

## **Speech by John Hontelez, Secretary General European Environmental Bureau (EEB), at EEAC CONFERENCE BORDEAUX 10/10/08**

I would like to start with thanking the EEAC for inviting me to respond to your Statement on a long term vision and strategy for achieving a Sustainable Europe, or more precisely, a Sustainable European Union. It is going to be a PERSONAL response, written in the train to Bordeaux, on the basis of my experience of some 24 years in the EU arena, as an environmentalist, definitely not a scientist, but also as an observer of the general trends and achievement of the EU in that period.

I like your Statement for its ambition and for its attempt to show how governance, social justice, the economy, education and culture all need to be mobilized, influenced and changed in an integrated manner to achieve sustainable development.

But I am also concerned about your vision. Not only because you take a fifty year perspective, and I realize I will not live long enough to see the result. Concerned also because I think we do not have so much time. OECD expects that the global economy, in GDP terms, will double in the next two decades; that greenhouse gas emissions will go up with 50% in the next 40 years, leading to global warming far beyond the 2°C scientists think we still can manage. And I am concerned even more because you describe in fact the need for a more profound social and cultural revolution than we have seen ever before, one might take not take place, or at least take more time than we have to prevent a major ecological disaster. Your vision implies that sustainable development is necessarily based on solidarity, fairness, full transparency and democracy, on altruism even. This is in complete contradiction with what mainstream politicians and business leaders tend to think: sustainable development for them is rethorics, some technological improvements, and citizens that treat their garbage well. It is in stark contradiction with the dominant ambitions and values that drive societies at the moment.

### **To summarize what, in my view, we are facing today as dominant anti-sustainable development objectives, ambitions and values:**

- Maximising economic growth, competitiveness, profit, defending EU interests in the global arena and defending national interests inside the EU arena.
- Consumerism, fed by a never stopping bombardment of commercial advertising and never ending confrontation with rich role-models, consumerism that has affected our generation, but even more the ones coming after us. As Environment Minister Gormley of Ireland said at the EEB Annual Conference two weeks ago: before a child has become adult nowadays it has already been confronted with some 100.000 commercial adds! Good luck to the parents that want to give their children a feeling of happiness based on spiritual and immaterial values!
- We are confronted with the greed of people active on the stock markets, running hedge/vampire funds, of bankers earning several millions of Euro's a year, and even more if they have to leave for failure. Such people are at the moment determining the financial health of our societies.
- And responsible political leaders being more and more threatened and undermined by populists, jumping in the gap emerged from the erosion of traditional community networks, with explicit or implicit assistance from ever more simplistic/commercialized media.

Your vision is not much less than a plea to tackle and erase these destructive forces in society. I can support that, but yet I am worried about that such a plea by itself is not sufficient for EU's political leaders, business elite and opinion leaders to make the big turn and follow and implement your proposals.

You are asking a lot from civil society, so the first requirement for getting attention and support is to convince people that it is really necessary, that the current development model will soon reach its end, a dramatic end. That the younger generations of today already have no chance for ending their life in prosperity and peace unless something drastically will happen. That change is necessary, the only chance we have. We need to hammer on the fact that the more and more rapid undermining of the carrying capacity of the region and the planet will not only lead to scarce resources, desertification and floods, but that it will also lead to destructive conflicts between and within societies and possibly even the end of human civilization as we know it.

The second requirement is to convince decisionmakers and the public that changing course in the EU can make a difference. This is already a difficult message. Everyone knows by now that China will soon be the biggest economy in several ways. And the Chinese do, rightfully, not feel guilty for the mess the rich western countries have already created before China's economy started expanding its own footprint. Other developing countries, finally, take off as well. The OECD countries will soon not be responsible anymore for more than half of the global resource depletion and pollution. So sustainable development can only be a global achievement or it will fail. And yet, if one looks at the OECD Environmental Outlook 2030 one sees that in 2030 GHG emissions per capita in OECD countries will still be threefold with the other countries in the world. And let's not forget that 40% of current pollution in China is directly linked to the export to the OECD! So: "common but differentiated responsibilities", the concept born in Rio in 1992, remains valid for the next decades, and the rich industrialized countries will continue to lead the way in consumption patterns and technology development.

This does not mean that changing course in the EU will change the world by definition. Setting the good example is important, but moving from competition to solidarity and fairness in international relations is crucial.

Third requirement is to show HOW can we make the shift. Your Statement contains a lot of good proposals. Looking at the current financial crisis, it becomes clear hopefully to many that the INVISIBLE HAND of Adam Smith does not exist, or not anymore at least. That the market is not driven by corporate social responsibility and long-term thinking, but by greed and hectic short term profitism. Let's not forget: in the past business was predominantly family owned. This meant there was an internal drive to think longer term, even to the next generation. Now more and more companies are in constant danger of take-over and changing stock-holder preference. Short term profit maximization is more important than ever.

I hope the current crisis will lead to a new wave of interventions and regulation by public authorities to steer the economy. And it is essential that this is done with sustainability in mind, and at the EU level or even the global level, rather than on the basis of new nationalism.

You are right to focus on education as a key precondition for a successful cultural revolution. This is not going to be easy. Consumerism responds to human nature, strongly exploited by commercial interests and populist politicians. And as long as we have the large, and growing, income and prosperity difference in our societies it is going to be difficult indeed to call for solidarity, fairness and more appreciation of the non-material side of wellbeing.

Looking at your concrete proposals, I would like to make the following comments:

1. Yes, the Commission is expected to elaborate a sustainable development VISION for the EU with a fifty year perspective. The Commission knows this from June 2006, but two weeks ago I met, with colleagues from WWF and Greenpeace, senior officials of the Secretariat General of the Commission. I can tell you: the work has not started, and most likely not even the brainstorming about it! So there is every reason to challenge the Commission to make a start indeed. But your exercise also shows that 50 years is maybe

a bit far ahead: any vision should lead to a programme for the next Commission already, and not the one in 20 years from now.

2. The complex relation between the EU and the Member States is not really tackled in your Statement it seems. You just assume harmony and complementarity. I am afraid you are stepping a bit too easily over the existential problems the EU is facing. The EU has part of the characteristics of a federal state, but it lacks the most important one: the support of a common citizenship. For the vast majority of citizens and national politicians the EU remains a cooperation of independent states, not more. Your call for more democracy and transparency is correct. But this will not necessarily lead to a stronger EU, in particular not in the social field where you may underestimate the lack of willingness of citizens of different Member States to show solidarity towards each other. Look at Belgium at the moment: many Flemish citizens resent to continue what they consider as subsidizing their Walloon countrymen and women. Then why would Dutch or UK citizens be more prepared to subsidize the citizens of Romania or even Turkey? There is no European citizenship and there will not be in the next years to come. You yourself promote diversity, and present Europe as “a house of many rooms”. Fine, but this is at the same time a serious limitation we cannot ignore.
3. From that perspective I agree we need ongoing dialogues, and your Statement has useful specific proposals for public debates and workshops. But in order to strengthen a constructive role of the EU we need first and foremost, and I think your councils can and should play a key role here: we need national awareness raising amongst public and decisionmakers about the necessity of the EU and the advantages of the EU to lead, coordinate, harmonize. And we need firm responses to populist, opportunistic and ignorant politicians and other public opinion leaders that continue to refer to “Brussels” as a authoritarian body throwing rules, bureaucracy and bills on to the Memberstates and citizens. Such nonsense needs to be systematically and continuously responded to, pointing at the role of the national governments in the Council, the nationally elected MEPs, the Treaties that were signed, and the enormous advantages of being part of the EU. Please make this part of your work at home! Provide regular honest, understandable, relevant, and ofcourse when necessary critical, information to citizens about what is the EU really about.
4. In relation to this I am really against your specific proposal on how to work towards a “genuine EU resource system” instead of the revenue basis of today. EEB is campaigning for environmental fiscal reform since many years. You also support this in your statement, or better said the background paper, as an essential part of sustainable development. But proposing that environmental taxes could be introduced to finance the EU is the worst you can do to promote such reforms! Environmental fiscal reform is to shift the taxation burden from labour to resource use and pollution. Such a shift is only possible if the revenues of the environmental taxes really go to the national authorities. On top of that, environmental tax reform is already controversial enough. Do not mix its introduction with another controversial issue as the EU financing of the future. Then rather propose company tax to go to the EU, which would make much more sense given the single market. Besides, in the current situation I do not know whether own financing sources for the EU away from the control of national governments and parliaments is a good idea at all. It would create even more distance between national politics, for most citizens the most important political level, and Brussels.

Like EEAC, the EEB is also convinced that the next decades are crucial for the survival of human civilization as we know it. And likewise we think the next 5 years really need to set the trends for sustainable development. Your proposals focus on debate, research, training, institutional initiatives. We think that is not enough. EEB is convinced that the next Commission should be guided by a clear vision of the EU towards an energy and resource efficient economy, with a social dimension to mobilize people to support this move. With the Platform of European Social NGOs and the European Trade Unions Confederation we are therefore preparing the launch of an EU civil society debate, for the first half of next year, to agree on a sustainability agenda for the next decade for the EU. We will invite EU level civil society organizations defending environmental, social, consumers, human rights interest, or working on development issues. We will involve think-tanks and scientist such as EEAC, and frontrunners in relevant business sectors. Our agenda will be concrete, with targets and timetables and actions the next Commission should undertake in its 2010-2014 operation. We have approached the Swedish Government, having the Presidency in the second half of 2009, to help us getting the messages through to the memberstates and the councils of ministers where these meet, and we will jump on the new MEPs as soon as they are elected, to join in the pressure on the new Commission to act. It is obvious that climate change and energy will be high on this agenda, but we intend to focus as well on three major areas with a worrisome ecological footprint but essential for quality of life: food, transport and housing. Obviously we will also discuss how the EU budget, as you also want, will become a real tool for sustainable development, and how research and innovation can be steered in that direction. We will seek a common agenda of all participants on a set of general messages, such as those on reversing the trend of an ever increasing ecological footprint for the EU. The strength of this agenda will be in the first place that it is agreed by representatives of organizations in Europe with tens if not hundreds of millions of members. But this agenda will be complemented with more detailed programmes that not everyone needs to sign off.

This civil society agenda is more likely to be a list of urgent demands than a list of suggestions for processes as you have prepared. I guess we need both. As long as your list does not become an excuse for Commission and Member States to delay action. Your Statement has shown the complexity of the challenges, and you are not wrong. But as you mention yourself at places: precaution and prevention are essential elements of sustainable development, and we should also apply them here: lets not wait until everyone is completely on board before we move. We need to act now, we need strong leadership and determination. We know that the depletion of the Earth's resources necessary for humankind to survive is going faster than ever and we already know to a large extent what needs to be done to slow this down.

I am looking forward to an active role in advising on the formulation of this civil society agenda.