

EEB Annual Conference 2019 Report



Sailing the winds of change for **EUROPE'S ENVIRONMENT**

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Umweltforum, Berlin

held in cooperation with



DNR
DEUTSCHER
NATURSCHUTZRING

EUROPE'S LARGEST NETWORK
OF ENVIRONMENTAL CITIZENS'
ORGANISATIONS



Working for a better future where
people and nature thrive together

Author Khaled Diab
Conference photos Sonia Goicoechea
Layout and design Gemma Bowcock
Editor Anton Lazarus
Editor responsible Jeremy Wates

Rue des Deux Eglises 14-16
Brussels, Belgium

+32 (0)2 289 1090
eeb@eeb.org

eeb.org
meta.eeb.org

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**Our 2019 Annual Conference was held in cooperation
with our German member Deutscher Naturschutzring.**



DNR stands up for nature conservation and
sustainability. Founded in 1950, the network brings
together 87 environmental organisations, which
reach almost 10 million people.

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INTRODUCTION

The Church of the Resurrection (Auferstehungskirche) in East Berlin was an underground hotspot for the opposition to the East German police state until the breaching of the Berlin wall in 1989, where people dared to dream of a better, freer future.

Thirty years after the Iron Curtain came down, environmentalists and policymakers gathered in the former church to discuss a different wind of change that is ruffling the curtains of the current order, as Europeans wake up to the scale of the climate and environmental crisis facing humanity and demand urgent action.

For that reason, the EEB's annual conference in 2019 took to the waves under the theme 'Sailing the Winds of Change for Europe's Environment'. The one-day event brought together leading politicians, policymakers, civil servants and civil society actors, including youth activists, to discuss ways of translating the mandate for change demanded by EU citizens into sustainable policies that safeguard prosperity and protect the environment.



WELCOME AND OPENING

Kai Niebert

President of Deutscher Naturschutzring

Jouni Nissinen

EEB President

Head of the Environmental Policy Unit

Finnish Association for Nature Conservation

The day began with short welcoming speeches focusing on hopes for what the EU can do for the environment over the next five years.

"The fall of the Berlin wall was not only the beginning of the German reunification process but also the start of a wider European integration process," reflected **Niebert**. "We tried to tear down walls then and we are trying to avoid new walls going up now."

"Big changes are coming, to politics, to the environment and to the whole of society," foresaw **Nissinen**, noting that the contrast between former European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker's and new Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen's vision and discourse "could hardly be starker".

"We had a Paris moment for the climate. We now need a Paris moment for biodiversity," he added.

This kind of ambitious pursuit of change requires massive commitment and buy-in. "We not only need a whole-of-government approach but also a whole-of-society approach," noted **ten Brink**.

Thankfully, great swathes of society are already convinced. "Long before the climate strikes began, the environment was one of the key concerns of EU citizens," said **Heidegger**.

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Below: our moderators for the day,
EEB Global Policies and Sustainability
Director **Patrizia Heidegger** and
EEB EU Policy Director
Patrick ten Brink



*Keynote speeches
about vision, hope
and opportunities,
followed by Q&A.*

EUROPE PROTECTS?

The EU's role in safeguarding the natural world and human wellbeing

Karsten Sach

Director General 'International and European Policy, Climate Policy',
German Federal Ministry for the Environment

Pascal Canfin

Chair of the European Parliament
Environment Committee

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"The EU is competent to act in all areas of environment policy," introduced Patrizia Heidegger. "According to EuroBarometer, 94% of citizens are concerned about the environment with climate change, air pollution and the growing amount of waste topping the list of environmental issues. And these concerns have only grown over the last couple of years."

Talking about the yet-to-be-released European Green Deal, **Canfin** said that von der Leyen's flagship initiative needed to focus on developing a new roadmap for EU financing that marshalled the resources at the EU's disposal, a fair transition, and the setting of clear targets and deadlines. Describing an unreformed Common Agricultural Policy as a threat, he stressed that: "Agricultural policy needs to be under the umbrella of the European Green Deal."

Predicting that the European Green Deal "will make progress over the next five years", **Sach** noted that: "we should make the 2050 climate neutrality targets binding." He also urged the EU to pursue ambitious goals on biodiversity. "The Commission should announce a new Environmental Action Programme at the start of its mandate," he added.



Karsten Sach

Below: **Pascal Canfin** joined the conference via videocall



*Multiple stakeholder vision
for the next five years:
hopes and fears for the next
European Commission,
European Parliament and
EU Presidencies.*

ALL HANDS ON DECK

Five years of common challenges and shared solutions

Rebecca Freitag

UN Youth Delegate on Sustainable Development of Germany

Dirk Messner

Co-Chair of the German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU)

Nick Molho

Executive Director, Aldersgate Group

Linn Selle

President, European Movement Germany

The panellists were positive about the potential of a European Green Deal. "We are not sceptical. It is very important to have a European Green Deal as a broad idea," said **Selle**. "But the devil is always in the detail, and there is the question of implementation."

The transition to a climate neutral and sustainable society will involve teething pains that could potentially hurt vulnerable members of society. To avoid this requires a just transition, the panellists agreed.

"We will not get environmental issues right, if we do not get social cohesion right," insisted **Messner**, which involves, he explained, aligning EU policies to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals and the related 2030 Agenda.

A growing number of businesses are weighing in behind efforts to shift the economy towards sustainability, pointed out **Molho**. "Progressive businesses used to be a small minority," he noted. "There's been a significant shift in business support for action on climate and the environment in the last 18 months. This must now be matched by an ambitious EU policy package."

The renewed momentum to tackle the climate emergency and other environmental issues has been thanks to youth activists, such as Sweden's Greta Thunberg, who have not only been out in force demanding action to protect their futures but have also galvanised support from many older people and reinvigorated the environmental movement.

"A lot of people say this is thanks to the youth. But we could never have achieved this without the work NGOs have been doing," insisted **Freitag**, who stressed that urgency of action and resolve were of the essence. "For that we need people with a positive vision and courage, not politicians driven by fear."

Linn Selle



Dirk Messner



Nick Molho



Rebecca Freitag



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Small-group workshops focusing on one priority. Participants were free to move around and contribute to several table discussions.

ALL HANDS ON DECK

Five years of common challenges and shared solutions

Following the panel debate, the participants at the conference broke out into smaller groups to discuss individual priority areas. Each group attempted to formulate a vision for their theme and how it can contribute to a just and sustainable transition.

The 15 themes covered were:

1. Sustainable food systems
2. Clean air
3. Boosting biodiversity
4. Non-toxic environment
5. Circular economy
6. Economic transition and responsible trade
7. Climate emergency
8. Getting prices right and the MFF
9. Responsible industry
10. Right to clean water
11. Oceans and fisheries
12. Aarhus Convention and environmental justice
13. Sustainable Development Goals
14. Better regulation and implementation and the rule of law
15. Youth



The groups identified a plethora of opportunities that would emerge over the coming five years, the EEB's Patrizia Heidegger reported. The Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030 Agenda can be used, some suggested, not only to guide EU policies but also to construct a narrative of hope for a better future.

In addition, the European Green Deal should act as a framework to bind together all the disparate policies required to facilitate Europe's transition, with the EU's budget and various financial instruments marshalled to promote sustainability. This includes reforming the Common Agricultural Policy to help improve Europe's agricultural practices and food system to ensure it improves the health of citizens and the environment alike.

This transition requires new criteria for measuring success, hence alternatives to conventional economic growth indicators are required, such as those gauging quality of life, welfare and wellbeing.

With extinction rates reaching alarming rates, it is crucial to focus on restoring biodiversity over the next five years. Opportunities for this include the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration (2021-2030) and a post-2020 EU Biodiversity Strategy.

The groups suggested a broad array of policies and actions. These included making the SDGs the overarching umbrella for EU policies and making the achievement of the SDGs binding and enforceable.

Not only should the EU budget and its various financial programmes be aligned with the European Green Deal, funding from them should be made conditional upon the achievement of environmental, social and sustainability goals.

The so-called 'one in, one out' principle for 'better regulation' that has been floated by the von der Leyen Commission must be scrapped. Fewer regulations does not necessarily translate to better regulations and could hurt the environment and people's welfare. Better regulation requires evaluating regulations on their merit – gauging their quality, not their quantity.

The EU must stop exporting its sustainability shortcomings to other parts of the world by reducing or eliminating the externalisation of environmental and social costs. Authorities should robustly enforce EU environmental laws and public prosecutors should be empowered to vigorously pursue infringements.

Stakeholders also have vital roles to play and must be involved in the policymaking process, it was agreed. Civil society can act on multiple levels, including campaigning, influencing policymaking, awareness-raising, monitoring, empowering citizens, especially marginalised groups, such as young people and minorities.



Representatives from governments of Member States' past, current and upcoming EU presidencies discussed environmental priorities.

CHARTING A COURSE

How can governments set the agenda for a greener Europe?

Austria	Elisabeth Freytag-Rigler Head of EU Environmental Affairs, Ministry of Sustainability and Tourism
Finland	Terhi Lehtonen State Secretary for the Environment
Germany	Karsten Sach Director General 'International and European Policy, Climate Policy', Federal Ministry for the Environment
Portugal	Alexandra Carvalho Secretary General, Ministry of Environment

What governments can do is to set the policy agenda in such a way as to make Europe greener. The speakers on the panel represented current, past and future EU presidencies.

The panel agreed that the EU's policy agenda over the coming few years, which have been identified as critical for the future of the planet, must shift beyond the climate to embrace a broad spectrum of interconnected issues, including agriculture, biodiversity, social justice and economic transition.

"There is a key role for governments as first movers or frontrunners," explained **Lehtonen**. "We need to ensure better alignment of other policies, such as agricultural policy and the EU budgets... We will need more Europe, not less, with all the challenges that entails."

Lehtonen urged holistic, joined-up thinking from governments: "The systemic nature of the challenge should be the starting point of setting the agenda."

"It is good that climate is so high on the agenda. It is good that we have a European Green Deal. It is important that other important environmental issues are also on the agenda," echoed **Freytag-Rigler**. As an example, she suggested: "I am of the opinion that we should have a European strategy to implement the SDGs."



Sach maintained that designing and implementing an effective European Green Deal that serves society and the environment required the involvement of and buy-in from a broad spectrum of stakeholders, especially civil society. “We need very close partnerships. Civil society matters,” he insisted.

He went on to highlight what he thought would be the headline policy focuses for the German presidency: combating climate change, linking sustainability with digital technology and helping shape an ambitious post-2020 biodiversity agenda.

Emphasising that “it’s not too late, but we need ambition and we need to move fast,” **Carvalho** focused on the need to set up a “just transition fund” for the countries that are most affected by environmental degradation or will be initially hurt by the shift to sustainability.

“In Portugal climate change is a very strong concern,” she cited by way of an example, “Portugal is the European country most vulnerable to climate change.”

Watch ► now

Karsten Sach



Alexandra Carvalho



CONCLUSIONS AND THE WAY FORWARD

Toni Vidan of Zelena akcija – Friends of the Earth Croatia and EEB Board member from Croatia which would take over the EU Presidency from the start of 2020, summed up the day's proceedings and delivered the concluding remarks.

"In these huge, chaotic times of transition, it takes a child to say that the emperor is naked," he told the audience, in a reference to the youth climate movement and its leading light 16-year-old Greta Thunberg.

This is not the first time that the environmental movement has initiated such a massive shift in perceptions. "I have a strong sense of déjà vu. I was here in March 1995, for the first climate convention, COP," Vidan said, recalling how then Chancellor Helmut Kohl's environment minister, a young Angela Merkel, who presided over that landmark gathering, congratulated the environmental movement for its role in paving the way to that moment.

Vidan suggested that the mainstream environmental movement needed to take a leaf out of the schoolchildren's playbook. "Be courageous," he urged. "Let's not think in terms of what is politically feasible from the bureaucracy in Brussels. Let's start living more in accordance with this moment of huge opportunity for the environmental transition. Let's call things by their real name."

He also urged those present to be the conduit between the EU institutions and the environmental community. "What the grassroots and youth movement need from us is to succeed in clearly communicating to them what the hell is going on in Brussels, and what member states are actually doing in that process." When it came to the European Green Deal, which had not yet been unveiled at the time of the conference, Vidan noted that expectations were high. "My sense is that if that deal is not just, it will not deliver," he emphasised, reiterating the importance of a fair transition. "Solidarity needs to be the essence of the Green Deal."

Vidani sent out three key messages to the upcoming presidencies of the EU:

1. To show strong and ambitious leadership;
2. To show strong and ambitious leadership;
3. To show strong and ambitious leadership.

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AMBITIOUS HORIZONS

During the drinks reception, the German Environment Minister **Svenja Schulze** spoke enthusiastically about the priorities for the upcoming German EU Presidency.

In reference to the growing public interest in environmental issues, she said, “we want to use this energy and create fresh momentum for environmental protection. We want to demonstrate Europe’s capability to act on climate.” She added, “It will pay off for all Europeans.”

She then explained how Germany’s turn at the EU’s helm would aim to advance climate action and biodiversity protection, particularly by contributing to an ambitious 8th Environment Action Programme.

Finally, Schulze highlighted another “wind of change to utilise for the environment”: digital technologies. She elaborated that digitalisation has an enormous potential for sustainability and that steps should be taken to see this potential realised.







European Environmental Bureau

Rue des deux Eglises 14-16
1000 Brussels, Belgium

Tel +32 2 289 1090

eeb@eeb.org

eeb.org