

SUMMARY REPORT

POSITIONING EUROPE IN GLOBAL SCIENCE: Priorities for research to achieve sustainable solutions

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On Tuesday 3 February 2015, Future Earth, DG Research & Innovation of the European Commission (DG RTD), the Brussels office of the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) and the European Parliament Intergroup on Climate Change, Biodiversity and Sustainable Development collaborated to organise a lunch meeting entitled “Positioning Europe in global science: Priorities for research to achieve sustainable solutions”, hosted and chaired by MEP Paul Rübige. The meeting was convened to present Future Earth to European policy-makers, and to identify strategic priorities for solutions-oriented research activities in Europe.

Opening the meeting, **MEP Paul Rübige** mentioned the importance of keeping Europe at the forefront of scientific and technological progress. *“We do not only feel responsible for our 500 million European people, but also for the population of the rest of the world”* said Rübige. He briefly presented the main activities of the Scientific and Technology Options Assessment (STOA), the body of the European Parliament which drives EP activities related to technology and scientific research, and which he chairs. He welcomed the fruitful collaboration between the EP and other European and international Institutions, praising the efforts of Future Earth in promoting dialogue on how to best organise research to achieve objectives for sustainability.

Kurt Vandenberghe, Director in DG RTD of the European Commission, and co-Chair of the Belmont Forum, a group of high-level representatives from major funding agencies across the globe, reflected on the embedding of sustainable development within legislations, policies and programmes of the European Union. Europe has a record of excellence in research and innovation, and it must strive to maintain a leading role in the World. In this context, technological innovation will remain crucial, but must be supported by business and social innovation, in order to respond to societal challenges and deliver solutions that preserve the World's operating space. A trans-disciplinary approach is needed, in which stakeholders are involved in co-creating knowledge and co-delivering solutions. This approach matches with the objectives of Horizon 2020, providing for a commitment to spend at least 60% of its budget for Sustainable Development and to open to international cooperation. The contribution of EU Science, Technology and Innovation is included in the Communication on the SDGs means of implementation.

The Future Earth platform was presented by **Frans Berkhout**, professor of Environment, Society and Climate in the Department of Geography at King's College of London, and Future Earth interim Director. Future Earth is a *“global knowledge trust”*, an international hub to coordinate interdisciplinary global sustainability research. He explained that Future Earth is a platform for international engagement involving stakeholders, research institutes and decision-makers, to ensure that knowledge is generated in partnership with society and users of science. He highlighted the importance of co-designing research priorities, in order to ensure that science is answering the

questions relevant to societies worldwide. European research bodies have played a leading role in this process, and it is important to link their activities with the priorities of European policy-makers.

Ulf Björnholm Ottosson, Head of Office of UNEP Brussels Office of UNEP, brought the United Nations perspective to the discussion. He underlined the importance of the scientific method in informing policy-makers, and the role of scientific evidence for decision-making. He noted the remarkable amount of information that is available to the public nowadays, but stated that this could risk creating confusion. He therefore called for a defence of the scientific method, and for effective management and communications of the vast amount of research and information that is available – which is exactly what Future Earth is doing. He added that strong institutions have to be able to translate the scientific findings to make them useful for decision-makers, and to facilitate applied science. He mentioned a number of initiatives that UNEP has been and is working on to achieve these goals, which he sees in line with the objectives of the European Commission, STOA and Future Earth.

Prof. Corinne Le Quéré, Global Carbon Project and Director of the Tyndall Centre at the University of East Anglia, took the floor as member of the Science Committee of Future Earth. She argued that Europe is already at the forefront of many sustainable development solutions but that efforts need to expand and implementation of solutions to accelerate to stay within the limitations of the planetary boundaries and maintain a strong resilient space for current and future generations. She added that science and policy making worked on different timescales, and that these gaps needed to be bridged to enhance knowledge transfer between scientists and policy makers. Future Earth is working in this direction, with the aim of developing new IT and social platforms for communication within the scientific world.

Prof. Frank Biermann, Chair of the Earth System Governance Project, and a member of the Management Team of the Institute for Environmental Studies of VU University Amsterdam, praised the effort of Future Earth in linking natural sciences to social sciences, saying that interdisciplinary working was far stronger than in the past. This is helping to promote a new way to look at the research agenda. He elaborated that the Earth System Governance Project draws on a new way of understanding global environmental change, moving from a more traditional view of the human environment to a more encompassing paradigm that sees the entire earth system as being at stake. The Earth System Governance Project represents a global community of researchers, but surely one with a strong European leg, said Biermann.

Farooq Ullah, Executive Director of the Stakeholders Forum for a Sustainable Future and member of the Engagement Committee of Future Earth, highlighted the important role of science in promoting sustainable development, with particular relevance for the Sustainable Development Goals, reminding the audience that they will apply globally to developing and developed countries. A new approach to scientific practice must be based on co-designing of priorities and co-producing of solutions. He added that Future Earth closes the loop between different dimensions of science, society and policy-making, and recalled the need to shift of conceptualisation from a bipolar relationship of the Science-Policy Interface to a triangular relationship of a Science-Policy-Society Interface which gives an explicit role for stakeholders in the development of science. He finally underlined the importance of moving from theoretical research to applications of that research.

Discussion with the audience - The discussion with the audience was very lively and touched upon topics including the accountability of policy-makers, technological solutions to promote energy efficiency, financing of research initiatives, and increasing the involvement of policy-makers in such



fora. Participants also discussed how to develop training and incentives for scientists to engage with policy makers and societal stakeholders, including the role of universities in creating those incentives. Several participants underlined the importance of mobilizing capital as essential for the transition to sustainable development, and mentioned a UNEP-led *Inquiry into the Design of a Sustainable Financial System*¹ as an interesting initiative in this context.

MEP Ricardo Serrão Santos, co-Chair of the “Biodiversity & Ecosystem Services” working group of the EP Intergroup on *Climate Change, Biodiversity and Sustainable Development*, welcomed the Future Earth initiative, while noting the small number of MEPs attending the meeting. He raised the issue of technological advancements that in the past have been detrimental to the environment. In his opinion, Europe must put in place a concrete action plan on sustainability in order not to make the same mistakes again, and he called for more politicians to be involved in the process.

In the last round of comments the speakers were able to conclude on the points raised by the participants. **Farooq Ullah** stated that it is very important to promote the ability of scientists to disseminate and mainstream their work, instead of keeping it within the scientific community. **Prof. Frank Biermann** commented on the role of universities, by saying that university management boards have a big responsibility in driving their students’ competencies. He also mentioned the importance of funding resources. **Ulf Björnholm Ottosson** agreed with the previous speaker by stressing that financial systems have to be available prior to the setting of research priorities, in order to invest energies where concrete results can be supported. **Prof. Corinne Le Quéré** commented on Corporate Social Responsibility by saying that consumers also have a power in driving priorities and market choices. About the lack of communication in the scientific community, she noted that some good practice exists, such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which strives to produce scientific content that is made available to the public. Responding to a previous comment made by MEP Serrão Santos who regrets the fact that the term “sustainability” has become a buzzword in discussions in the Parliament, **Kurt Vandenberghe** reaffirmed that biological considerations have to be taken into account on the same level as socio-economic ones. He praised the work of Future Earth in creating a space where policy-makers and scientists can interact and see the impacts of their activities. Finally, **Prof. Frans Berkhout** underlined that one of the aims of Future Earth is to build trust with partners in society. He added that this will help in rethinking all the services that are necessary to human beings (nutrition, transport, industrial production, etc.) and this will eventually trigger a societal change.

¹ <http://www.unep.org/inquiry/>