

Panel Series
Rethinking Well-being – How to keep Europe on the Sustainability Track

Panel III: Cutting the Edge:
How to realign the EU Sustainable Development Strategy

European Parliament, 23 February 2010

SUMMARY REPORT

On February 23rd, the Bertelsmann Stiftung and the World Future Council (WFC) jointly held the last out of a set of three debates in the European Parliament dealing with the issue of *Rethinking Well-being. How to keep Europe on the Sustainability Track*. The panel series was hosted by three Members of the European Parliament: Rebecca Harms, Jo Leinen, and Sirpa Pietikäinen. At a first meeting in the middle of January participants had discussed the need to go beyond the current GDP-related growth paradigm and to develop a more comprehensive and sustainable understanding in which ways future economic models should contribute to human well-being. The second meeting focused on the question of how to increase the political impact of measurement tools aiming to capture and assess sustainable development in our changing world. During the final panel, the participants focused on possible implications of alternative concepts of well-being on the EU's future growth and sustainability strategy.

After a welcome by Thomas Fischer, Head of the Brussels office of the Bertelsmann Stiftung, Rebecca Harms, MEP and Co-Chair of the Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance, introduced the three speakers, namely Jo Leinen, MEP with S&D and Chairman of the Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety, Anders Wijkman, Chair of the CEPS Task Force "A green budget for a sustainable future" and member of the World Future Council, and Conny Reuter, President of the Social Platform in Brussels.

As Jo Leinen stressed in his statement the headline goal of the EU's new growth strategy – **the so-called "EU 2020 Strategy"** - had changed from competitiveness to sustainability, integrating economic, as well as social and environmental aspects. From his point of view the implementation of the EU's 20-20-20 climate and energy agenda would mark an important move towards renewable resources, even though 80% of Europe's energy would still come from non-renewable resources. Referring to the example of unused electronic waste coming from mobile phones and other IT gadgets, Jo Leinen urged the audience to reuse energy and other resources that stay currently unused. Finally, Leinen pinpointed to the necessity of economic sustainability: there would be a close link between the economic crisis of Greece and the resurgence of rampant speculation in global financial markets which ought to be tamed by a strict European regulatory framework.

Former MEP Anders Wijkman started by the observation that, different from the failed Lisbon Strategy, the European Commission's EU 2020 paper would actually contain some entry points for alternative approaches to economic development. It would, however, remain difficult in the EU's institutional setting to approach economic, social and environmental problems in an integrated way. Neither the European Parliament's nor the Commission's internal organisation would allow for concerted action at interdepartmental level. Wijkman then criticized the complete absence of European political and public leadership in the aftermath of the devastating outcomes of the Copenhagen climate summit. According to him, the EU's renewable energy policy debate should put a much stronger emphasis on "good strategic reasons" like energy security, pollution, import of fossil fuels from non-democratic regimes and poverty reduction. Wijkman sees the road to success in a new understanding of well-being that puts the preservation of natural capital at the centre of economic thinking. First of all, this would imply that development and resource use ought to be decoupled, thereby turning resource productivity into the key criterion of sustainability - which should also be included in the EU 2020 strategy.

Conny Reuter focused on the economic crisis' effects on the living conditions of people in Europe. According to him we should stop "spending our time on discussing agendas" and focus on the huge development and social problems that we have to cope with in reality. In his opinion, well-being is about nothing else but social and societal cohesion. From this perspective, the high numbers of Europeans living under the threat of poverty (82 millions) and of "working poor" in the EU (19 millions) would clearly indicate how far Europe is actually away from achieving the objective of well-being for all of its citizens. Beyond its detrimental impact on cohesion, however, this grievance would also considerably damage the EU's economic basis. Poor people would be obliged to buy cheap products which are usually imported from outside the EU's internal market. According to Reuter any approaches towards sustainable development would have to address the developmental, industrial and social dimension of the current global crisis. When finally commenting on the Commission's draft EU 2020 strategy paper he particularly deplored the missing issue of antidiscrimination issues. According to Mr. Reuter, a non-discriminatory and sustainable Europe would have to provide for an active inclusion policy, combining traditional labour market policies with the guarantee of social services and minimal incomes.

During the ensuing discussion Jo Leinen stressed the importance of finding new indicators for innovation and well-being such as health, decent work and good education. Anders Wijkman once again stressed that we should abandon our "throw away mentality" and introduce clear targets for energy and resource efficiency. Furthermore, the public would have to be informed more accurately about the backdrops and externalities of cheap production in other parts of the world. Rebecca Harms endorsed this point and added that consumption patterns are not defined by well-informed elites but by the majority of consumers. Focusing on the political relevance of new concepts of well-being, Mr. Fischer asked how the EU 2020 Strategy and the EU Sustainable Development Strategy could possibly profit from the different sets of indicators as they have recently been presented by the Stiglitz Commission, the OECD and the EU's

“GDP and Beyond” initiative. He also pointed to the fact that, in order to take action immediately, we need to find new modes of production that can actually be implemented.

As Conny Reuter put it in his closing remarks, the EU’s strategic priorities should concentrate on coupling solidarity between the rich and the poor as well as between the member states with sustainability. All panellists agreed that it would therefore be particularly salient to get into a constructive dialogue with forward-thinking representatives of the business community.

Contact:

Thomas Fischer, Brussels Office, Bertelsmann Stiftung, +32 2 233 38 93,
thomas.fischer@bertelsmann-stiftung.de; www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de

Dirk Hendricks, Brussels Office, World Future Council, +32 2 210 17 80,
dirk.hendricks@worldfuturecouncil.org; www.worldfuturecouncil.org