

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

**Panel II: Coming to Grips: How to capture and
assess sustainable development in a changing world**

European Parliament, 3 February 2010

SUMMARY REPORT

On February 3rd, the Bertelsmann Stiftung and the World Future Council (WFC) jointly held the second 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 is 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. Taking this debate as a starting point the second panel focused on most recent tools and indicators to define and measure the well-being of societies.

Chaired by Thomas Fischer, Head of the Brussels office of the Bertelsmann Stiftung, and opened by Dirk Hendricks, Head of the WFC's EU liaison office, the four speakers – Enrico Giovannini, President of the Italian Statistical Institute and member of the Stiglitz Group, Jakob von Uexküll, Founder of the Right Livelihood Award and of the WFC, Raoul Weiler, President of the Brussels EU Chapter of the Club of Rome, and Willy de Backer, Director for Europe of the Global Footprint Network and Founder of the 3E Intelligence Project – also discussed the question of how to increase the political impact of measurement tools aiming to capture and assess sustainable development in our changing world. Among the participants attending the event were MEPs Rebecca Harms from Germany, Vittorio Prodi from Italy, Claude Turmes from Luxemburg and Indrek Tarand from Estonia as well as Ziga Turk, Secretary General of the EU's Wisemen Group "Horizons 2030" chaired by Felipe Gonzalez.

In his introductory statement Enrico Giovannini recalled the five main findings of the Stiglitz Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress: First of all, a shift from production to income that flows to households is needed. Secondly, the Commission focused on the multidimensional concept of well-being, and not happiness, comprising several specific elements and the cross-cutting dimensions equity and sustainability. Thirdly, subjective as well as objective measures are important. Fourth, according to the Stiglitz Commission a major concern for the future is the question of how to merge democracy and information age. Finally, as follow-up to the presentation of its report, the Commission is currently organising roundtables all over the world to bring together relevant stakeholders and to define what well-being means in different national contexts.

Jakob von Uexküll started his presentation with the observation that quantitative changes in the economic system have become qualitative changes. From his viewpoint, mankind is confronted with the challenge to choose between sustainable “citizen values” and non sustainable “consumer values”. He then introduced the idea of a trusteeship economy. In particular, concerning corporate taxes, the obligation to maximise profit should be overcome. Instead, taxes should target abuses of our planet, focussing on resources rather than income. As von Uexküll stressed people are increasingly aware that the externalities of GDP growth are resulting in the destruction of human livelihood. Accordingly, he fiercely pleaded for a stronger involvement of civil society in policymaking.

Concentrating on solutions beyond the traditional GDP paradigm, Raoul Weiler, pointed out that we are experiencing not only limits to growth but also limits to waste. According to him the most urgent issue we have to address is the restricted capacities of our planet. Particularly the developed world ought to accept the realities of another “Copernican Shift” which is currently taking place. We should do away with our predominant, traditionally anthropocentric world vision as fast as possible and learn to accept a new, eco-centric one. In practice, this could even imply for people living in advanced societies that they would have to accept “de-growth” as a new economic paradigm.

As Willy de Backer stressed it is high time to move beyond the “GDP and Beyond” debate. He criticised that the narratives on sustainability had not sufficiently been taken up by the media so far and that there was no real impact on political decision makers. While many reports and measurement instruments are on the table, the real question stayed unaddressed: How much energy, materials and waste do we actually dispose of on our planet? Although they may be rather helpful to develop new narratives of sustainability and well-being, the recent debates on statistical indicators run, according to de Backer, risk to overshadow the much more relevant debate on the limits of the planet. Since we cannot afford to waste time, we should rather focus on convincing the “movers and shapers” in politics and business that they need to think and decide in terms of a limited “carrying capacity” of the earth.

During the discussion, De Backer warned the audience that the Europeans were losing the battle in green technologies against China. Mr Giovannini called it a mistake that we still adhere to the term “sustainable development” since it is based on altruistic assumptions. As an alternative, we should concentrate on propagating the concept of “vulnerability” of our societies which would also increase the pressure on policymakers to act. Mr Weiler supported this argument by pointing out the dramatic effects of climate change on human beings. In the same context, Mr von Uexküll stressed that the transition to renewable energies could be speeded up if there were the necessary political will.

In his closing statement, Jakob von Uexküll stressed the importance of an intensified exchange between the Southern and the Northern hemisphere about innovative initiatives and approaches towards more viable forms of living together. Mr Weiler branded the EU and its member states as “partyocracies”, where people would have to lobby for change. Likewise, Mr Giovannini recalled that building narratives requires investments and that there is a fight going on between

different interests and world views. Mr de Backer further concretised this conclusion and proposed to give much stronger support to the “unsung heroes of sustainability”, namely those business leaders who start to see the risks and try to change the perspective of their political leaders.

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