

Achieving the SDGs within Europe: No Poverty Eradication without Environmental Action

Event Summary Report

19 February 2019 – European Parliament



Extreme social inequalities on the one hand and environmental and climate change on the other, are closely linked and we cannot afford to tackle any one of these threats in isolation – they both deserve the highest policy priority and must be addressed together. Do we proceed with business as usual? How can Europe balance the needs of nature and people and maintain a healthy environment, while fostering sustainable economic growth and eradicate social inequalities? The Agenda 2030 is the only way forward and its universality is the key to success. Only by working together and involving all people concerned, we can “transform our world”. The SDGs can only be achieved by policy coherence within and outside the EU, addressing all goals as one package. This conference looked into the interface of environmental and social issues. It did so by including testimonies, concrete examples of bad practices versus best practices and lessons learned. The panel included:

- **Isabelle Thomas**, MEP
- **Christian Van den Bilcke**, The Club of Rome, EU Chapter
- **Perrine Orosco-Le Fournis**, on behalf of Maurice Ponga MEP
- **Isabell Kempf**, Co-Director, UN Environment / UNDP Poverty and Environment Initiative
- **Astrid Schomaker**, Director Global Sustainable Development, DG ENV, European Commission
- **Vic Van Vuuren**, Director Enterprises Department, International Labour Organisation on Green Jobs
- **Céline Charveriat**, Executive Director, Institute for European Environmental Policy (IEEP)
- **Philippe Pochet**, General Director, European Trade Union

In her opening speech, **MEP Isabelle Thomas** brought up the changes that Europe has seen since the 2008 financial crisis when it comes to poverty and social inequality. At the same

time, we are all faced with the urgent consequences of climate change, for example with the issue of rising sea levels. The connection between climate change and social inequality is that it is the poor people that are the first victims of the consequences. They are the ones hit the hardest by this, and yet not the biggest contributors to the problem. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) function as a link between the ecological and the social sphere. **Isabelle Thomas** stressed that the European Parliament needs to vote in favor of mainstreaming the SDGs in all policies within the European Union. Because of their importance in combining social equality with sustainable development, they need to be implemented in the very core of the institution, as well as seen in the budget and the many different programs of the EU. Further, she argued for increasing the European Social Fund (ESF), as well as refusing cuts for agricultural funds, which she argued are substantial.

Christian Vanden Bilcke, speaking on behalf of the co-organizer (the Club of Rome - EU Chapter), presented their concern with the many current incoherences in combining the environmental and social approaches. In the Club of Rome, he said that the implementation of the SDGs is nowadays the main focus, as they offer an intelligent integration of social and environmental approaches. As a co-organizer of the event, Mr. **Vanden Bilcke** told the audience that the idea for this topic came up nine months ago in a meeting with Stella Reschke from the EP Intergroup Secretary. They both found a lack of attention to the topic and decided to organize an event within the European Parliament, focusing on the interface of social inequality versus environmental action. Within his intervention, he specifically pointed to possible questions as the following: Do environmental policies give enough attention to social injustice and the indispensable social buy in? Do inversely social policies sometimes give impression that at any rate they are above environmental problems? How do we conceive environmental policies, so that they are socially broadly understood and carried? And how do we conceive social policies, so that they integrate environmental concerns with equitable distribution of cost? Mr. **Vanden Bilcke** finally stressed the importance of being concrete today, and to focus on actions within the EU borders in this discussion.

Perrine Orosco-Le Fournis was present, speaking on behalf of MEP **Maurice Ponga**. As Maurice Ponga comes from New Caledonia, he is well-aware of the threat of climate change, in particular to the EU overseas entities. The actions towards these threats can, however, have a very positive effect and result in creating jobs for people and improving their quality of life, as long as the focus is on innovative solutions. **Maurice Ponga's** view is that these natural disasters need global solutions, which can target both poverty and environmental problems, through giving opportunities to local populations. Emphasis should lay on the link between environmental actions and reducing poverty.

In her [presentation](#), **Isabell Kempf** from the UN Environment/ UNDP Poverty-Environment Initiative (PEI) showed how recent events in Europe point to the clear link between environmental and social policy. France's "yellow vests movement" is an example of people resisting the current policies, and instead demand new agendas. She emphasized the

importance of the tandem of social and environmental policies working together. Further, she elaborated on how the poor bear the cost of some of the environmental threats, namely pollution and health. Studies have showed that air pollution is the “single largest environmental health risk in Europe”, causing approximately 400 000 premature deaths annually, which is 10 times more than car accidents. **Isabell Kempf** gave an example of how the poor are the population bearing the cost of this problem. In a case study of the city of London, half of the poorer areas surpassed the EU limits for nitrogen dioxide, compared to only 2% of the wealthier areas. This shows the close link between inequality and climate change, since the wealthy areas are those with the most cars, thus contributing the most to the bad air quality, which the poorest areas have to pay the price for. The UNDP and UN Environment Poverty-Environment Initiative “supports country-led efforts to mainstream poverty-environment linkages into national development planning and budgets”. From PEI, **Isabell Kempf** presented three lessons learned to make this mainstreaming successful. Firstly, the importance and central roles that the ministries of finance and planning should play on the topic of poverty-environment. Secondly, the need for policy coherence and sustainable investments. Lastly, that policies need to be presented on a local level in order to involve people in the change and make it more concrete for the normal citizen.

Astrid Schomaker, representing DG ENV, discussed the importance of “active policy coherence”, where neither social nor environmental policy is pushed back for the other. She explained that the EU’s social welfare model is on shifting grounds, where 22,5% of the EU population risks poverty and exclusion, which she deemed “unacceptable”. Because the poor as a social group are both more exposed and more vulnerable to environmental health risks, such as pollution and noise, environmental degradation is an important driver for social inequalities. Further, **Astrid Schomaker** provided four conclusions for future environmental policies in her [presentation](#). Firstly, she concluded that environmental policies need to be ambitious to protect the poor who often suffer most from pollution. Secondly, these policies need to be “poverty proof”, meaning that targeted measures to improve the resilience of the most vulnerable social groups in society may be necessary. Thirdly, the policies need to contribute to “future proof” economies, supporting the transition to a circular economy with its opportunities for greater competitiveness, green growth and jobs. Lastly, the transition needs to be just, with active policy coherence and a green shift that works for all parties.

Vic Van Vuuren addressed the audience, representing the International Labour Organisation (ILO), and stressed the importance of speaking about environmental sustainability and social justice together. From his perspective at ILO, he gave the example of that 1,2 billion jobs depend on ecosystem services, which is 40% of world employment. There is an overhanging risk of exploiting these natural resources, which in turn would lead to “profound social consequences”, thus stressing the significance of a coherent approach to both of these issues. In his [presentation](#), **Vic Van Vuuren** then discussed the importance of the right narrative, which is done through presenting sustainable development, jobs creation and income generation as coherent. If nothing is done towards global warming, it will destroy

jobs, but through action more jobs will be created. Actions to limit global warming to 2°C is estimated to create 18 million jobs by 2030. Further, **Van Vuuren** argued for a coherent approach, involving both governments and social partners. At ILO, a [guiding framework](#) has been developed, which includes practical tools for countries in order to work for a just transition towards environmentally sustainable economies and societies for all. Finishing his presentation, **Van Vuuren** looked optimistically to the future of the partnership with the EU and a continuation of the current debate.

Céline Charveriat, representing the Institute for European Environmental Policy (IEEP), also discussed how the “yellow vests movement” changed the conversation of the linkage between social and environmental policies. She further addressed the great exposure of climate change that poor people face, for example, when it comes to air pollution and accessibility to green areas, which both have big impacts on both physical and mental health. The exposure to the risks, combined with accessibility to health care and information, make the poor population very vulnerable. The inequality also differs depending on geographical factors, household composition and minorities for example. An example of a minority group that is greatly affected is the Sami people. They rely prominently on the environment and will be badly hit by climate change, even while they do not contribute as much as other social groups. Studies from Oxfam show that the top 10% of the population in a society play a much bigger role in contributing to climate change than the lower 10%, giving the latter a “double burden”. **Céline Charveriat** continued by saying that the solution must be a paradigm shift, and pointed to her [infographic](#), showing the donut model, which includes both the economic, social and ecological spheres. In her [presentation](#), she showed that the key must be to leave no one behind, both in the context of poor and rich within a society, as well as for different countries’ burdens. Because the solution could be a win-win situation, where climate change is mitigated at the same time as social conditions are improving. It is however not easy: by 2050, Europe has to cut down its carbon footprint by 80%. To do this, **Charveriat** argued for everyone to think new: look at new sectors, think in circular economy and find interlinkages with innovation and technology.

Philippe Pochet, from the European Trade Union, began by rephrasing the name of the event. Instead of focusing on the poor people, he argued the attention should lay on the rich: the ones who are actually contributing to the emissions. One cannot blame poor people for striving towards consumption and traveling. Those are not the people who should bear the responsibility for a solution for this. Instead, the rich will have to create change, since they are the ones with power. He also warned the audience that we are not moving in the right direction right now. **Philippe Pochet** stressed that this transition into a more sustainable society should not be more difficult than any other transition that the world has seen, such as the rise of the IT sector. There has to be an investment placed, but change is related to capitalism and will not be difficult to achieve as long as people invest in it. For Europe, the recommendation provided is to invest and innovate, through preparing for this transition and through convincing people and therefore having support.

During the discussion one remark was made by a member of the audience, arguing that the SDGs are un-implementable, and that “they have no legitimacy and shall fail”. Responding to this remark, **Christian Vanden Bilcke** did not agree that the SDGs are un-implementable, and quoted Frans Timmermans who publicly said at the EDDs in June 2017 that “the SDGs are urgent, feasible and exciting”. **Astrid Schomaker** also did not agree with the remark by the audience member, and instead argued that the SDGs force you to use them systematically. That means you cannot look at one policy area at a time but must look at them all together. Another question was whether or not the terms used in this context instead should talk about culture more than the groups of rich and poor. **Céline Charveriat** answered this by saying that culture, indeed, is a very important issue. She also stated that her belief is that culture is an aspect that will be more and more relevant, especially concerning meat consumption for example.

In the closing remarks of the panelists, **Christian Vanden Bilcke** summed up that “underdiscussed” was a lead word in the debate, as well as the fact that these two issues must go hand in hand and include everyone. The linkage between sustainable development and social justice is something that will be further followed in the Club of Rome, both its EU Chapter as its International structure. **Isabell Kempf** recognized that one cannot pretend that there are no trade-offs between sustainable development and poverty eradication. Instead, the focus should be on working on the complex agenda of the SDGs and on the interlinkages between these two issues. **Astrid Schomaker** argued for the need of changing the way of consumption and high living, that is a big threat to creating a sustainable future. The SDGs are a crucial part in this as they are about “changing everything we do”. **Vic Van Vuuren** then argued for the need of adequately regulated frameworks in the case of environmental action and poverty eradication. The pressing need is for implementation and monitoring processes, since those who monitor are those who are successful. **Céline Charveriat** underlined the need for a just transition, where especially young people are involved in the conversation. She argued for the need of a reinvented way of discussing, where the EU citizens are more involved in the policy process. **Philippe Pochet’s** closing remarks further expressed the need for having conversations and discussions with people of completely different opinions and backgrounds. These conversations need to include both the social and the economic model, in order to have common strategies. **Isabelle Thomas** finished the discussion with stating that it could be effective to add a principal to the SDGs, namely that one has to do what they say. She named the example of the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) not mentioning the SDGs.

[All meeting documents can be found here.](#)

Kindly supported by the Foundation Labour and Environment