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Find out what drives us to change Europe

European Union commissioner for Economic and Monetary Affairs Olli Rehn (L) speaks next to Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso during a press conference as the EU publishes its latest economic report.

AFP PHOTO / JOHN THYS

The transition to a sustainable society requires the EU to move beyond the quest for GDP growth, and beyond top-down governance

Back to growth, or forward to sustainability?

by Olivier De Schutter 17.11.2013 - 19:58

Within months Europeans will have elected new MEPs, and within a year member states will have nominated the next set of EU Commissioners. What should citizens demand of their new leadership? What priorities should guide the next set of European decision-makers, beyond saving the euro and getting creaking economies back to growth?

Europe is badly in need of a new mobilizing
project that maps out a bold vision for the future, and forms a pact with citizens on how to get there. The transition to a sustainable society is that project, and, unlike the creation of the internal market and the single currency, this is a project that should aim not only to change Europe, but to change the way the EU governs in the process.

No vision of the future can bypass sustainability. Sustainability is relevant far beyond climate change, energy use and environmental conservation. Ultimately it depends on our ability to shift to simpler, less environmentally-damaging modes of production and consumption.

Social justice, quality of life and a sense of community are not optional add-ons in this equation -- they are the very essence of a society that is able to sustain itself and its environment.

Simply cutting carbon emissions will not be enough to put our societies on sustainable footing. The growth of emissions can be slowed relative to the growth rate of the economy by carbon-saving technologies.

However, as UK economist Tim Jackson has convincingly shown, emissions cannot conceivably be stalled or reversed while the economy continues to expand, however great the technological advances of the coming years.

We need alternatives to GDP growth as the goal of public policy, and we need alternatives to work and wealth accumulation as the driving forces in our lives.

European policymakers have been too few and too timid in acknowledging this truth: that a genuine transition in the way we live -- and not just a technical readjustment of our growth model -- is the only true path to sustainability.

The good news is that this transition is already happening, and it is taking the form of diverse social innovations on the local level.

Innovative projects are everywhere, and they are challenging the conventional ways in which things
are used, bought and owned: car-sharing, city bikes, waste exchanges between companies, green savings accounts, ethical public procurement, urban agriculture. In some cases the quest for sustainability has been mainstreamed across entire territories, such as Transition Towns in the UK and Ireland, the Italian CittàSlow network, and the Fair Trade Towns springing up all across Europe.

The strength of these schemes is their diversity. Ideas have come from the bottom-up, responding to specific local concepts of sustainability, and they are all the stronger for it. The process of asking what people want for their community and their environment forces them to engage with their surroundings in new and innovative ways – and this can sow the seeds of social solidarity and non-wealth-related forms of fulfilment that are essential for all forms of sustainability.

What can be done to harness this wave of social innovation? What can the EU usefully do to support these innovations without stifling them? The answer is nothing less than a revolution in the EU’s modes of governance, and a reversal in the direction of policymaking. No longer can we invest our faith in policy frameworks that dispense funding for meeting a set of goals prescribed from the top-down. Some of the most promising sustainability initiatives may function across a territory rather than across a sector, and some may require no policy framework at all. What we need instead are tools that can allow us to adapt to a complex and fast-changing environment, recognizing the limits of our ability either to predict future trends or to identify in advance which solutions will work best in specific contexts.

The EU, a body used to governing from the top-down, must instead become a learning organization that channels the lessons and innovations occurring at the local level. It must recast itself as a facilitator of social innovation for sustainability.

The Reference Framework for European Sustainable Cities, an online toolkit for integrating...
sustainability into local policy, could point the way forward. It is a joint initiative of member states, local governments and the European Commission that seeks to create a common space for sharing practices ‘while respecting the diversity of local priorities’. This could be a blueprint for reimagining the EU’s role more broadly.

Empowering local actors does not mean rejecting a European approach. The most promising initiatives to date have harnessed the power of networks and shared practices, while avoiding the pitfalls of top-down policy prescriptions. Municipalities declaring themselves Transition Towns aspire to similar goals, but are free to decide on the ways and means of reducing energy use and encouraging sustainability.

Diversity is an asset, not a liability, and it is something that Europe has in abundance. It is because of the panoply of institutional and social innovations it can tap into that the EU is capable of winning the battle for sustainability. But first it must do away with the things that currently make it unfit for this transition: the way it pursues growth, and the way it makes policy.

Olivier De Schutter is the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to food and the winner of the 2013 Francqui Prize for contributions to the social sciences. He is convening an international conference in Brussels on 8-9 May 2014 on "The EU’s Fifth Project: Transitional Governance in the service of sustainable societies".

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