ESDN Strategic Workshop

Sustainability & Sustainability Policy as Opportunity and Answer to Democratic Challenges of EU Policy and Politics

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Introduction

This ESDN Strategic Workshop Report provides information and documentation of the inputs, discussions, and outcomes of the ESDN Strategic Workshop, entitled “Sustainability & Sustainability Policy as Opportunity and Answer to Democratic Challenges of EU Policy and Politics”. The Workshop took place in Brussels on 12 December 2019 and was organized in cooperation with the German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, and Nuclear Safety and the Open Society European Policy Institute.

In order to implement the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs on the European level, a transformative approach to environmental and sustainability policy is needed, as questions of democracy, participation, adequate frame and narratives are crucial. However, the fields of environmental and sustainability policy are relatively unconnected to the areas of participation and democratic policies. The synergies of both debates have to be identified in order to overcome the lock-in of sustainability policy on the European level, as well as the lack of a convincing citizen-oriented European vision and narrative that also includes a way to address rising populist attacks against issues of global responsibility, transformative changes and democratic values.

Sustainability policy addresses the whole range of policy fields in a short-term and long-term perspective, ranging from the local level to the global level. The 2030 Agenda and the SDGs do not only define a global vision of the common good for everyone, everywhere, but also call for a great societal transformation to achieve its vision. However, sustainable development policy is difficult to get into the mainstream of policy-making, especially on the EU level, as its role for strategic policy-making with respect to the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs is still weak.

At the same time, however, accelerating technical, economic, social and cultural changes has led to a loss in shared basic values and a crisis of democratic institutions and procedures due to nationalistic, xenophobic populist forces. Participatory and democratic policies and movements, therefore, are especially needed that strengthen and guide the European integration and European policy-making processes and define a new societal mission that reaches beyond individual policy fields, beyond this generation and beyond European borders.

The potentials and limits of linking both discourses could help to incentivize and foster the debate in European institutions on how to use transformative policy towards sustainable development as a vision and mission to future democratic, open, global responsible and integrative European policy.

A combination of keynote speakers and interactive plenary and table discussions sought to illuminate some of the challenges that environmental and sustainable development policy face from populist parties and populist rhetoric.

In total, the ESDN Strategic Workshop hosted 35 participants from 9 countries. The Workshop began with an opening and orientation session, which was followed by 3 sessions.

- **Session 1**: Reality Check – The Current State of Democracy in Europe as Risk for (Global Responsible) SD
- **Session 2**: Discourse Check – The current state of intellectual and conceptual grounding/consulting policy at EU level
- **Session 3**: Ways to Positively Transform European Policy and Politics

The full documentation of the ESDN Strategic Workshop can be accessed via the ESDN Website, where the following documents are available for download: 1) Workshop Agenda; 2) PowerPoint presentations of the keynote speakers; and 3) Strategic Workshop Report.
Opening Session

The opening session included a welcome address from Elisabeth Freytag-Rigler from the Austrian Federal Ministry for Sustainability and Tourism and Vice President of the ESDN Association, as well as from Jörg Mayer-Ries from the German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety.

Elisabeth Freytag-Rigler welcomed the participants on behalf of the ESDN and explained the restructuring of the ESDN and that it has now become the ESDN Association and leadership of the Network has passed to Finland. She told all participants that an ESDN Accession Form would be sent around to all the current ESDN Members and Associated Partners to fill out and sign to become Associate Members of the ESDN Association.

She began by saying it was a good idea to host this ESDN Strategic Workshop in Brussels, as many present come from national ministries. In this sense, it is good to be closer to Brussels based organizations, the EU and EU institutions.

She also shared that the SDGs cannot be reached in a 4-5 year legislative term, as the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs are bigger and more long-term. The long-term strategy has a 2050 perspective. It is good that we have a 2030 perspective with the SDGs, but Europe needs to move beyond election cycles and short-term planning when it comes to the implementation of the SDGs.

Participation is very important for the SDGs and sustainable development. There is a close link between democracy and sustainable development and we need citizens to participate in more than elections and become more active in making decisions and being involved when it comes to sustainable development.

Jörg Mayer-Ries also welcomed participants and explained the background of the Strategic Workshop. The Workshop should provide the space for everyone gathered to talk about things that are crucial for democracy and sustainable development policy, as this has not really been done very often. The purpose of the Workshop is to gather ideas from the different stakeholders gathered to try to influence the national and EU level debate regarding democracy and sustainable development policy.

In Germany, for the last 30 years, there has been this debate around environmental policy ecological problems have to be solved. This was not really linked to the economic and social debates. The other debate was Rio and development policy. This whole debate has now evolved into something more complex, it is about governance and the style of policy. With the 2030 Agenda, it is about transformations, society, the environment and the economy. At the German Federal Ministry for the Environment, this train of thought is put forward, to not only talk about the environment, but also take into consideration the other aspects of sustainable development (social and economic).

With respect to transformation, which is increasingly being brought up in discussions, especially in conjunction with the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. However, the topic of transformation is difficult to talk about, as the destination of the transformation is unclear, which makes it a hard topic to address.

He also stressed that without democratic, participatory approaches, the SDGs cannot be reached by 2030.

In January, the Ministry for the Environment had a workshop and found that this type of inclusion of many aspects of sustainability is being attacked.
In the 17th ESDN Workshop that took place in May 2019, it was looked at what could happen not only on the national level, with respect to anti-democratic, populist, nationalist trends, but also on the EU level.

This Strategic Workshop should focus on ideas and solutions to address these issues and exchange views: What is going on in different European countries? What is going on in the political institutions? What are the concepts regarding environmental policy and civil society policy and how can they be linked? Where are the entry points? How can these entry points, and the synergies between them, be found?
Session 1: Reality Check – The Current State of Democracy in Europe as Risk for (Global Responsible) SD

Session 1 began with two keynote presentations that provided insights into the current state of democracy in Europe with respect to sustainable development. The first keynote speaker is an investigative journalist who focuses on justice and abuses of power, but has recently branched out into fact checking with the rise of fake news and misinformation. The second keynote speaker discussed about how to keep politics and policy positive when confronting climate denial. This was then followed by a panel discussion with a Member of European Parliament and the Economic and Social Committee (EESC). Here participants were able to hear inputs from the two panelists and ask questions.

Fake News as challenge to Democracy and Journalism in Europe

Cristina Helberg from Correctiv in Germany was the first keynote speaker. Her full presentation can be found on the ESDN Website.

She began her presentation by sharing what Correctiv is and what it does to combat fake news and the spread of misinformation. However, more recently, they are serving as fact checkers to the spread of false and misinformation. She made it a point to not call misinformation fake news, as it is not really news.

She then began to discuss the history of when the first signs of the spread of misinformation began to appear. For Germany, this was in January 2017. The spread of misinformation intends to influence the political scene and does not constitute a simple mistake. She used the example of one of Germany’s oldest churches being burned and how misinformation was used to say that a 1,000-person mob started the blaze, when in fact, there was a small fire that was caused by fireworks and there was no 1,000-person mob.

She used another example of the spread of misinformation with trees that were cut down in a forest, so that wind turbines could be built. Someone had posted about it on social media and said that by clearing away the forest released more CO2 emissions than could be gained by installing the wind turbines. Correctiv was able to debunk this by checking with the authorities at the German Federal Ministry of the Environment. The Ministry of the Environment performed the calculations based on the amount of trees removed and how much CO2 they sequestered and weighed it against how much the wind turbines saved. The wind turbines still saved more CO2 emissions than the trees that were cut down.

Once an article is debunked, they are then featured on Correctiv’s website, twitter, Facebook, etc. Cristina Helberg shared that Correctiv has a cooperation with Facebook, in which Correctiv links the misinformation with fact checking. This means that if someone tries to share a post that was fact checked and debunked as being false, the person receives a pop-up that warns the reader that what they are reading and wanting to share is misinformation. If a website receives many of these types of pop-ups, then they lose website advertising, which means they lose money.

Cristina Helberg also shared that last year in summer, there was news circulating on the Compact of Migration. However, she had no idea about this Compact on Migration and why this was such a big deal on this particular website, as no regular media outlets picked this up. However, it seemed to be a big thing, but then on one day Correctiv noticed that all the websites they were monitoring began writing about it. Because of this, the German Press Office has changed their procedures to start monitoring such websites. There is the normal public space, in which dialogues and information are exchanged, but there is also a second, well-hidden public space. If one does not know how this
information is being used for misinformation, then it is very hard to find it. This is something that is challenging for democracy, as the spread of misinformation degrades democracy’s integrity.

Q&A

The first question from the audience was in respect to whether there has been a rise in the number of misinformation instances regarding the environment.

Cristina Helberg answered that there many more instances of misinformation being spread about the environment and by migration.

Another question from the audience asked if Correctiv has been able to develop some kind of indicators to measure the extent to which misinformation is present on the internet.

Cristina Helberg answered that it is very difficult to create indicators for this, as it Correctiv cannot monitor and cover the entire internet, especially at the rate that websites come up and go down.

One member of the audience asked a question regarding the extent to which Correctiv reaches the people who may have seen the misinformation and spread it.

Cristina Helberg answered that the people who believe this misinformation would never go to the correct site. One could criticize Facebook, but the cooperation that Correctiv has with them is good, because Correctiv is receiving many hate messages, so that is a sign that what Correctiv is doing is working. Such messages reach the people that Corrective would never reach and now, Correctiv, can is able to reach into those bubbles.

Another question focused on whether Correctiv has an impression on whether the work they are doing online affects the offline behavior of people.

Cristina Helberg answered that it is very hard to determine a cause and effect relationship.

One audience member asked whether the current status was sustainable regarding fact checking and the spread of misinformation.

Cristina Helberg answered that one of the problems stems from the fact that misinformation is spread extremely rapidly. In an effort to combat this, Correctiv trains citizens to join as fact checkers. Correctiv’s aim is to train thousands of people to be fact checkers, in order to be able to respond quicker.

The last question that was asked was in relation to whether Correctiv observed any effects their answers to an article or post that was misinformation, such as the messages being declined or not shared as often.

Cristina Helberg shared that Correctiv can see that there is a decline once they do fact-checking. Correctiv currently has lawsuits from websites that have lost their advertisements, because once a website has three fact-checking reports, these advertisements go down quickly, and so, too, do the amount of times the website, and what they post, shared.
How to Sustain Positive Politics around the Just Transition in the Face of Climate Denial

Heather Grabbe from the Open society European Policy Institute gave the second keynote presentation of the first session. Her presentation focused on how to sustain positive politics in the face of climate denial.

She began her presentation by stating that the big question that remains is whether the SDGs and the climate agenda will be taken up and integrated into all policy areas. This political moment cannot be passed up. One challenge that remains for policymakers and politicians is how to ensure democratic consent for the transformational change that the SDGs require.

Heather Grabbe then gave a brief overview of the politics of climate in Europe, saying that Europe is currently in the ‘calm before the storm’; it is now widely accepted by most political parties in Europe, as well as in many societies in Europe, that climate action is required.

Climate politics will get nastier over the coming years. As the European Commission will begin to disaggregate policy measures in the next 100 days, there will most likely be a great deal more Russian disinformation and other climate denials from political parties, such as the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). We will see a greater wall of funding from lobby groups for fossil fuels and delay tactics being employed by politicians who are sympathetic to those lobby groups.

Heather Grabbe then shared different ways that one could go about climate and climate change. According to China, only authoritarian measures work. China has done well on policy statements regarding what the government and country are doing for the climate change issues. However, when it comes to the actual implementation of climate change policies, it still lags behind democracies. Without transparency measures, it is hard to guarantee targets are being met.

Another point that she brought up was in relation to a massive change in behavior that would be needed to reach climate change. Neither markets, state governments, nor authoritarian governments can guarantee this shift in behaviors. The true prices of everything do not factor into many aspects of the lives that humans live, such as in fossil fuel products. Even if prices were reflective of the true costs, they would be too slow to affect behavioral change. However, introducing taxes is a good way to change behavior quickly.

However, there is a European way that can maintain democratic consent for the transition ahead. This comes in the form of change management: if you want to change the culture, you have to establish urgency for change. Greta Thunberg has highlighted this sense of urgency. It is important to establish this in Europe before misinformation and populist parties start to deny climate change. It is vital to get the EU Member States onboard. There is a big risk to getting people involved, i.e. you have to pay off the countries that will be losers, i.e. coalmines in Poland. We do not want to set up a mindset that reinforces the notion of being paid to give something up. You need justice to be included and that everyone will have to change. You have to align national, regional, sub-national levels.

Heather Grabbe then mentioned one last aspect regarding behavioral change: co-creation of all those who will be affected is important. Involving citizens in the tradeoff discussion of climate policy, because citizens need to be shown and actively participate in how the transition will look, to make sure that it is just and everyone knows the ways in which they will be losers and how governments will then address those loses. However, the challenge comes from the fact that there are uncertainties regarding
the future. This is even more of a challenge when taking into account the need for transformational change.

When you are creating a new system of justice, you need to set it up for those who are weakest and stand to lose the most. It is hard to overcome loss-aversion and move towards collective action. Incrementalism would be dangerous when it comes to climate action and moving fast is going to be much better. Europe’s success or failure will influence the rest of the world, and Europe has to get it right.

**Plenary Discussion with Members of Parliament, SD Policymakers & Think Tank Experts**

**Heidi Hautala**, a Finnish Member of the European Parliament opened the plenary discussion. She prefaced her intervention by saying that if there will be more irregularities in the weather and that some people still think that just because it snows or is cold that the climate is not changing.

She stressed the fact that it is important for one to tell one’s own narratives, because if one does not do that, then someone else will do that and it may become a false narrative. Climate change could be one such narrative.

Heidi Hautala then focused on the relationship between sustainable development and businesses, as they are vital to reaching sustainable development goals, so they are needed onboard. We want to see the EU put in place legislation that firms are now obligated to report on climate action. Businesses want to do something, but they need a level playing field; it tells decision-makers that there are incentives that are needed. Interaction with the private sector and citizens as consumers is also needed.

The last point that she made before the Workshop participants were able to ask a few questions was concerning change management. She mentioned that it is a very dangerous game to play because there are so many vested interests that would revolt against the proposed changes. There are still many people who would feel threatened by such a shift. Within EU institutions, there is still this silo thinking and a situation where the silos work against one another. This is then compounded further, because each silo has a different lobby group behind them.

**Peter Schmidt** from the European Economic and Social Committee was the other panelist and gave his inputs during the discussions that followed Heidi Hautala’s opening. The results of the discussions can be seen below.

One Workshop participant opened the discussion by raising the issue of being able to sustain positive politics around sustainable development, because the more policymakers talk about sustainable development, the more the populist parties are growing. Because of this phenomenon, other parties are now not taking a stand for sustainable development or climate change, as they do not want to be provoked. Therefore, the questions remains: “How do you change this transformation into a positive force?”

**Peter Schmidt** answered that one point is our narrative. When we look at the current situation, many businesses start their narratives on sustainable development, but there is an important point missing: Why do we not reach the people on the ground? People are earning less and less and less over the last decades, yet the entire cake is bigger.

Sustainable development is an opportunity for us to come back with a policy for the people. We have to create a level playing field for businesses for example. The purpose of a business is to no longer just
to make money. We have to challenge our economic system. No one challenges these economic problems. As long as we do not have a participatory approach, we will not make it on course to deliver sustainable development.

Another workshop participant added their perspective to this. From their perspective, we would need to achieve a high level of ambition and make a change in society. We need to build a bridge between those who are active and those who fear the change. We have to develop a strong narrative and not just the sense of urgency. This can be done by focusing on the fact that life can also be better. We need to show that changing and transforming our economic system offers better opportunities for everyone.

Some ways to be able to help in this is by avoiding confusion and incoherence between different policy frameworks and discussions (policy coherence). It is also important to redefine success, as we are often measuring it in terms of GDP. We are measuring the success of companies by market shares, etc. New types of assessments that integrate other dimensions and link it to success will be important. Once this has been done, then you may convince other people to follow.

One Workshop participant asked if we were facing an identity problem, as we are now more than solely our ethnic identity. There is also this fear that still persists of change and changing these ingrained identities. There needs to be positive visions and narratives of why one should change their identity.

Another participant added to this, saying it is about culture.

One participant mentioned that co-creating this change and developing the correct governance tools to get there would be needed. They then asked if there were any good practices and whether they were scalable.

One participant was interested in hearing any examples of deliberative methods at the local level. On climate, in particular, it is often about understanding the complexities and it is a different outcome from just asking yes or no questions.

Peter Schmidt responded that it would be easy for municipalities to organize energy systems, bit that it costs money. However, the big energy companies want to control everything and do not want it brought to the people.

A participant from Finland also responded that, at the political level, it has been quite successful that the government has been reporting to the Parliament. The Committee for the Future is the government’s counterpart. It ensures there is a debate among all parties in the parliament. They will develop the recommendations and send it to the government. The committee for the Future has been able to come up with a joint understanding, even though populists are included there. This has been an institutionalized way of ensuring that all political parties are on board for the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda.

A participant from Germany shared that they are currently doing a citizen participation on nitrogen. It is not simple or sexy; there is a lot of science behind it. You always have to reach out to at least 2,000 people to have 200 in the end. It is also difficult to have a representative share of the population. We had people come to regional conferences to discuss this topic. It raises questions, such as how much can you expect from citizens? How much do you have to explain? How transparent do you have to be?

Heidi Hautala responded to the question regarding governance mechanisms and said that the European Parliament committees could be key. MEPs will try to put to the table how the political committees could organize their work. Parliament will produce an annual report. Maybe we can link
that to the European Semester and add a new dimension for the SDGs. Unfortunately, within this legislature, there have been no discussions on this. Talking with the EESC is also helpful. The present mechanisms we have are not up to date (EESC report from a year ago).

Regarding identity: the H&M CEO said that this consumption hostile environment will cost jobs. We are witnessing 3.5% and beyond of the population changing their identity by going to flea markets, for example, and buying second-hand. The Circular Economy also presents new possibilities.

One participant mentioned that there is still a problem in the European Parliament with mainstreaming sustainable development. The Parliament conducted a report into the relation of sustainable development and trade, where they asked all committees to feed into the report. However, no one from the trade committee commented or fed into the report. However, trade is a very important topic and issue in sustainable development.

Heidi Hautala added that the mainstreaming of sustainable development within the European Parliament is changing quickly. Sustainable development is now talked about 50% of the time in the trade committee. Linking sustainable development to supply chains will be key.

A participant from Germany shared that they are currently discussing a lot of issues on the side of governance and on the institutional side. We experienced this with our citizen participation models. However, in how much are these governance systems able to take this up? Our governance structures may not be well equipped to handle the transformational change that is needed. How do we reach directly to people and their problems with climate policy, social policy, economic policy, etc.? Another dimension would be how we can make positive and constructive dialogues. Political parties fear that they will lose votes.

A participant added that it is about using the bottom-up energy that is there. Climate is often used for as a proxy for much more.

The German participant from above added the change management aspect and that it is maybe it is not just about using the energy that is there, but also about fueling that energy. Therefore, it becomes more about change and participation management.

Peter Schmidt shared that the EESC should say green and social deal. We should change the competition law, as municipalities cannot handle this. When we do not reach the working people, we will not be successful. The youth is thinking strategically, they are now starting to approach the German trade unions to talk about the green and social deal. Bring this onto the floor and explain the shift. You need to go to the people and explain the tradeoffs.

Another participant shared that it is often hard to exchange information, even in working groups at the EU. There needs to be a shift away from the “prisoner’s dilemma” thinking and to a system, which rewards cooperation. The new President of the European Commission should send a strong message to the Member States to share information with all members.
Session 2: Discourse Check – The current state of intellectual and conceptual grounding/consulting policy at EU level

Session 2 began with two keynote presentations. The first presentation provided insights into sustainability governance in Europe and the second presentation looked into sustainability policy and transformative change with respect to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. After the two keynote presentations, there was another panel discussion with one main intervention. After the intervention, the floor was opened to the rest of the participants to discuss and ask questions.

**Sustainability Governance in Europe: Governance Principles and Democratic Achievements: a practitioner's view**

**Louis Meuleman**, from DG Environment, was the first keynote presentation of Session 2. His presentation focused on sustainability governance in Europe. His PowerPoint presentation can be found on the [ESDN Website](#).

For the basics on governance and the interplay of governance and democracy, please consult Louis Meuleman’s slides, where he connects sustainable development and governance, governance and democracy, as well as democracy and sustainable development.

In the context of the EU and the questions that are arising regarding whether the EU should lead on the SDGs, Louis Meuleman reflected on what parliaments could do.

There have been activities around Agenda 2030 in 22 national parliaments. The European Parliament was an early mover at the EU level regarding commitment to Agenda 2030. However, it has not yet succeeded in responding to the reinvigorated challenges and opportunities of Agenda 2030 in a satisfactory way. Activities have remained in the DEVE realm for too long. All parliaments will need to ‘teach their silos to dance’: setting up internal working mechanisms to better tackle overarching issues, including Agenda 2030.

At EU level, relations between the Council and Parliament would benefit if the Parliament established an interlocutor on the SDGs, such as the Working Party for Agenda 2030 in the Council. There is great potential to improve and use the interparliamentary dialogue and collaboration of the EP and national parliaments for cross-fertilization to advance SDG implementation.

The promises of the incoming President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, are telling, as she has said that each Commissioner will ensure the delivery of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals within their policy area. The College as a whole will be responsible for the overall implementation of the Goals. She will refocus the European Semester into an instrument that integrates the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and will ensure that every new [trade] agreement concluded will have a dedicated sustainable-development chapter. She also intends to put forward a strategy for green financing and a Sustainable Europe Investment Plan, and wants citizens to have their say at a Conference on the Future of Europe, to start in 2020 and run for two years.

Some challenges remain for governance for sustainable development and governance for democracy. Louis Meuleman states that there is a challenge to governance that it might become a shadow of new public management. Another challenge is the changing administrative culture and the capacity for systemic challenges.

Some ways to address the root causes of governance failure include:
• Ineffective coordination among local, regional and national authorities;
• Lack of administrative capacity, and insufficient financing;
• Lack of knowledge and data;
• Insufficient compliance assurance mechanisms; and
• Lack of integration and policy coherence (horizontal/vertical).

In closing, Louis Meuleman asked the question, “How can SD policy and SD governance contribute specifically to a robust and transformative democracy?” He answered that the set of SDGs is a powerful tool to stimulate organizational and policy change. However, before the full potential can be reaped, we need training and information in the first place. Secondly, we need leadership from the top that allows policy officers to become change leaders themselves. Finally, a strategic guidance document that would fuel strategic learning processes would be beneficial.

**Sustainability Policy & Transformative Change: Experiences in 2030 Agenda and SDG Implementation**

**Udo Bullmann**, a German Member of the European Parliament, was the second keynote speaker.

He began his presentation by stating that in this environment, there is no need to talk about the general situation that Europe finds itself in, as this is an era of fundamental change. There is a polarization of those who govern and those who are governed, meaning there is increasingly more distance between them. The issues that the world is facing can be found in the architecture of its societies. What needs to be looked at is how we want to build up an environment for our future.

The SDGs are a holistic way to give an answer and to build up what we want. However, we do not trust on the substance of the SDGs and we are behind on delivering on them. The world does not have an appropriate lead actor. The US is not leading and China is too far away. Therefore, it falls to the EU and one must ask themselves if the EU is ready to lead when it comes to the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. Is the EU ready to define new policy hierarchies? Is the EU in a different position to set out where it wants to go?

He also shared that the SDGs are not the prolonged form of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The SDGs call up the global North to look at their own domestic policy goals and recognize the there is a need for change in those domestic policy goals, such as policies regarding trade and development.

With respect towards the expectations towards the new European Commission, there is an appreciation for the mission letters, in which the SDGs are mentioned for the first time. The part about collective responsibility was also good.

For the EU, security and migration policy are also important and could overshadow the EU’s attempts to empower partners in the global South.

Udo Bullmann then painted a scenario, in which the EU establishes binding targets regarding the SDGs and works them into the European Semester as a collective commitment. However, the European Commission has not yet made this move. One also cannot access the new Commission without considering the type and the way in which the incoming Commission came into being (what was the governance process?). It is not yet clear if empowering the EU and strengthening it as a global player is the answer to the transformational change that is needed. It is also difficult to predict what course the EC will chart over the next five years.
In closing, Udo Bullmann said that if we are serious about the problems of ownership and appropriate delivery, then the SDGs are overarching as policymaker. If you want to change systems to be sustainable, you need local government and local actors and networks (public and private). You need to empower these actors on the ground. Without the production of tailor made solutions, then you cannot make this transition.

**Plenary Discussion with Members of Parliament, SD Policymakers & Think Tank Experts**

**Saïd El Khadraoui** from the Political Strategy Center at the European Commission opened this plenary discussion with a brief intervention.

Over time, people have, more or less, lost trust in mainstream parties. Populists are good at using fear and issues to divide people and provide answers to problems of globalization and migration. People are more informed nowadays with social media and technology. You have more minority governments in Europe that form governments (Spain).

Other models besides democracy are becoming known and showing that you do not need to have a democracy to have a good life. People fear that decisions are taken at a higher level, far removed from one’s environment; it becomes and identity issue and an alienation and loss of control issue. Populists and nationalists are using this feeling to encourage people to take back ‘control’.

Sustainable development has the great strength in the opportunity it provides to build a narrative about a positive future. Sustainable development offers a conceptual framework that obligates governments to transform towards a sustainable future. The challenge will be to have this long-term transformation in mind, but also have short-term results.

The first thing that is needed is a vision of the way forward. This will help all actors understand the direction we want to take. The Green New Deal could be very important, as it helps people understand where you want to go. One needs to have the necessary policy coordination and integration (system strategies and tool mixtures).

However, the change we need is not incremental, but rather disruptive. It is clear that innovation, small and big, needs to play a role, but sometimes they have the opposite effect. We need to identify the key issues that need to be addressed, and then mobilize thinkers, researchers, activists to create solutions together.

We need to think differently about what success exactly is and what it looks like. For example, it is not the highest possible GDP and for companies it is not necessarily to have the biggest market share or largest profit margins.

In order to ensure a just transition, the social dimension needs to be fully integrated. This would require policymakers to be adaptive and flexible and implies that a different type of civil servant may be needed in the future.

In closing his intervention, Saïd El Khadraoui said that the global dimension is also crucial, because no country can do it alone.

The floor was then opened up for participants to discuss, give feedback, and ask questions regarding the topics from Session 2.
A participant asked how does one involve citizens more into policy-making? There are a few things that are not always realized, such as who are the citizens? Who do we want to involve? When do we consider citizen participation a success? This is especially true, given that citizen participation may not even be representative of the entire population.

Said El Khadraoui responded, saying that it will be the lower skilled people who will not go there. In policy design you have to take into account all voices.

Citizen science project in Flanders regarding air pollution. 20,000 families were given pollution monitors for their homes and it triggered a lot of debate at the local and regional level.

One participant asked what we think are the dynamics regarding the incoming EC and what they can contribute to a positive development.

One participant responded that they were not convinced, as looking back at the last couple of years, showed that only a couple of institutions at the European level were discussing how the SDGs could be implemented, but were not talking to one another. Currently, we are setting ourselves up to repeat the same process, which is not helpful.

One participant added that the communication between the Council and the European Parliament could help. However, some of the things that are coming out of the Multi-stakeholder Platform (MSP) are not that good, as there might be organizations that are missing from the Platform. The Committee of the Regions, however, might be a good place to convene the European Parliament and the Council.

The participant then asked a question regarding political reluctance and the vested interests within the European Parliament. The question then becomes, how can we bring politicians along with us.

Said El Khadraoui answered that there are a few nice concepts regarding inter-institutionality, like the Conference on the Future of Europe. We need to ask ourselves what type of Europe we want, as a society and as an economic mode. The climate pact could also be a way to expand the MSP idea to a larger group to create a dynamic instrument.

Vested interest are crucial to mention, as there are winners and losers in any transition. A strong narrative and vision that includes leaving no one behind will be increasingly important. Policies should be developed to help with these kinds of transitions. From the first day onwards, we need to design the policy tools that will make the transition and they should not go against any group. We need to get out of the us vs. them reasoning.

One participant commented that they thought there was already enough talk, but that the lacking element is collective agreement for strategic action, which is something different from conversations. There needs to be a 5-year political way to go forward at the EU level. Where is the strategic readiness on the European scale for action? We need new concepts, we need to do research and engineering and see how we can tackle the SDGs and create dynamics. The vicious circle of politics needs to be broken, especially in how politicians use people’s uncertainty around the future.

Another participant added that we need a positive narrative that gives people hope. A narrative is not enough. People do not believe many narratives and have heard enough over the last 30 years regarding promises about how the world would be better. In general, people are working for society, but are not earning enough money. Therefore, we have to provide more ideas regarding wealth distribution and we need to provide people with the choice to be sustainable.

The same participant responded to this assessment and agreed that if one does not fight growing inequalities, then the SDGs cannot succeed and transformational change cannot succeed. These
growing inequalities are a driving force behind rising populism. Inequality is a trigger point. Therefore, our problem is not just about greening a broken economic model, but rather addressing the inequalities that exist in our societies and addressing those who will lose in any transformation. Policy, therefore, should focus on the losers in these situations and try to make such transformations just.
Session 3: Ways to Positively Transform European Policy and Politics

Session 3 was comprised of an interactive exchange among the Workshop participants. The remaining Workshop participants were asked to each share their thoughts from the day of keynote presentations and panel discussions, as well as to bring in their own personal experiences to discuss how they see European policy and politics transforming to meet the challenge posed by the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda.

Interactive Exchange among Workshop Participants

The first participant thought the entire Workshop was inspiring and many new things were learned and some new challenges were brought to light, especially concerning sustainable development and democracy. The discussions throughout the Workshop were helpful in this respect. One of the most important take-away messages, and one that was mentioned throughout many discussions was about including the losers of any transition into any democratic process. The processes that are being used at the local and national levels could be used at the EU level, but it is very hard to get all of the EU Member States onboard. It is definitely worth thinking about how this could be done at the EU level.

The next participant also learned a lot. People are always looking for simple answers, the silver bullet. For the time being, it feels like we are juggling with many balls. We have many possible routes into a sustainable future. Perhaps the main message is that we cannot do this all on our own. We need to get everyone on board and to disperse this realization of what is necessary.

Another participant accentuated the theme of a just transition, as for some countries this theme will be very important, as they may perceive themselves to be on the losing side in a transition that the SDGs require.

Another participant thought we should pay more attention to issues and problems from the perspective of the public administration and the issues that public administrations have to solve. Maybe we should change the level of generality of discussions to a lower level and more concrete issues, like establishing a sustainable mechanism in public administration activities. It is possible only by incorporating some principles in rule of public administrations. Sustainable impact assessment for example. At this level of generality, we can discuss more ideas and translate that into concrete solutions.

The next participant mentioned that bottom-up and top-down approaches are needed, as well as collaborative agreement from the 3 EU institutions. The bottom-up approach is important, because each national government should work to have a strategy in implementing the 2030 Agenda. It depends on how much work each government puts into changing national policies to be in line with the Agenda. It depends on how each government acts in regards to the EU Commission.

Another participant thought that the narrative part was very interesting, because it is very true that if you do not make your own narrative, then someone else will do it. Any law or measure put out by the EU or the national level will be scanned by the populist parties for any weaknesses to exploit. It will be widely shared and widely public. One take-away from this Workshop should be that we need to openly addressed that there will, indeed, be losers, but this is our vision and this is how we will take into account the losers. So, do not hide the weak parts, but be transparent.

Another participant added that the way that politics works now with information spread, such as the Alternative für Deutschland to activate non-voters. Even more important is the reception of this
information being spread by right-wing populists is worrisome. There is a lot of non-knowledge out there regarding media and media literacy by other parties. Narratives need to be about the people. How do we target people and make the narrative usable and understandable for people?

Another participant agreed with this argument. We have to explain policy much more and how policy works; how it works for the people it is meant to serve. We have to teach how laws are working, how the government is working and the parliament. It is important to tell people why a particular decision was taken and why some decisions were not taken. This means some people have a disadvantage and we think about how the government can then support them, for example. What we are doing now is not enough. We just do a press release, which leaves out the details.

Another participant also agreed with that and stressed that our main goal is the fairness and the justice to win the people and that they receive not only transparency, but that we do not lose them.

One participant thought that making sure that the link between policy and science is very clear was important. What climate deniers do, is that they say that science is not trustworthy. However, there is a sense of public confidence in science. It is very vital. In Germany, the trust in science is high. In the US, however, it has been reduced drastically in the last decade. Understanding policy, and how it is made, is very important.

In closing the ESDN Strategic Workshop, Jörg Mayer-Ries, speaking for the ESDN said that on the one hand, as public servants, the exchange of good practice and of making sustainable development policy relevant in decision-making will continue and the ESDN will continue to exchange on this issue.

The ESDN will have to discuss what it would like to do with the new European Commission. There are things that are occurring and that need to be followed-up with and cooperation in these fields needs to be strengthened, to move the sustainable development debate along.