

2020 EEB Annual Conference Report



EEB

European
Environmental
Bureau

From the ashes of a pandemic
TO AN EVER GREENER DEAL

Securing Europe's Environmental Leadership

9 November 2020

EUROPE'S LARGEST NETWORK
OF ENVIRONMENTAL CITIZENS'
ORGANISATIONS



Working for a better future where
people and nature thrive together

Editor responsible Jeremy Wates

*This report is largely based on the [article written by Khaled Diab](#) and originally published on the EEB's news website [META](#).

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Keynote speakers



Kate Raworth
Senior Research
Associate, Oxford
University



Virginijus Sinkevičius
Commissioner for the Environment,
Oceans and Fisheries
European Commission

Speakers and panellists



Johanna Sandahl
President
European Environmental Bureau



Florika Fink-Hooijer
Director General of DG
Environment



Leonore Gewessler
Austrian Minister of Climate Action,
Environment, Energy, Mobility,
Innovation and Technology



Pascal Canfin
Member of the European
Parliament, Chair of Environment
Committee



Ana Colovic Lesoska
Executive Director of Eko-svest
(North Macedonia), Goldman Prize
Award winner 2019



Tonny Nowshin
Environmental Justice and
Degrowth activist



Elisabeth Freytag-Rigler
Head of Directorate EU-
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Federal Ministry for Sustainability
and Tourism



Jeremy Wates
Secretary General
European Environmental Bureau

Moderators and rapporteurs



Patrick ten Brink
Deputy Secretary General and
Director of EU Policy
European Environmental Bureau



Patrizia Heidegger
Director for Global Policies and
Sustainability
European Environmental Bureau

INTRODUCTION

At the dawn of the new decade, humanity was already facing three fundamental challenges: climate breakdown, mass extinction and a flood of pollution that had reached every corner of the world. The Covid-19 pandemic has further underlined the fragility of human society – and also reminded us of the possibilities for doing things differently.

As we grapple with the pandemic in Europe and try to draw lessons from it, we need a vision for a better future. A future where the enjoyment of fresh air, clean water and a safe environment is a right for people everywhere. Working with, rather than against, nature to boost our resilience to future threats.

Through the European Green Deal, the European Union has indicated it is serious about building a greener future, but will the actions proposed be sufficient to drive a real shift? Which other policies and measures do we need to achieve real sustainability? Will the EU's relations with other parts of the world act as a brake on its environmental ambition – or can they be the means for amplifying its impact?

This conference reflected on the first year¹ of the European Green Deal and how the disruption caused by the pandemic can and must be used to accelerate the green transition rather than derail it. It will ask what still needs to be done for Europe to embrace and implement truly transformative policies that inspire action at home and abroad.

Having taken place less than a week after the US elections, the conference also looked at the EU's position in the wider world and asked whether, when it comes to environment-related policies, we are punching above or below our weight, and what Europe can do better to support green transitions globally.

Breaking with convention, the European Environmental Bureau's annual conference took place virtually, instead of the usual physical event, such as the one which [took place in Berlin in 2019](#).

Hundreds of people registered for the event, from every corner of Europe and beyond, and wandered around the conference's e-spaces. A peak of 1,300 people tuned into the speeches and panel discussions.

The main message from the one-day event were that the European Union needs to shift from a focus on the 'dough' of economic growth to the 'doughnut of wellbeing' within planetary limits. The EU must dare to be more ambitious with its Green Deal and build back better after the COVID-19 pandemic.

The event was structured in four parts and kicked off with a session asking the question: European Green Deal: system change or semantic change? In this session, Kate Raworth, Senior Research Associate, Oxford University, presented her ground-breaking 'Doughnut economics' model and addressed the question of how transformative the European Green Deal and recovery measures are.

In the second session, EU Environment Commissioner [Virginijus Sinkevičius](#) and [Jeremy Wates](#), EEB Secretary General, discussed the EU's leadership's role in 'building back better' and the concern of whether we are not just repeating the same mistake of focusing on growth rather than sustainability and resilience for human and planetary well-being.

A lively discussion ensued in the third session on 'Building back better, building back differently'. [Leonore Gewessler](#), Austrian Minister of Climate Action, Environment, Energy, Mobility, Innovation and Technology; [Florika Fink-Hooijer](#), Director General, DG Environment, European Commission; [Pascal Canfin](#), Member of the European Parliament, Chair Environment Committee; [Ana Colovic Lesoska](#), Executive Director Eko-vest (North Macedonia), Goldman Prize Award winner 2019; and [Tonny Nowshin](#), Environmental justice activist, were joined for an interactive Q&A by [Elisabeth Freytag-Rigler](#), Head of Directorate EU-Coordination Climate and Environment in the Austrian Minister of Climate Action, Environment, Energy, Mobility, Innovation and Technology.

¹ EEB background paper: [The European Green Deal, one year in](#)

OPENING SPEECH

by Johanna Sandahl, EEB President

In 1992, the Earth Summit, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development took place. I remember thinking "It's happening now. We can change the world."

32 years later, all the nice words, visions and goals that were the result of the Rio conference have in fact not become reality.

Still, it was one big event together with other, big and small, events that contributed to the beginning of a change. Just as the small and big actions that happen today around Europe, and the rest of the world, together make a big difference. The world is changing. 93% EU citizens see climate change as a serious problem. The knowledge about biodiversity and the willingness to protect it is growing constantly. People's awareness about the problems our lifestyles are causing is growing stronger and stronger. When the World Economic Forum compiles the most serious global risks to society, the list is dominated by environmental problems such as extreme weather events, natural disasters, biodiversity laws, and the collapse of ecosystems. The insight is there. But also the power of action: The world's nations have agreed on the Paris Agreement. Agenda 2030 with its 17 global goals has been established and in city after city, and country after country, plans are being developed to make sure the agenda becomes the reality.

Even in EU politics, or one can say especially in EU politics, there's clearly something going on. The fact that the commitment to the Green Deal seems to

have helped through the pandemic - morphing into insistence on a green recovery, is to be welcomed. But of course, a lot needs to happen. Fine words and ideas that we can find in the European Green Deal need to be turned into very specific and concrete policies in many different areas.

So far, almost one year on, we have seen some positive results, with the Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 and the Chemical Strategy for Sustainability, whereas the Farm to Fork Strategy and the Circular Economy Action Plan 2.0 have been of mixed quality and the Industry Strategy and Climate Law proposals have been disappointing. A particular concern is the direction of the CAP negotiation, which is out of line with the EGD objectives. We're still missing a sustainable development strategy for the EU, in line with the 2030 Agenda, to serve as the compass for environmental, social and economic policies, as well as governance.

While our particular focus is on European policies, Europe does not exist in a vacuum. A sustainable Europe if that could be achieved would mean little in an unsustainable world. Collaboration with countries outside of Europe and international negotiations such as the climate, and biodiversity negotiations, it's of crucial importance.

These challenges strengthen my strong belief in the incredible importance of the civil society and the environmental movement - what an important force we are for the environmental and societal transition to really happen. Our knowledge about the challenges we face is broad and deep. We've got the ability to see solutions to problems. We have the strength to point out what needs to be done, from Greece in the South to Norway in the North, and from Ireland in the West to Georgia in the East. A force that strengthens and defends the democracy that is so important for us to change the world.

It's my greatest wish that we can leave this conference with the feeling that we, together, can make sure that it's happening now. The world is changing.

This is an abridged version - Johanna Sandahl's full speech can be viewed [here](#).



Watch ► now

EUROPEAN GREEN DEAL: SYSTEM CHANGE OR SEMANTIC CHANGE?

How transformative are the EGD and the recovery measures?

Kate Raworth

Senior Research Associate, Oxford University

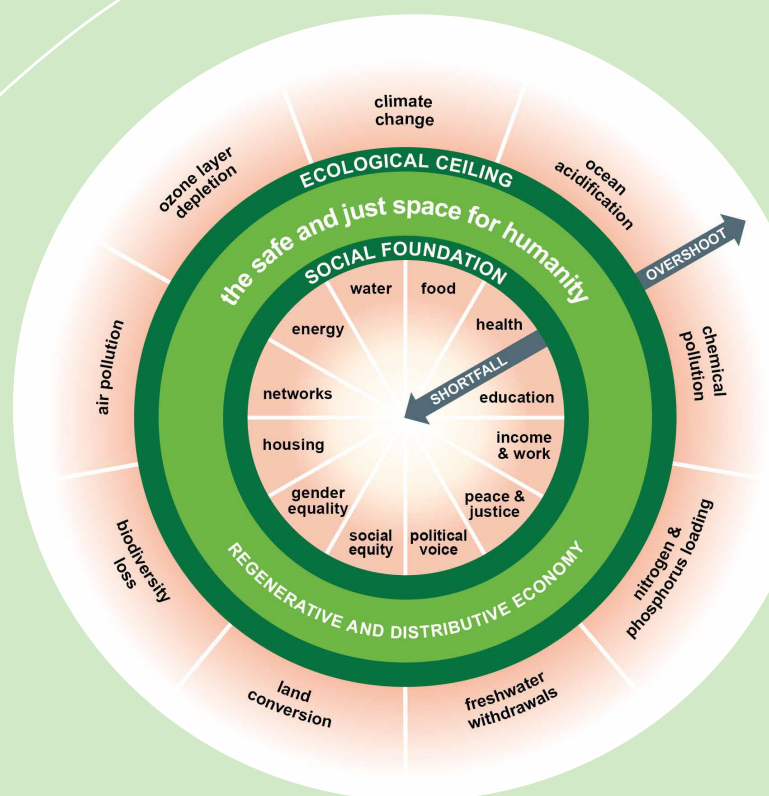
Hitting the sweet spot

The keynote speaker at this year's annual conference was [Kate Raworth](#), the British economist behind the 'Doughnut of Social and Planetary Boundaries', that visually represents a framework for sustainable development that does not overshoot the Earth's natural limits (add diagram).

Raworth spoke on the theme of whether the European Green Deal truly represented a system change or was simply a semantic shift. *"We cannot deny that Europe has set out a transformative agenda,"* the British economist told the EEB's EU Policy Director [Patrick ten Brink](#). *"It has shown leadership and, for that, Europe has to be recognised and praised."*

One challenge of the European Green Deal that Raworth identified was in the tension between the self-identification as a new 'growth strategy' and its holistic vision of a wellbeing society and economy living within ecological boundaries. *"When I read the strategy, I'm struck by the two contradictory paradigms it presents,"* Raworth admitted.

Research by the EEB, and modelling and simulations by the [LOCOMOTION](#) project, suggest that so-called 'green growth' is unlikely to deliver the required reductions in



emissions and shrink our ecological footprint sufficiently to make us sustainable. Achieving true sustainability requires deep system change, including rethinking how we create jobs and our relationship to work, as a new EEB report will argue later this month.

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"The test of the European Green Deal is: will it bring Europe into that sweet spot where people's needs are met within planetary boundaries? Will it be harnessed for this transformation or hijacked?"



Kate Raworth
Senior Research Associate
Oxford University

One example is the electric car. If it simply replaces the internal combustion engine, this will prove unsustainable. Making it sustainable requires a rethink and redesign of how we move and the mobility solutions we use.

Pursuing the dream or illusion of endless growth, Raworth reiterated, was a major factor behind the biggest crises of the 21st century so far, including the financial meltdown of 2007/8, the ongoing climate breakdown and the COVID lockdowns of 2020. *"These crises emerge from human systems,"* she explained. *"Our strategy of endless expansion means there are boomerang effects that lead to crises."*

Hostage situation

Despite the progress in outlook and semantics, the question remains, Raworth emphasised, of whether this transformative vision would be harnessed or hijacked.

Raworth criticised the long timeframe of the European Green Deal, saying that 2050 was too far in the future and we needed to act radically now. She also criticised the lack of binding targets in certain key areas, such as decoupling and the circular economy.

"Legislation and finance is where the risk of hijacking is the greatest," she noted, pointing to examples like the Common Agricultural Policy, where money that should have been used to make agriculture sustainable is set to be used to perpetuate destructive farming practices.

Historic opportunity

Kate Raworth urged European leaders to rise to the occasion and to dare to be ambitious. *"The best way to harness the opportunity is that leaders just need to have the guts to do it,"* she insisted. *"Sometimes a moment opens up, a crack in history."*

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BUILDING BACK BETTER:

The EU's Environmental Leadership

Virginijus Sinkevičius

Commissioner for the Environment, Oceans and Fisheries
European Commission

Jeremy Wates

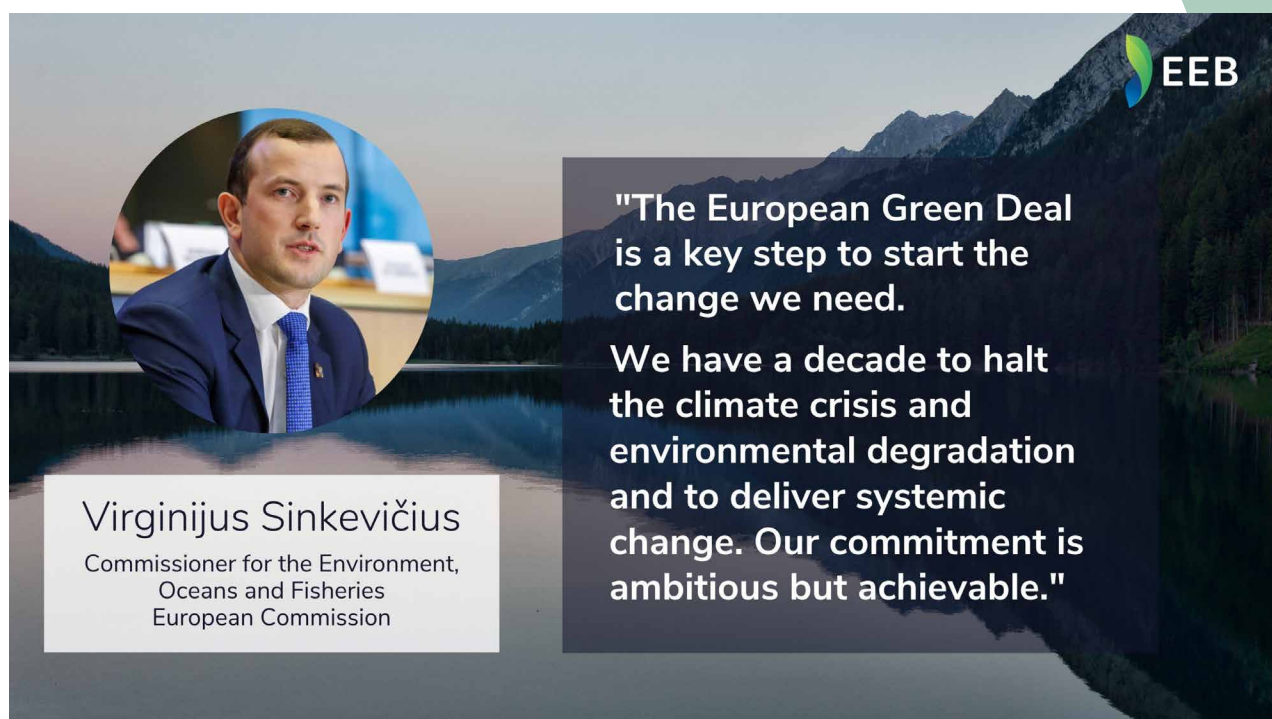
Secretary General
European Environmental Bureau

In a discussion with Jeremy Wates, EEB Secretary General, European Environment Commissioner Virginijus Sinkevičius echoed Raworth's point that European leaders should rise to the occasion and dare to be ambitious. *"We live in times of crises. Human beings tend to go back to old solutions, to business as usual. I'm proud that, here, in Europe, we did the opposite, despite the difficult circumstances,"* he argued in a session about the EU's environmental leadership. *"COVID-19 reminded us of our fragility and the fragility of our world."*

Sinkevičius expressed his conviction that the only litmus test that counted for policymaking was: Is

it ambitious enough to keep us within planetary boundaries? He, however, disagreed with Raworth's assessment that the European Green Deal was not ambitious enough to meet the magnitude of the crisis. *"We have a decade to halt the climate crisis and environmental degradation and to deliver systemic change,"* Sinkevičius said. *"Our commitment is ambitious but achievable."* He cited, as an example of this ambition, the EU's Biodiversity Strategy for 2030. But this would require buy-in from every segment of society. *"Last but not least, what is crucial is societal support. This cannot be done without everyone on board,"* he said.

Watch ▶ now



Virginijus Sinkevičius
Commissioner for the Environment,
Oceans and Fisheries
European Commission

"The European Green Deal is a key step to start the change we need.

We have a decade to halt the climate crisis and environmental degradation and to deliver systemic change. Our commitment is ambitious but achievable."

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BUILDING BACK BETTER, BUILDING BACK DIFFERENTLY

Leonore Gewessler

Austrian Minister of Climate Action, Environment, Energy, Mobility, Innovation and Technology

Florika Fink-Hooijer

Director General of DG Environment

Pascal Canfin

Member of the European Parliament, Chair of Environment Committee

Ana Colovic Lesoska

Executive Director of Eko-svest (North Macedonia), Goldman Prize Award winner 2019

Tonny Nowshin

Environmental justice and degrowth activist

Replacing the Minister for the Q&A:

Elisabeth Freytag-Rigler

Head of Directorate EU-Coordination Climate and Environment in the Austrian Federal Ministry for Sustainability and Tourism

Build to thrive

A panel debate chaired by the EEB's Global Policies and Sustainability Director Patrizia Heidegger brought together eminent voices from politics and civil society to discuss how to build back better and to build back differently. These included the chair of the European Parliament's Environment Committee, Pascal Canfin; Florika Fink-Hooijer, Director-General of the European Commission's Environment DG; Elisabeth Freytag-Rigler of the Austrian Federal Ministry of Climate Action and the Environment, as well as Ana Colovic Lesoska, Director of the Centre for Environmental Research and Information (Eko-svest),

Austria's Minister for Climate Action and the Environment Leonore Gewessler outlined her vision for a sustainable future: *"We have to avoid spending billions of euros to move from one crisis to another."* Gewessler also stressed the importance



of embarking on an inclusive transformation.

To truly achieve this kind of equitability requires not only finding ways to improve the situation of the vulnerable in Europe, but also needs us to think about the global impacts of EU policies, observed Tonny Nowshin, a climate justice and degrowth activist.



Pascal Canfin emphasised the ever-important need for NGOs to work with the EU institutions as environmental policies are made and highlighted the crossover between biodiversity and climate spending as a way to push progress.



Florika Fink-Hooijer touched on the economic question, stating that we need to move past the “green growth” narrative as a way of reaching climate neutrality and mainstream more effective solutions, such as green taxation.



Ana Colovic Lesoska offered a view of the Balkan context, saying that the EU’s green agenda could serve as a blueprint for new environmental measures - for both member states and neighbouring countries.

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CONCLUDING REMARKS

EEB Secretary General Jeremy Wates wound up the annual conference by reflection on how far the environmental movement had come in Europe in recent times. *"We are in a completely different place than a few years ago,"* he commented. *"Under the Juncker Commission, we made gains despite, not because of, the Commission. The Von der Leyen Commission has really changed that."*

Wates praised the youth movement, environmental organisations, growing public concern and engagement, and policymakers with foresight for the shift.

"Has the European Green Deal changed things? Yes, it has. But it's not a panacea," Wates said. *"The COVID-19 pandemic could have knocked the Green Deal off course. But by and large it has held. EU politicians have for the most part stood behind the European Green Deal and turned it into a call for a green recovery."*

Although that particular war may be won, the battles were far from over, Wates cautioned: *"We have to continue the trench warfare on specific policy areas."*

"Now, political courage and leadership are crucial, as are the roles of the environmental movement, civil society and business," Wates concluded. *"Only together can we transition to a better world."*



"EU politicians have stood behind the European Green Deal and turned in into a call for a green recovery.

Now, political courage and leadership are crucial, as are the roles of the environmental movement, civil society and business. Only together can we transition to a better world."



Jeremy Wates
Secretary General
European Environmental Bureau



SAVE THE DATE FOR OUR NEXT ANNUAL CONFERENCE

This year, our annual conference will take place in Paris on Monday 11 October 2021.

Watch [this space](#) for more information closer to the event!

To be informed once registrations open, please sign up to our newsletter [here](#).

Check out our 2020 conference website [here](#).



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