



## Europe at the crossroads: the challenge of environmental sustainability

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Dear participants,

A 40 year birthday. If you think of a 40 year old person you would say that he is middle aged. But a 40 year old organisation is still in its infancy. So as far as I can see, EEB has only started its journey. It is 40 years young but 40 years wise! So, congratulations to the European Environmental Bureau.

As I start my mandate I look forward to 2019 and hope that I will be still on the invitation list for your 45th birthday celebrations!

If Europe has the legislation it has; if we lead the way on many environmental aspects; if we are a bit closer to sustainability; if our air and water are getting cleaner *despite* growing economic activity, it is thanks to your support – and also thanks to your constructive criticism.

And thank you for getting NGOs and civil society on board. Thank you for bringing Europe closer to its citizens by linking Brussels policy making with local grassroots organisations. Thank you for being the "watchdog" of implementation and compliance.

And above all, thank you for putting the wellbeing of people first.

So, what about the next forty years?

### ***Do we have a Vision and a roadmap?***

Well, we do. We have a vision in the 7th Environment Action Programme: by 2050 we must *"live well, within the planet's ecological limits"*.

Coming from a small island myself, I am very familiar with the concept of limits and constraints.

Malta is the smallest Member State, with the highest population density in Europe. It is considered as one urban zone with 400,000 inhabitants, over a 300 sq km area. 1300 persons per km. And in addition over 1.2 million tourists every year. This is an island which is continuously being challenged by limitations in size, water supply, accessibility, infrastructure, workforce availability, to name but some of the many constraints. This is a chain, and therefore it is only as strong as its weakest link.

It was in line with the concept of limits that, when I was Minister for Tourism, I commissioned a maximum carrying capacity study for sustainable tourism numbers in Malta as a destination. An unpopular measure at first, which needed an exercise in persuasion - but in the end tourism stakeholders realised that it was in their own best interests to have a sustainable tourism industry within and not beyond the islands limitations.

Our vision and challenge for 2050 is not much different. The only distinction is that the challenges are on a bigger scale.

This is why we need an ambitious roadmap. The 7th Environmental Action Programme tells us exactly what to do and how to do it from now up to 2020 in order to achieve a sustainable economy.

We must use the tools we already have at our disposal to strengthen the smart and sustainable pillars of the EU2020 Strategy.

This, for me, will be a first priority in the coming months: and I will work closely with my fellow Commissioners on the review of the Strategy.

It is important that we move forward the resource-efficiency agenda continue working on the circular economy.

Very often, I get carried away by some very valid concepts wrapped up in abstract phrases, like; phasing out environmentally harmful subsidies, adding new market-based instruments, driving eco-innovation....

But instead I prefer to talk about more practical and meaningful projects. One such project is Tomatenfisch.

No, it's not a fish recipe. It is a project set up in Berlin, and co-financed with EU research funds. It is an innovative way of producing fish and tomatoes under one roof, with aquaculture and hydroponics supporting each other.

It enables nearly emission-free food production with optimal resource use.

It is a good example of green and blue growth creating a win-win situation; of environmental technology at the service of our economy.

This is a point I'm very keen on, and I know the EEB will agree: today it is no longer a matter of choosing between economic growth and environmental protection. They must co-exist. It is no longer a question of balance between the economy and the environment, but it is all about integrating the two of them.

We have to realise that Environmental Protection is an economic opportunity, an opportunity we cannot afford to miss. An opportunity that will create mutually reinforcing benefits for the economy and the environment for the good of our society.

### ***Biodiversity***

We have to play our cards right. We have to manage growth and not let it happen in an unchecked manner, totally dissociated from the natural capital it depends on. In other words, we have to implement our Biodiversity Strategy to the letter in order to reach our targets for 2020. As we speak, my team is working on a mid-term assessment to take stock of where we stand in terms of reaching our targets.

### ***Compliance***

It is also of the utmost importance that we focus on our health and wellbeing. This we can do through our work on Air Quality, the Water Blueprint, and REACH.

And here I must stress the importance of implementation. What is the use of having very good plans which are then not implemented? It is only when implemented fully and correctly that environmental legislation produces results and delivers benefits. Efficient implementation is also essential to achieve legal certainty and a level playing field for business and better quality of life for people.

It is very worrying to note that some of our Member States fare very badly on implementation. In some cases implementation is hardly present at all. Thank god these countries are the exception and not the rule!

The Commission has always, and will continue to help by identifying implementation problems and providing solutions. This has been done extensively in the area of waste.

But please rest assured that I will not hesitate to resort to all the means at my disposal to penalise those who intentionally fail to live up to their obligations.

A lack of implementation is counterproductive, it undermines everybody's efforts and it is tremendously unfair towards those who abide by the rules.

On top of that, a lack of implementation leads to non-performance and to missing out on economic opportunities. Had the current EU waste policy been fully implemented by all, an extra 400,000 jobs would have been created.

On the one hand we have enough proof to confirm that environmental protection can also contribute to generating much-needed new jobs.

On the other hand, we also have to understand that adding layer upon layer of environmental legislation could be economically unproductive.

### ***Refit***

That is the reason for this Commission's fitness check. We have to identify excessive burdens, overlaps, gaps, inconsistent or obsolete measures, and correct them.

The fitness checks on water and waste have already been completed by the previous Commission. We have now been given the mandate to review the nature legislation.

The intention being that of increasing the environmental standards while reducing the administrative burdens.

### ***Sustainable Development***

Before concluding, I would like to say something about Europe's international dimension. Following the Rio+20 Summit, we are committed to the global commitment towards sustainable development goals – I refer to the UN post2015 agenda.

I will be working closely with Vice-President Mogherini and fellow Commissioner Mimica to make sure that the EU does not only engage but more importantly lead internationally by developing a clear, ambitious and coherent agenda towards achieving our Sustainable Development Goals.

In this respect, there are some aspects of this agenda that I want to stress:

- The agenda will have to be universal and must apply to all countries, from developing to developed. No exception - we all need to engage and contribute.
- It will have to address sustainable development by integrating and not only balancing the economic, environmental and social dimensions.
- We must have a transformative agenda which embraces change. We are not after growth, but after a sustainable growth - whether blue or green! We must promote a resource efficiency economy addressing not only the production side, but also the consumption side.

The New York-based "Open Working Group" has delivered a set of 17 goals. We should not try to reinvent the wheel but we should try to build on that consensus.

Ladies and gentlemen, time is running out. Things are now very different to what they were 40 years ago. I do not even dare to think what things would be like in 40 years' time if we fail in our collective task. Earlier on I was joking about the 40 years. But this is extremely serious. Think of your children and grandchildren. We cannot fail them.

So let us act fast – and let us aim high.

I said it elsewhere but I do not mind repeating it again: President Juncker has correctly said that we should aim at a triple A rating for Europe's economy. I think we all agree.

But because we want to "*live well, within the limits of our planet*" we need to also aim for a triple A environment. Our children and grandchildren do not deserve anything less.

We cannot compromise on the future quality of our environment.

Dear EEB,

Let me just finish my talk with a plea to you all. I understand that you are passionate environmentalists; that you are committed to a healthier planet. But 40 years of EEB successes have also shown that you are passionate Europeans. Therefore my plea is simple. Let us work together. When you are unhappy you will let us know, but when you are happy please let the world know. Over 40 years you have helped shape the Environment *and* Europe because you believe in both. Please don't forget that we need your constructive support and your voice.

I wish the EEB and this conference every success and above all, I am very much looking forward to working with you all.

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