

Conference Report

sef: Policy Lunch, November 2016

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From Shared Vision to Common Action. Realizing the SDGs in the EU's External Activities

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More than a year after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, an overarching EU strategy for implementing the 2030 Agenda is still missing. However, the integration of the sustainable development goals (SDGs) in the EU's external activities seems to advance. With the inclusion of the SDGs in the EU's Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy and with the ongoing Revision of the European Consensus on Development, the EU has set clear signals. Is the EU on the right track, after all? And what would be important next steps to live up to its promises?

These were the questions discussed with representatives from the European Commission and civil society organizations during a sef: Policy Lunch on 7 Novem-

ber 2016, held in cooperation with CIDSE at the Representation of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia to the EU.

No shared vision so far

Referring to the title of the event, chair Patrick Leusch from the DW-Media Services GmbH opened the debate by asking whether a shared vision of the 2030 Agenda existed within the EU at all. The clear-cut answer by Jean Saldanha from the International Alliance of Catholic Development Agencies (CIDSE) was "no". Many people within the European institutions and the member states would still think that this was a development agenda only. In her view, the universal aspect of the SDGs was not yet understood by the EU. She cautioned against the feeling that with the Summit in September 2015 and the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, the job was done. While envisioning the Agenda was fun, she pointed to the fact that the main work was still ahead, and action was needed now. Leida Reijnhout from Friends of Earth Europe claimed that a shared vision was desperately needed as the 2030 Agenda was a truly political agenda. She deplored that the EU was very weak in formulating political messages at the moment, and was not ready to position itself against vested interest by the business community.

Representing the European Commission on the panel, Giacomo Durazzo from the European External Action Service (EEAS) claimed that a lot of work was going on within the Commission. From his perspec-



sef: Policy Lunch 2016 (l.t.r.): Giacomo Durazzo, Leida Rijnhout, Patrick Leusch and Jean Saldanha

tive, the 2030 Agenda was a transformative agenda. Therefore, existing instruments needed to be adapted and new instruments created. He signaled that the EEAS was already working closely with the Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development (DG DEVCO), and that the Commis-



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sion was currently developing a common vision. The policy context would be set by the end of the year. So far, this was very much a headquarter exercise, he admitted.

Are the priorities set right?

Durazzo furthermore stressed that a joint approach between internal and external aspects was needed. While he saw this as “part of our bread and butter”, he admitted that from the outside, one could get the impression that the external part seemed to be developed faster and with more eagerness. In addition, moving from a paper to reality was a different story, Durazzo said: “There are different interests that we have to reconcile.”

The Commission’s performance so far was heavily criticized by the two civil society representatives on the panel. Rijnhout as well as Saldanha underlined that the root causes for poverty needed to be addressed, and that race for resources and extractive policies supported by the EU were one of these root causes. Human well-being therefore needed to be decoupled from economic growth.

“Are we too easy with the EU-bashing? Should we be more patient?”, Leusch asked. “No, we should not be patient”, was the clear answer by Rijnhout. It was

not for the first time that we were confronted with sustainable development, she argued. The process already started with the Rio Summit in 1992. So there was plenty of time to act but vested interest of big business was hampering progress in the EU, she claimed. Saldanha agreed that civil society actors were not too impatient and that necessary innovations were slowed down by other interests.

Coherence as a main challenge

Klaus Rudischhauser from DG DEVCO provided a side-comment in the audience and stood up for the Commission’s work. He agreed that policy coherence was the issue, and that implementing the 2030 Agenda inside the EU was much more difficult than in its external policies. This was not surprising, though, he continued, because it affected anyone of us very directly. The Commission would have preferred to be quicker with its common answer to the 2030 Agenda, but – as Rudischhauser explained – it had realized that it was necessary to consult with all relevant stakeholders prior to finally presenting a serious vision that was ambitious enough. He emphasized that the EU was one of the drivers of the 2030 Agenda. Rudischhauser said that the Commission was well aware that many things had to change but he also asked for some understanding that this was taking time because the EU had to get 500 million people and 28 governments on board. The next step now will be the revision of the Europe 2020 strategy turning it into a transformative agenda for a more sustainable economic model. He concluded that we all had to work on changing our lifestyle thereby involving the whole society.

Getting society on board

Taking up this last point, Saldanha claimed that most people had already realized that there was a need to change our lifestyle, also without knowing the 2030 Agenda. What is heavily missing, according to her, is a genuine dialogue between the European Commission and civil society. An online consultation process cannot comply with the requirements of a real exchange. There were not only silos within institutions, she argued, but also between institutions and the society. Saldanha therefore felt that innovations in society were not adequately reflected in policies so far. The sef: Policy Lunch provided an opportunity for such an exchange; the necessity to continue this dialogue and to bring in fresh ideas for transformative policies became obvious.

Imprint

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