European Economic and Social Committee

European Environment Agency

PUBLIC EVENT | ÉVÉNEMENT PUBLIC

Civil society's role for a just and fast transition towards sustainability

Le rôle de la société civile pour une transition juste et rapide vers la durabilité

12/02/2020 | VMA 3 | 9:00 - 13:00

EESC | Van Maerlant Building | Rue Van Maerlant 2 | 1040 Brussels

Background paper

Context

In 2020, Europe faces environmental challenges of unprecedented scale and urgency. The latest assessment of the European environment's state, trends and prospects — SOER 2020 — addresses the systemic character of these challenges and provides insights into how Europe can respond.

SOER 2020 states that Europe will not achieve its 2030 or longer term sustainability goals without ambitious action during the next 10 years. Therefore, the key question is no longer why or whether sustainability transitions are necessary, but how to make them happen. The need for such far-reaching change is reflected in the European Commission's European Green Deal, which emphasises the importance of ambitious transformations to tackle climate change and environment-related challenges, and the opportunities that these could create for a just and inclusive transition.

The EESC Sustainable Development Observatory and the European Environment Agency are jointly hosting this public event to engage a broad range of civil society organisations to discuss the core messages of the SOER 2020 report and their implications for actions in support of ongoing policy processes (i.e. the European Green Deal, the next EU environment programme, Horizon Europe, etc.).

Accelerating the sustainability transition will require engaging all sectors of the economy and society. The event will look at ways to leverage the role of civil society in enabling sustainability transitions to secure the healthy environment on which our wellbeing depends, making sure that no one is left behind, and in translating knowledge into action. It will also discuss how to foster the engagement and active participation of all stakeholders, including youth, in accelerating the shift towards a more sustainable Europe. It will inform EEA activities including EEA strategy (2021-2030) and development of future partnerships to produce knowledge that can guide and support sustainability transitions. It will provide valuable input to the EESC's ongoing and future discussions on the various elements of the European Green Deal and the implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Sustainability challenges and responses

Although European environment and climate policies have delivered substantial benefits over recent decades, the messages from the SOER 2020 assessment of recent trends and outlooks is clear: policies have been more effective in reducing environmental pressures than in protecting biodiversity and ecosystems, and human health and well-being.

TABLE ES.1 Summary of past trends, outlooks and prospects of meeting policy objectives/targets

Theme	Past trends and outlook		Prospects of meeting policy objectives/targets		
	Past trends (10-15 years)	Outlook to 2030	2020	2030	2050
Protecting, conserving and enhancing natural capital					
Terrestrial protected areas	Improving	Mixed	☑		
Marine protected areas	Improving	Mixed	☑		
EU protected species and habitats	Mixed	Mixed	☒		
Common species (birds and butterflies)	Deteriorating	Deteriorating	☒		
Ecosystem condition and services	Deteriorating	Mixed	☒		
Water ecosystems and wetlands	Mixed	Mixed	☒		
Hydromorphological pressures	Deteriorating	Mixed	☒		
State of marine ecosystems and biodiversity	Mixed	Deteriorating	☒		
Pressures and impacts on marine ecosystems	Mixed	Deteriorating	☒		
Urbanisation and land use by agriculture and forestry	Deteriorating	Deteriorating			☒
Soil condition	Deteriorating	Deteriorating	☒		
Air pollution and impacts on ecosystems	Mixed	Mixed	☐	☐	
Chemical pollution and impacts on ecosystems	Mixed	Deteriorating	☒		
Climate change and impacts on ecosystems	Deteriorating	Deteriorating	☒		
Resource-efficient, circular and low-carbon economy					
Material resource efficiency	Improving	Mixed	☑		
Circular use of materials	Improving	Mixed		☐	
Waste generation	Mixed	Mixed	☐		
Waste management	Improving	Improving	☐		
Greenhouse gas emissions and mitigation efforts	Improving	Mixed	☑	☒	☒
Energy efficiency	Improving	Mixed	☐	☒	☒
Renewable energy sources	Improving	Mixed	☑	☒	☒
Emissions of air pollutants	Mixed	Mixed	☑	☐	
Pollutant emissions from industry	Improving	Mixed	☐		
Clean industrial technologies and processes	Improving	Mixed	☐		
Emissions of chemicals	Mixed	Deteriorating	☒		
Water abstraction and its pressures on surface and groundwater	Improving	Mixed	☒		
Sustainable use of the seas	Mixed	Mixed	☐		
Safeguarding from environmental risks to health and well-being					
Concentrations of air pollutants	Improving	Mixed	☒	☑	
Air pollution impacts on human health and well-being	Improving	Mixed		☑	
Population exposure to environmental noise and impacts on human health	Mixed	Deteriorating	☒		
Preservation of quiet areas	Mixed	Mixed	☒		
Pollution pressures on water and links to human health	Mixed	Mixed	☒		
Chemical pollution and risks to human health and well-being	Mixed	Deteriorating	☒		
Climate change risks to society	Deteriorating	Deteriorating	☐		
Climate change adaptation strategies and plans	Improving	Improving	☐		

Indicative assessment of past trends (10-15 years) and outlook to 2030		Indicative assessment of prospects of meeting selected policy objectives/targets		
Improving trends/developments dominate	Year	☑	Largely on track	
Trends/developments show a mixed picture	Year	☐	Partially on track	
Deteriorating trends/developments dominate	Year	☒	Largely not on track	

Note: The year for the objectives/targets does not indicate the exact target year but the time frame of the objectives/targets.

Europe faces persistent problems in areas such as biodiversity loss, resource use, climate change impacts and environmental risks to health and well-being. Global megatrends such as demographic change are intensifying many environmental challenges, while rapid technological change brings new risks and uncertainties.

Perhaps the most important factor underlying Europe's persistent environmental and sustainability challenges is that they are inextricably linked to economic activities and lifestyles, in particular the societal systems that provide Europeans with necessities such as food, energy, housing and mobility.

Change at the needed scale and pace will not be achieved through incremental improvements to established modes of producing and consuming. This will require more fundamental transformation — rethinking not just technologies and production processes but also consumption patterns and ways of living.

Where does Europe go from here?

While Europe faces major challenges, the future can be shaped. Europe can either be carried by current trends or it can seek to actively shape them towards a more sustainable trajectory. Europe will not achieve its sustainability vision of 'living well, within the limits of our planet' simply by promoting economic growth and seeking to manage harmful side-effects with environmental and social policy tools. Instead, sustainability needs to become the guiding principle for ambitious and coherent policies and actions across society. An overarching EU strategy for the implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals would provide an essential framework for coherent action.

SOER 2020 identifies a range of areas where urgent action is needed during the next 10 years.

Strengthening policy implementation, integration and coherence: Full implementation of existing policies would take Europe a long way to achieving its environmental goals up to 2030.

Developing more systemic, long-term policy frameworks and binding targets: The coverage of long-term policy frameworks needs to be extended to other important systems and issues, starting with the food system, chemicals and land use.

Leading international action towards sustainability: Europe cannot achieve its sustainability goals in isolation. The EU has significant diplomatic and economic influence, which it can use to promote the adoption of ambitious agreements in areas such as biodiversity and resource use.

Fostering innovation throughout society: Changing trajectory will depend critically on the emergence and spread of diverse forms of innovation that can trigger new ways of thinking and living.

Scaling up investments and reorienting finance: Although achieving sustainability transitions will require major investments, Europeans stand to gain hugely – both because of avoided harms to nature and society, and because of the economic and social opportunities that they create.

Managing risks and ensuring a socially fair transition: Successful governance of sustainability transitions will require that societies acknowledge potential risks, opportunities and trade-offs, and devise ways to navigate them. Policies have an essential role in achieving just transitions.

Linking knowledge with action: Achieving sustainability transitions will require diverse new knowledge, drawing on multiple disciplines and types of knowledge production. This includes evidence about the systems driving environmental pressures, pathways to sustainability, promising initiatives and barriers to change.

Enabling society wide action and a just and fast transition

Sustainability transitions cannot be imposed in a top-down way. They will only be successful if based on broad support from a wide range of societal actors, so the social dimension cannot be underestimated. Transitions bring surprises, trade-offs and unintended consequences but they will also create diverse new jobs and opportunities — often in ways that are hard to anticipate in advance. Recognising the diverse realities across Europe and unequal distribution of costs and benefits arising from systemic changes is vital for a just transition.

Policies have an essential role here, for example in supporting companies and workers in industries facing phasing out. Measures such as retraining, subsidies, technical assistance or investment can help those that are negatively affected and ensure that they secure benefits from systemic change. The European Green Deal Investment Plan and Just Transition Mechanism are a step in the right direction.

Sustainability transitions also critically depend on the emergence and spread of diverse forms of innovation that trigger alternative ways of thinking and living. Citizens, communities and civil society groups are important sources of creativity and innovation. They are instrumental in bringing about behavioural and lifestyle changes. The total number of initiatives across Europe is likely to number in the tens of thousands. Cumulatively they represent a substantial amount of societal energy that policymakers could engage with more strategically.

Governments could offer more support for civil society innovations, for example by funding citizens' groups and projects; providing privileged access to public infrastructure (e.g. vacant land or offices); facilitating the circulation of knowledge about grassroots projects; stimulating experimental partnerships with public services (e.g. schools, hospitals); and more publicly displaying support for citizen-led sustainability projects and their positive contribution to public life locally.

Democratising information, enabling local action and empowering cities and communities are also key prerequisites for a just and fast transition. There are many legitimate perspectives on desirable futures and choices on how to reach them. Effective governance requires participatory processes that enable diverse stakeholders to identify shared visions and goals and credible pathways to reach them. Inclusive approaches are essential to ensuring societal support for sustainability transitions and that no-one is left behind.

Further reading

EEA (2020) The European environment — state and outlook 2020: knowledge for transition to a sustainable Europe (https://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/soer-2020)

EEA (2019) Sustainability transitions: policy and practice. EEA Report No 9/2019 (https://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/sustainability-transitions-policy-and-practice)

EESC (2019) The sustainable economy we need (own initiative opinion) NAT/765-EESC-2019 (https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/opinions-information-reports/opinions/sustainable-economy-we-need-own-initiative-opinion)

EESC (2019) Leaving no one behind when implementing the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda (own-initiative opinion) SC/53-EESC-2019-02446 (https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/opinions-information-reports/opinions/leaving-no-one-behind-when-implementing-2030-sustainable-development-agenda-own-initiative-opinion)