

Impact Outlook

- ‘Investing in a low carbon and resource-efficient economic future makes business sense. The EU is now taking the first important steps to make a transition towards a green economy’
- ‘Transitions thinking is currently being built into our medium-term planning. Our focus will be identifying knowledge, skills and governance approaches for this transition’

An environmental knowledge powerhouse

In an exclusive interview, Dr Hans Bruyninckx, Executive Director of the European Environment Agency, talks with Impact about how the new environmental knowledge agenda, which he says is linking policy implementation to an increased understanding, will achieve more systemic long-term objectives

Can you briefly discuss the background to the European Environment Agency (EEA) being set up, and what its work involves?

The EEA and its European Environment Information and Observation Network (Eionet) were set up by the EU in 1990 and the Agency began its work in 1994. We are first and foremost a knowledge institution. We are a major information source for those involved in developing, adopting, implementing and evaluating environmental policy at the EU and national level, and also the general public. Our work here in Copenhagen, where we are based, is to provide sound, independent information on the environment. Our task is to support sustainable development and to help achieve significant and measurable improvement in Europe's environment.

Our agency is unique as we have 33 member countries, including all 28 EU Member States but also countries outside of the EU like Norway, Iceland, Turkey and Switzerland. This wider membership gives us an extensive network within which we can share and build our understanding on environmental issues that matter to citizens across the continent. This is important as a large share of our work is based on data compiled by member countries in connection with specific pieces of EU legislation.

What do you believe are the current key environmental challenges Europe is facing, and how is the EEA working to address these?

There have been many environmental improvements over recent decades, thanks in part to action taken by the EU. However, the challenges that Europe faces today are considerable. European natural capital is being degraded by socioeconomic activities such as agriculture, fisheries, transport, industry, tourism and urban sprawl. And global pressures on the environment have grown at an unprecedented

rate since the 1990s, driven not least by economic and population growth, and changing consumption patterns. The impacts of climate change, air and water pollution and the continued degradation of our biodiversity are becoming ever more real in our daily lives.

So how are we addressing these complex challenges? The EU has set out an ambitious set of policies to tackle them, such as through the 7th Environment Action Programme, the 2030 Climate and Energy package, the Europe 2020 Strategy and the Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme. As a knowledge actor, the EEA is responding to these challenges by designing a new knowledge agenda that links supporting policy implementation to an increased understanding of how to achieve more systemic long-term objectives. In recent years many of our reports, including *The European Environment – State and Outlook 2015 (SOER 2015)*, have highlighted the vital importance of systemic approaches.

Today's environmental problems, including climate change, involve a high degree of complexity. For example, we cannot improve air quality in Europe without low carbon transport, better-designed cities, enhanced international cooperation to tackle the transboundary movement of air pollutants, and a network of green spaces around urban areas. Our assessments regularly underline the need for consistent and long-term policy objectives. Introducing fundamental changes to key systems can take decades. Building a clean and low carbon mobility or energy system without clear objectives is likely to hamper investments in innovative solutions.

Integrating environmental considerations into economic policies is essential in Europe's move towards sustainability. How successfully do you think this is being done currently, and what ways can improvements be made?

DR HANS BRUYNINCKX took up his post with the EEA on 1 June 2013. From 2010 until that appointment, he was head of the HIVA Research Institute in Leuven, Belgium, a policy-oriented research institute associated with the University of Leuven, where he was also head of the Political Science Department from 2007 to 2010. Bruyninckx has been a senior member of the interdisciplinary Leuven Centre for Global Governance Studies and Promoter-Coordinator of the Flemish Policy Research Centre on Transitions for Sustainable Development (TRADO). He holds undergraduate and Master's degrees in Political Science, and specialised in international relations at Antwerp University and the University of Leuven. He also completed an additional programme in Development Studies at the Catholic University of Louvain. Bruyninckx completed his PhD in 1996 at Colorado State University on the topic of international environmental politics, subsequently teaching at several other universities in the United States and Europe, including Colorado State University, Canisius College, New York, and Wageningen University in the Netherlands. He was born in Schoten, Belgium, in 1964.

Investing in a low carbon and resource-efficient economic future makes business sense. The EU is now taking the first important steps to make a transition towards a green economy. Let's not kid ourselves, such a shift will have serious effects for our economies and will require ambitious actions on policy, knowledge investments and innovation. But doing so will bring major economic opportunities to boost Europe's economy and employment and it will put Europe at the frontier of science and innovation.

On 20 July 2016, the European Commission proposed a new package of measures to accelerate this transition in Europe. The package is one of the concrete steps proposed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 40 per cent by 2030 compared to 1990 levels. The proposals include binding emission reductions for Member States, and for the first time foresee the inclusion of land use and forestry into the EU's 2030 climate and energy framework. The package would strengthen the EU climate and energy policy framework significantly towards the EU's long-term trajectory towards a competitive, low carbon economy. It takes a comprehensive look at the emissions from all sectors of the economy: transport, buildings, agriculture, waste, land use and forestry and foresees emission reductions in all the economic sectors. It also builds on the reform of the EU Emissions Trading System (EU ETS) proposed in July 2015, which covers emissions from industrial and power sectors. Moreover, emission reductions are foreseen to be facilitated by a number of sector-specific policy initiatives or wider packages, such as the low emission mobility strategy or the circular economy package.

These are just the first steps, but a lot more has to be done. EU Member States are now developing low carbon development strategies outlining concrete steps to turn EU-wide, long-term ambitions into national and local action. These strategies were submitted for the first time in 2015 to the European Commission and will be further assessed by the EEA during the course of this year.

And we are already seeing a shift – a transition from the carbon-intensive industrial sectors and resources to cleaner ones as we work to meet our commitments to cut greenhouse gas emissions. Alongside the Kyoto and Paris agreements we have our own ambitious EU goal to live well within the limits of our planet by 2050. Significant changes will also be needed in Member States' energy-generating mix if the EU is to

meet its 2050 goal to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 80–95 per cent compared to 1990 levels.

This involves a transition to a low carbon economy which cannot be achieved by public investments alone. Private investments are also need to be mobilised for clean infrastructure projects and research on clean technologies. The EU has set out several key proposals which will help in this transition including the circular economy package, the raw materials initiative, and the Energy Union. So it's clear Europe has a lot to do and it won't be easy, but I think the realisation of the need for a transformational shift to a sustainable future is there.

What do you consider will be the big environmental topics of interest to Europe in the coming few years, and what steps is the EEA taking to ensure that Europe is well placed to address these?

Climate change, air pollution and loss of biodiversity continue to be hot topics across Europe and around the world. We will continue to provide knowledge in terms of data and assessments to inform and support European policy makers as they work to address these challenges and work to meet our 2050 ambitions. Transitions thinking is currently being built into our medium-term planning. Our focus will be identifying knowledge, skills and governance approaches for this transition.

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