

Report Thematic session 4: Europe and the clean energy transition

Speaker: **Martin Hession** (DG CLIMA)

Moderator: **Julie Baleriaux** (ERCEA)

Rapporteur: **Paolo Fornari**

The moderator, Miss Julie Baleriaux, introduces the speaker for this session, Mister Martin Hession. Martin Hession, formerly chair of the UN Clean Development Mechanism Executive Board, is a barrister, former academic at Imperial College, and has been a senior official at the Department of Energy and Climate Change for a number of years, involved in climate change policy at EU and international level. He is currently on secondment with the European Commission working in DG Climate Action.

In his presentation, Martin Hession presents the European Union as leader in the fight against climate change and global warming. People are aware of the consequences of climate change and know that it can negatively affect their living standards. The aim is to keep growing while being sustainable: is this even possible? The European Union has showed that this is possible indeed.

The European Union is on good track to meet the objectives set for 2020, but there is no time to lose: new, more ambitious goals for 2030 have been set. However, they have been established mainly by heads of state, therefore they can be considered political goals, not necessarily linked to what scientists and researchers might consider as feasible aims.

Core of the European strategy is the Emissions Trading System: in 2020, emissions from sectors covered by the system will be 21% lower than in 2005. Setting a common target across Europe is certainly simple and desirable, but there can be individual measures on a national level to implement. In fact, the European Commission can make proposals, but it is up to the Member States to debate, modify and apply them according to their needs.

Another important project is the Energy Union: based on the domestic production of more renewable energy, it increases innovation in the field of sustainable technologies, as well as incremented security within the energy market.

Another recent, crucial step has been the negotiations around the Paris agreement. For the first time, a global treaty (only Syria and the United States of America are currently out) frames the necessary actions to be taken domestically. National states must act and change their legislation, encourage various sectors to look at the current situation, think about what can be done, and even support the states that suffer the most because from climate change.

The challenging goal the European Union has decided for itself is to limit the temperature increase to 1.5 degree. To achieve such aim, emissions have to be cut quickly. However, there is the economic side to consider: how costly would it be in the near future? Do we have enough advanced technologies to support this change? Will be the costs bearable for the Member States? And how fast will we get to that point? In any case, something has to be done soon; we have used more than half of our emissions budget by now, and future generations are seriously at risk.

Open debate

The presentation was followed by a lively debate moderated by Julie Baleriaux.

Martin Hession is firmly convinced that it is possible to combine economic growth and cutting of emissions. Years ago, it was impossible not to use coal, but now we know that there are available technologies to avoid its use, and that is the same with many other issues. Technologies are there, we just need to change the way we look at our welfare.

Europe is not only producing a lot, but also consuming a lot. For instance, it is true that emissions declined also because of moving manufacturing to other continents. Climate policies need to happen everywhere, and each country is responsible for dealing with its own emissions and its own contribution to climate change. However, the European Union can take the lead, because in other parts of the world environmental issues are not seen as a priority, for example in lands where poverty and health are major issues. Such countries can be helped by other, by starting technical cooperations with them, organising programs to raise awareness about environmental problems and available resources. But we cannot forget that the European Union is getting less important in cutting emissions since it does not contribute too much any longer; our role is crucial in bringing forward new technologies.

The Emissions Trading System has been ongoing for a while, and proposed as a possible solution, but it might also be considered almost as a failure. At first, it overachieved on the emissions part, and from an environmental point of view it has been a success, with less costs than expected. But secondly, some other policies have partly contributed to the fact it hasn't completely matched the general expectations.

The USA have always played a key role in the fight against climate change, but at the moment they do not play this good role any longer. It seems that even discussing the topic is very hard. It is absurd that climate change can be denied even if proved, but surely preconceptions and prejudices, conservative attitudes and religious beliefs can be factors for this general resistance to environmental-friendly measures. On the other hand, the Paris agreement has brought some unexpected turnouts, for instance China willing to implement an emissions trading scheme, something that, not long ago, would have been considered not imaginable.

Another topic is the role of CCS technology - carbon capture and storage. Some think it is underused, some others believe that it is a quick solution going nowhere since it is still carbon based. According to Martin Hession, one should try not to be ideological on this matter. What we should keep in mind is that, in one way or the other, we must stop sending emissions in the atmosphere. Even if it can be difficult to implement or dangerous, it cannot be completely ruled out. Adaptation might become a major topic as well. The main problem with it is to conceptualize what adaptation actually is and how much money needs to be spent on it.

Media do not always tell us the real fact and the climate change problem might seem too big for us to deal with, as normal citizens. Everyone can do something, even small, to contribute to the cause, because we cannot see a problem that involves everyone just as someone else's problem. It is not a question of what I believe, it is a question of what I know and what I can do to tackle the problem on the basis of this knowledge.