](#).

Morning Session

From Challenge to Opportunity: Towards a Modern, Sustainable EU Society

Key ideas

Frans Timmermans, EC

Key areas to work on in the future:

- Translating SDG commitments into real action could possibly lead to a big societal backlash, which views this as an elite issue, refusing scientific evidence. We need concrete measures that people digest.
- Key priority is not making good analysis but instead mobilising society, to get them to understand it's not a threat but an opportunity.
- We must find an equitable way to share the burden and we must regulate when it's necessary eg. downsizing major corporations.
- Education, health and housing issues are of key importance to European public and that is all part of inter-sustainability.

Jyrki Katainen, EC

He outlined 3 priority policy issues:

- Circular economy, coming with many opportunities and a better way to regulate the modern economy.
- Focusing on ethical artificial intelligence (AI) especially in the areas of healthcare and social services. We must make sure that people adapt to it by using and improving the education system and hold the Member States accountable.
- Focus on fiscal sustainability and responsibility. Successful welfare states have high levels of fiscal sustainability thus it's a prerequisite.
- Katainen argued for not overshooting and over-regulating, but instead creating an enabling environment.

Priorities for the next Commission:

- Timmermans: President should take charge of SDGs, together with Vice Presidents and prepare a solid, holistic roadmap to 2030.
- Katainen: There must be an action plan for the 2% goal. The EC must start to regulate on the AI and linked to that EC must do more in modernising the educational systems by holding Member States accountable.

Global and European sustainability challenges affecting our way of life

Key ideas

- Acting fast is a major priority – even if we deliver on the Paris agreement we will encounter major losses eg. coral reefs and ice caps.
- Need to reflect on displacement of people – think about a Nansen Planetary Passport
- European Union is a powerful convergence machine, however it still lagging behind the US on human capital.
- Three major challenges the EU is facing now are: ageing, climate change and changing technologies.
- Private companies need a standard methodology and build a coalition standard accounting under OECD.
- Business need collaborate more and there must be more openness for innovation.

Alexander Stubb, Vice-President, EIB

Stubb outlined 3 mega trends for the incoming Commission: climate change, demographic change, value changes. He argued we should work towards European bank of sustainable development. He offered 3 policy proposals:

- Leadership must be taken on climate and sustainability.
- AI and robotisation must come to forefront.
- Continue to focus and promote European values and multilateralism.

EU and global performance on SDGs looking back, looking forward

Key ideas

- Europe has to lead on sustainability, it needs to lead more adequately instead of by example. There needs to be a solid plan for decarbonisation, a European wide system;
- We need to champion Green Eurasian Infrastructure, whilst holding China accountable;
- Europe needs to decrease its consumption;
- We need a more regulated environment and multinational companies need to talk more with the governments, their clients and employees on the importance of SDGs;
- Common themes: rules and playing fields, making profits and contributing to SDGs are not mutually exclusive.

The systematic transformation a shift towards integrated frameworks

Key ideas

- Must create a new narrative about food with a Common Food Policy, with relocalised food systems, support social innovations, putting resilience above efficiency gains, and diversity above uniformity, aligning public policies and the organisation of markets with agroecology;

- Food waste can be managed through innovation such as KITRO (food waste start-up) by focusing on: food quality, process optimisation, changes the menu offer, as an example for the tourism sector;
- Procurement must be part of the conversation, with a creation of a broader network for procurement officers across the EU to share best practice following the Danish example;
- For food business shareholders can lead the company through shared views on for example creating added value through sustainability, with Colruyt Group being a successful Belgian example.

Making it happen, in Europe and in the World

Key ideas

- Education on sustainability is key – for all individuals and all generations (both future and current decision makers). The focus should be on *how* it is taught and on creating relevant the material for teachers that can be used at all levels.
- Management education is underestimated as an enabler for the SDGs. With over 17,000 business schools worldwide, graduates i.e. current decision makers, should be given the tools to bring SDGs into their decision making, every day.
- Don't overlook the power of the individual.
- Technology innovation including advances in nano-electronics, digital and artificial intelligence are needed to tackle the problems of the 21st Century. Europe should lead the way, and drive development on a global scale.
- Scale is important when talking about innovation. Meeting the right people at the right time is important to connect ideas to growth opportunities. Hello Tomorrow is a non-profit that connects start-ups with engineers, helping to mobilise deep tech forces to take action.
- Products as a Service - viewing, and providing, products as a service rather than for a single use cycle will incentivise manufacturers to make products which last longer, can be upgraded or repaired and are material banks for the future. Giving manufacturers the responsibility will help drive change more quickly – e.g. Philips providing light as a service to Schiphol Airport.
- Material Banks and Material Passports – Rau and Turntoo online platform acts as a material register (like a land registers), it lists all the materials used in construction, their worth and analyses the overall circularity of the building. This approach means, upon deconstruction, buildings are written down to the minimum material value (not zero).
- The online platform Ubuntu provides opportunities for sustainable hackers - connected academics, researchers, activists working at grassroots level on innovative solutions - to connect to large organisations who have the capacity to scale up action. Within two weeks of launch a community of 600 people had contributed 500 solutions on plastic pollution.

Next Steps: Europe's Missions for the Future

Key ideas

- A clear road map is needed to translate the SDGs into a coherent plan - taking a mission-orientated approach to addressing the SDGs would bring sectors together to

solve the ‘wicked problems’ under the banner of a time-bound, ambitious and tangible mission (a current example is ocean plastics reduction). Mission-orientated approaches better recognise the complexity of societal problems, allow for long-term political scene-setting, and create the space for multiple, simultaneous, bottom-up experimentation projects to exist. This approach places a value on potential positive spill overs which may result from cross-sectoral insights. (Speaker - Mariana Mazzacato, Director of the Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose, UCL)

- The SDGs should, as they do for DG R&I, be used to focus and frame the work of other DGs including for example Trade, Industry.
- Fair globalization and sustainable finance cannot happen without responsible business conduct and proper human rights due diligence of companies.
- There needs to be an enabling environment, with a supportive legal framework, and funding available so work can be done independently, this will create and foster dialogue between businesses, civil society and government.

Further information:

- [Sustainable Europe 2030 – EPSC](#)
- [Reflection Paper Towards a Sustainable Europe by 2030](#)
- [Europe’s Sustainability Puzzle: Broadening the Debate](#)