

Sustainable Development Essay for National Economic and Social Council, Ireland (NESC) and EEAC Annual Conference 2017

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What should a Sustainable Europe look like in 2030?

Our vision of a sustainable Europe is one where the economy, society and environment are balanced. One where green spaces are commonplace in cities, where there is widespread use of cycle lanes and public transport – trams and trains more so than buses, as they can run on electricity rather than fossil fuels. In our vision of a sustainable Europe, we'd see new buildings integrated with solar panels, solar heat cells and insulation; a Europe where green energy is a major player, if not the default power source. In fact, by 2030 we'd hope to see largescale government divestment from the fossil fuel industry at both a national and European level, and investment into a flourishing green energy industry. This Europe would value parks and community spaces, and would build with an eye towards the future, leaving room (where possible) for new infrastructure, improvements and renovations.

We hope to see a Europe that is representative of all identities, merging into one European identity, offering space for inclusion and acceptance of different people from various backgrounds. A Europe that leans less towards polarisation, but works towards building trust and bridges between divided communities for the better functioning of the society. In so doing, it erases the risk of radicalism rising, due to marginalised and alienated communities.

This is a Europe that would value and protect its rich biodiversity, natural beauty and resources, and all its citizens, their culture and their history, while safeguarding their future.

What are the biggest challenges for implementing a Sustainable Europe by 2030?

Political Will

One of the biggest, overarching challenges for implementing a sustainable Europe by 2030 is political will. If sustainability (and, to a larger extent, climate change) is not seen as an urgent, driving issue then it will not stay on the agenda of policy makers.

In fact, highlighting this, I, Amy, remember speaking to a number of Irish policy makers at one point on the importance of acting preventatively on climate change, and the damage that the increased frequency and severity of storms and flooding (that have been associated with climate change) is doing to the Irish people and the Irish economy. Everyone present expressed worry, and a certain sense of urgency over the issues that face us here in Ireland. However, it was reflected that the issue of sustainability, in itself, was not seen as an issue that *constituents* were particularly concerned with, and so actions on sustainable development kept getting pushed further and further down the list to make way for what were seen as "more pressing issues" at the time. This is not unfair or unexpected; however, it's why I always try to convey the idea of acting on sustainability by working sustainable principles into *other aspects* of policy, that people are concerned about, and not simply focusing on sustainability once, as an item to be ticked off on an agenda. Sometimes to make a difference in terms of action, all that's required is a shift in outlook.

Money also plays a role as a barrier to implementing a sustainable Europe by 2030. The fossil fuel industry, and industries dependent on fossil fuels (ie. car manufacturers, the agricultural sector, etc), play a significant part in both national economies and the EU economy. Legislation implementing sustainability would necessarily impose stricter regulations on these industries and result in a serious loss of revenue. Sometimes making developmental projects more sustainable might require more capital investment than the cheap alternative, and certain private sector industries might require monetary incentives to sign on to sustainable initiatives. Coming up with this kind of money and facing potential loss of revenue is a challenge for governments struggling to balance budgets in a Europe that is still only recovering from an international debt crisis.

Another factor is time. It takes generally takes a lot of time to draft, enact and implement legislation (as it should in any democratic society), and governments will have many other things on their agendas competing for their time and attention. This lack of time can act as a barrier to implementing a sustainable Europe by 2030. Furthermore, government terms are generally much shorter than this long-term goal of a sustainable Europe, and therefore most sitting governments are more concerned with what they can do within in the confines of their term, rather than laying the foundations for something that will come to fruition when they are no longer in office. This difference in the *perception* of time between officials at a state and European level will be a challenge to overcome if we are to implement a sustainable Europe by 2030.

Social Inclusion

There are 17 Sustainable Development Goals as agreed by the UN in 2015. The 16th Sustainable Development Goal aims to promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, and to provide access to accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.

Therefore, we also need to look at social inclusion. Europe is becoming a more diverse society. This means that such a society needs to be reflected at a national level and international level, while maintaining its core values and dignity. As mentioned earlier, a society that lacks inclusion is one that is preparing to fail at all levels. The more diverse we become, the less we can afford to exclude certain groups in the movement of change for a better Europe.

This is clearly stated in the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development, stating that we should “leave no one behind”. If, indeed, we want to leave no one behind, we should start by acknowledging the potential of young people and their ability to be valuable assets to any work place. Young people are not only the future, but they are also the present, because in order to act correctly in the future, we must first be included and prepared for that future we want to see. We must be part of the building process today.

To eradicate the marginalisation that exists in our community, we must first reduce the level of unemployment (especially among young people), and reduce segregation of the wealthy verses the poor. It is important that there is a system put in place to insure the integration of all societal groups. Such system can primarily be reinforced through education (a point we elaborate on below).

Social inclusion can be achieved by creating a channel for the integration of all age groups and communities in order to live in a unified Europe, to avoid unnecessary rivalries, radicalism, and lack of trust (i.e. fear of one another), and to foster an atmosphere of sustainability.

Education

We all know that in Europe we live in a relatively privileged and luxurious society when it comes to education. But we hope that by 2030, we can live in a society that does not only aim to educate us, but also prepare us to face the 'real world' after school. We hope to see a Europe where the educational system allows for young people to gain some level of practical experience in their field of studies - enough for them to be valuable assets to their career choice after university. In so doing they would realise the 8th sustainable development goal (SDG), which seeks to promote sustained, economic growth, in order to achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all. [UN Goals 2016].

Secondly, we hope to see a reinforcement in our education system, to create awareness among citizens from primary schools, on topics of sustainable development. Such topics we believe could be easily introduced to their civics class curriculum. We wish that we could make more effort in cultivating political awareness among young people about topics on the European Agenda, and getting everyone involved to build the type of future we want to live in. For example the 13th SDG emphasises urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts. We believe this can be achieved by first creating awareness through education as discussed above, and introducing environmental lessons into our curriculum.

In addition, organisations such as ECO-UNESCO in Ireland should be encouraged to continue engaging and creating a fun learning space for young people in schools. Another measure would be to support youth initiatives such as 'International Youth Empowerment' (INT-Y-E), whose aim is to educate and empower young people to be active citizens and create a better future for themselves and their community.

Young people could start by taking positive actions in their daily lives and extending them to their family and community – actions such as turning off the light when leaving a room, turning off the tap when brushing their teeth, or simply recycling their rubbish properly. Through education, the understanding of why people need to take such action is much clearer and the willingness to act becomes ignited.

What actions should be taken to support the transition towards a Sustainable Europe in 2030?

There are many actions that can be taken with immediate effect to support the transition towards a more Sustainable Europe, in terms of working towards a greener and more inclusive society. The first would be to fully ratify and implement the Paris Climate Agreement and begin building towards those targets. Another thing would be for governments to commit to leaving all untapped fossil fuels in the ground – something that would go a long way towards achieving the Paris emission reduction targets and keeping global warming below 1.5 degrees Celsius.

Regulating the agricultural sector in terms of emissions, and banning the use of harmful pesticides such as neonicotinoids – which have been critically linked to catastrophic losses in bee populations, as well as large die-offs in other pollinators – would be important actions that could be taken to protect European agriculture and biodiversity. Protecting existing parks, community spaces and forestry is something that needs to be done to protect local environment and wildlife, but setting aside "green spaces" in future developments in both urban and rural areas would also help.

Re-evaluating our transport systems is another thing that would need to be looked at. Expanding public transport and cycling schemes would also help build towards sustainability and have the added benefit of cutting down on emissions. In an Irish context, we could look at introducing the Dublin Bike Scheme in other cities in Ireland, expanding the LUAS light rail network in Dublin and

other metro and train systems across the country, incentivising carpooling, and establishing “car-free” zones in heavily urbanised areas. In a European context, we could expand international rail systems and promote rail travel over car or plane travel.

Investing in renewable energy is another action that can be taken. Wind farms (both on land and offshore) and solar panel installations are on the rise across Europe, and the success of energy providers like Airtricity in Ireland (which utilises mostly wind power) shows that investing in renewable energy can yield better results with regard to reduced emissions, sustainable energy and cheap, clean electricity. Again, in the context of Ireland, we could also benefit greatly from investment in wave power, with the entirety of the west coast exposed to the powerful waves of the Atlantic. Other countries in Europe have their own strengths and weaknesses in terms of energy resources, but this should not be seen as a deterrent to investing in and developing clean energy practices, as our current fossil fuel dependent model of providing energy depends on extensive trade and imports for exactly the same reason.

We also need to look at the opportunities we have to make our education system more sustainable, and one that reflects our European values. In Ireland, many young people have the opportunity to complete their third level education. This is due to a system called SUSI which has been put in place to encourage young people, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to obtain at a minimum their third-level degree. However, some of these young people complete their education, but cannot put the theory which they have learned in school into practice. Even when they attempt to do so, they may not be valued for it.

In this case, integration can be created. For example, by implementing a quota for a fair distribution of young employees in workplaces with adequate salaries matching their experience and effort at work. We see more young people being exploited in workplaces, making great input in their work which is not reflected in their earnings. We believe that everyone, regardless of age, background or education should earn at least a minimum salary when they engage in an internship or an apprenticeship in which their input is significantly beneficial to the organisation, so that they can sustain themselves, by paying their rents, bills and food.

Speaking from personal experience, I (Ornella) had the privilege of having a family that could support me after school, for me to build the experience I needed to break into the work force. But I also recognise that I am only one in half a million who may not have this same privilege for various reasons. As a result, those young people may not be able to afford to follow the career path of their dreams - which would be beneficial and add value to their community – but instead, they may be forced to compromise in a quick paying job, with a degree in their pocket and no sense of contentment. The question is how do we solve such a problem which continues to prevail in our community? How do we create the bridge between education and work without having to go through the “hungry” months, which may result in frustration and even depression, especially among young people? I may not be aware specifically of what we will achieve by 2030, but I certainly hope to see a change in this struggle, resulting in a society where people are not limited in achieving their full potential in education or career because of their age, gender, or origins - a society which offers an equal opportunity to everyone who is part of it.

Lastly and perhaps most importantly, we both believe the way to achieve this social, economic and environmental sustainability is through sustainable policies enacted, implemented and enforced by governments legislating for: fair living and working conditions; a public education system that gives students the tools to engage and succeed; measures to address climate change; stricter building and development regulations; stricter regulations for commercial pollution; incentives for private industries and consumers to act more sustainably; and improved waste management. These are all

things that can be taken up with relative immediacy and would go a long way towards making our cities and towns much more sustainable places to live.

We firmly believe that if we enact these kinds of changes and keep sustainability on the political agenda of our representatives at both a national and European level, we can achieve a fully sustainable Europe by 2030, and realise a Europe where the economy, the environment and society work in harmony with and not against each other. This could be a Europe where we learn from present challenges and create an inclusive space where everyone can be given the chance to make a valuable input in building a more peaceful, prosperous and sustainable Europe. We believe this is not just possible, but firmly within the grounds of “achievable”.