

## **Sustainability, Europe and inter-regional cooperation**

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Ladies and Gentleman

Do regions in Europe have a role to play in sustainability  
debate? The background for discussing the question is the  
present weak position of regions in the European Union.  
The regional politicians are the softies in Europe. So how  
can we progress from this starting point.

Let us recall discussions about sustainability agenda for the new millennium at the Annual Conference of the North Sea Commission in Arendal, Norway. It was in 2004. The political interest in sustainability was diminishing. We were worried about patchy actions under a heroic title of “transition”, as if we were passing a rainy period in the sustainability debate. A few problems are found to be managed and a few alarming ones are issued such as climate change and biodiversity loss. Linking sustainability to quality of life debates is argued. It is proposed to use regional qualities for sustainable innovations. The regions intended to co-operate along these lines but the political spirit was too low for much progress.

The slumping line in sustainability debate is bent three years later. Climate change, water issues, empty seas climb to the top of political agenda's. Actions emerge. Many have

contributed to the turnaround. Scientists served evidence for sense of urgency, businesses found opportunities of green consumerism and high oil prices and lobbyist groups pursued alarming, the North Sea Commission being one of them. The turning point, however, is created by the political action. All credit goes to Al Gore, former vice president of the United States and former president candidate. It is not his personality that matters because he does not appeal as a breathtaking visionary but rather as a good politician. It has been the United States move that has sets the sustainability agenda, not in the European one. Why could a US politician take up the challenge of sustainability, but not Kok, Prodi or Baroso? Why could Arnold Schwarzenegger catch global attention by selling his Hummer and not Angela Merkel by opening Solar Power Plants? Why do so many in Europe perceive the Goteborg agenda on

sustainability as being subordinated to the Lisbon agenda on productivity? Why does the Dirty Nation whip us to do better job and not the North Sea Region that is the cradle of sustainability? Do we loose track what politics is all about? It is frustrating and we should do something about that.

Europe is an excellent global brand. Ask an Indian or and African and you'll get an answer that you can earn in the US but you should live in Europe. Amsterdam of three quarter million inhabitants has almost as many tourists as ten times bigger New York. I do not think that the European politicians are inferior to any others but on the contrary. Europe shows to the world that former enemies can co-operate and that well-being of peoples needs fine threads for weaving, less barbwire for keeping. The European politicians successfully uplifted poor nations on the western and southern edges of Europe and they transfer

huge sums to the poor newcomers on the eastern flanks. The European Union takes also the lead in international sustainability, like combating climate change and poverty alleviation. The regional issues of nature, products, air, water and land are addressed in directives. The local sustainability for quality of life is tackled although some entrepreneurs complain about procedures. Europe is the showcase that a vivid planet goes together with well-being of people and reasonable profitability.

The European sustainability policy looks pretty but it has no stage to show it. It is because the sustainability agenda is by and large interregional. Land and water use, renewable energy, coast management, migration of people and species and others must be addressed inter-regionally because the problems and solutions are borderless. The need for inter-regional actions even grows as people and

nature become more mobile. Note that the mobility grows twice faster than income growth and we strive for more income. The inter-regional actions are highly demanded because innovations are usually rooted in the specific regional qualities. The innovators usually start interacting in a region to find clients, get fund, reach experts and so on. Successful interactions create business. The successful businesses form clusters. The sustainable clusters fuel economy. Progress towards sustainability implies inter-regionalism. Inter-regionalism, however, has no forum. The European Parliament is largely populated by old-timers and a few young strong horses to get political experience. It is like House of Lords. We do not have representation of the interests of communities in Europe, like it is in House of Commons. There is no stage for inter-regionalism, which implies no cakewalk for sustainability debaters. We need a

political forum for inter-regionalism to recap the lead in sustainability debate.

Politics is all about setting course of actions. What would inter-regionalism pursue? First of all, the politics of inter-regionalism must translate complains of the communities in Europe onto the EU political agenda. In analogy to the vision of Henry Petrovsky, a design guru, that peoples' complains drives product development, the translation of communities' complains brings creativity into the European politics on sustainability. Secondly, the inter-regionalism creates networks for exchange of know-how and experiences, thereby making better choices for actions thus saving money and contributing welfare. I would plea for a permanent and ever growing network between regions aiming at sustainability and innovations across the Europe. Thirdly, the regions can take part in transnational initiatives

for nature, health, culture and sports. I would champion a Sustainability Olympiad for sports that link good muscles with even better brains. The Sustainability Olympiad, in my view, provides a stage to renew traditional regional sports with sustainable innovations using renewable energy, water power and so on. Who would join the initiatives?

The European regions were able to integrate diversity of peoples and places. They proved that using diversity creates even more value than power play by economies of scale. Time has come to show that inter-regional co-operation creates sustainable Europe.

Thank you for your attention.