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EUROPEAN YOUNG LEADERS ALUMNI MEETING, BRUSSELS

Climate action: talking the talk and walking the walk

EVENT REPORT



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Climate action: talking the talk and walking the walk

As young people around the world swap classrooms for street protest to demand action in response to the climate emergency, the incoming President of the European Commission has promised to make a Green Deal her top priority. Ursula von der Leyen says she's heeding the voice of youth and aims to make Europe the world's first climate-neutral continent. She plans a European Climate Law to give legal certainty to the drive to carbon neutrality by 2050. The EC is talking the talk on climate, but can it walk the walk? The meeting of alumni from Friends of Europe's European Young Leaders Programme focused on how to ensure the proposed Green Deal can be an effective tool, rather than just another bumper sticker. It examined how other public institutions, the private sector, civil society and us all as individuals can take action that works to save the planet from the ravages of climate change.

"We know what the problem is, we want to shift to thinking about what can be done and how it can be done. That's where we want to get to ... an action-orientated focus," said **Dharmendra Kanani**, Director of Insights at Friends of Europe, who moderated the event.

Kicking off the debate, the group heard from **Daniela Jacob**, Lead Author of the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Special Report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. The report, released in October 2018, estimated that humankind has little more than a decade to keep global warming below 1.5°C. It warns that exceeding that maximum, even slightly, will dramatically increase risks of major disruption that permanently damage eco-systems and adversely affect the lives of hundreds of millions of people.

"If we warm another half degree, it is very likely that extreme situations like heatwaves, drought and heavy precipitation will happen more often and be stronger," Jacob said. "You can see changes already."

The scenario is grim, but Jacob was clear there is still time to avoid the worst, if we act fast. "The report clearly states, for the first time, there is no physical, chemical, technological, cultural, financial or other reason not to limit warming to 1.5 degrees," she said. "It is just about the political will."

She stressed that a multi-pronged approach is needed, running through action at all levels of society, from individuals to local, national and international authorities and within the private and public sectors. New evidence shows that effective climate action is not incompatible with sustainable development, Jacob added. She welcomed the growing public awareness of the need for action - as shown by the global wave of youth-led demonstrations - but added that governments have to wake up fast. The longer they wait the more costly action will become.

"It will be much more expensive and much more difficult in the future and it will harm society much more," Jacob explained.

"We have to accept that there is a transition phase, but the transition phase has to be fast," she added. "We are not fast enough. We have only, let's say, a five-year time frame to act and every month we wait is causing damage."

Even with effective action, the meeting heard that the world will probably have an overshoot to around 1.8°C before going back to the 1.5°C target by the end of the century. That will cause drastic but, in some cases, reversible impacts on ecosystems and human landscapes, meaning that disaster risk-reduction and other efforts to helping humanity to cope with the effects of climate change are essential alongside the focus on limiting temperature rises.

Turning to priorities for action, speakers underscored the importance of local-level action, pointing out that city authorities are often more ambitious than national governments in introducing measures to tackle climate change.

“We need a great transition of society,” said Jacob. “Cities can be forerunners and are key in changing habits, changing transport, changing mobility, changing energy use.” She added that cities are particularly vulnerable to climate change, facing the risk of overheating, flooding, invasive species and disease.

The group heard how European authorities are helping city authorities cope with climate adaptation issues like water-management and flood control. The current review of EU regional funding should provide more money to assist cities and regions drawing up adaptation plans. Local authorities’ roles in monitoring the effects of climate change and in research and information sharing were also highlighted.

Beyond the urban environment, the meeting looked at how Europe can push for change to make agriculture more responsive to the fight against climate change. Participants pointed out that efforts to introduce more environmental responsibility into the EU’s Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) were often torpedoed by national governments or the farm lobby in the European Parliament.

There were calls for EU environment ministers and the EP’s ENVI (Environment, Public Health and Food Safety) Committee to be given a bigger role in CAP decision-making. One speaker introduced a note of optimism into that debate pointing out that there was currently “a unique opportunity within the political system in Europe to move the agenda forward significantly with regard to climate action.”

The private sector clearly has a key role too, if efforts to limit climate change are to succeed. Businesses have to change their practices and invest in climate-friendly technological change. Investors and consumers are pushing companies for more environmentally friendly business models, but government can also set a regulatory framework that offers more incentives for good behaviour and sanctions for laggards.

“It is a combination of the political frame and the push, the innovation from industry and from the public,” said Jacob, who underlined the importance of technology in hitting the zero net emissions target. “We need technological development and behavioural changes to reach this and that’s an area where the companies could play a much more active role.”

Businesses are becoming more aware of the need for a faster switch to a more sustainable approach and are mainstreaming climate thinking into the way they operate, the meeting heard.

“Everyone in the corporate sector realises that we haven’t moved the needle in the way it needs to be moved,” an industry insider said, pointing to their own company which has established targets for cutting emissions in Europe by 25% and has transitioned

to using 100% renewable electricity for European manufacturing. Impetus for change is coming from shareholders, consumers and the government with a growing focus on sustainable financing, they said.

However, obstacles remain, such as convincing consumers that to switch from established products to more ecological alternatives that are unfamiliar and may be more expensive.

“There is no willingness to pay the premium for eco-responsible behaviour outside of a small minority,” said one business representative. That could be changing, however. “We are at a tipping point,” added another participant from the private sector. “We’re starting to find the right narrative to bring consumers along.”

One way to help consumers make informed purchasing decisions would be to have carbon-footprint labelling on products, the meeting heard. As public awareness of environmental issues grows, companies that move early to adapt could gain a competitive edge, the conference was told.

For a deeper look at prototyping innovation for carbon reduction, the Young Leaders are invited to hold a sandbox session at Coca-Cola’s R&D centre in the Brussels district of Anderlecht, the company’s largest outside the United States. The American beverage giant uses the centre for consumer research on sustainable products and to work with communities to promote environmental innovations.

As for government measures to generate climate-friendly business behaviour, carbon taxation was mentioned as one option, along with changes in regulations to make it easier for entities to get out of contracts committing them to outdated, unecological practices: the example of a music festival in Belgium contractually obliged to serve water in plastic bottles was mentioned. The EU’s Emissions Trading System (EU ETS) - the world’s largest, covering 11,000 factories, power stations and other installations - was highlighted as a “policy lever that works”, with one participant pointing out that the cap on emissions which the system imposes has been going down year-by-year and “compliance has been of more or less 100 %.”

Among the proposals that the EYL group agreed to take forward was the formation of a “stranded-asset working group” that would mobilise actors in the world of auditing to indicate how putting money into unsustainable infrastructure could leave investors facing costly liabilities, as coal and other hydrocarbon resources are phased out. Such auditing work is increasingly seen as a practical tool to discourage fossil-fuel investments on a global scale by highlighting the risk of financial liability if companies are left holding such stranded assets.

One participant said efforts were already underway to seek changes in auditing standards in the United Kingdom to require asset pricing. Another suggested that could be a “worm in the system” that brings real changes.

Another powerful tool being increasingly used in the fight to ensure business and government don’t backtrack on climate commitments is litigation. The group heard how recent legal action forced the Dutch government to step up its plans to address climate change. Similar cases are in the pipeline in Belgium, Germany, India and New Zealand. “This is a way for citizens to directly seek changes from their government depending on the laws of each individual country or state,” said a participant.



1. **Doug Ruley**, Chief Counsel at ClientEarth; **Xavier Damman**, Co-Founder and CEO of OpenCollective and European Young Leader
2. **Lindsey Nefesh-Clarke**, Founder and President of Women's World Wide Web and European Young Leader
3. **Sebastien de Halleux**, COO at Saildrone and European Young Leader
4. **Jamil Aanzi**, Business economist, UN Women's Representative and European Young Leader; **Denis Jaromil Roio**, Founder of Dyne.org Foundation and European Young Leader
5. **Yui Kamikawa**, Senior Manager for Global Sustainability at The Coca-Cola Company; **Artur Runge-Metzger**, Director for Climate Strategy, Governance and Emissions from Non-Trading Sectors at the European Commission Directorate-General for Climate Action



Legal action has also been taken against infrastructure and companies, such as coal-fired power plants. There too, there have been successful cases, notably in Spain and Greece. Legal means to stop activity damaging the planet can also include shareholder action: climate campaigners can buy shares in polluting companies then introduce shareholder resolutions demanding they clean up their act. If they don't follow up, they can be sued.

Another idea suggested during the event was for the creation of a whistle-blower platform similar to Global Leaks, where insiders could flag climate abuse.

Taking forward the need for global action, many contributors asked how Europe can promote the fight against climate change beyond its borders. "There are so many people in the U.S. that do not really care because they are negationists, so what could Europe do to reach those people?" asked European Young Leader **Alfredo Muñoz**, Founder and CEO of architecture and design firm ABIBOO. "What could we do from Europe to impact those people from the bottom up and what is the impact Europe can have in India or China?" he asked.

Jacob responded with a call for a more pro-active European approach in global climate affairs. "Europe has to get back and realise its strengths, I cannot understand that Europe is sitting like a little rabbit in front of a snake and the snake is China or India or the U.S.," she said. "We need new thinking in the political arena."

“ Maybe here Trump is our ally, because by imposing tariffs very suddenly on significant amounts of goods around the world, he's ... made businesses realise that they can survive if they suddenly have to change business models

Sebastien de Halleux, COO at Saildrone and European Young Leader

Participants agreed that the climate problem won't be solved without the United States. There were calls for the use of trade levers to prevent "shuffling carbon around the world" when European restrictions see emissions displaced to other parts of the world. Other ideas included writing respect for the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change into trade agreements – something the EU has already done in some cases - and even for sanctions against the worst climate abusers.

Jacob said forward thinking European regulation on the climate does have an influence on other countries. She also pointed out that many nations around the world are moving ahead with progressive climate ideas: she cited Indonesia's growing use of wind power and Rwanda's plans for a "green airport" with net zero emissions.

European Young Leader **Denis Jaromil Roio**, Founder of Dyne.org Foundation, explained how he's seen action undertaken in Chinese cities, such as the removal of car lanes and the planting of trees, but was unconvinced of the effectiveness of such measures. "The transformation is happening also there, but I would like to distinguish how much is marketing of a new model ... and how much is real intervention that will impact," he said.

Sebastien de Halleux, COO at Saildrone and another European Young Leader, wondered whether U.S. President Donald Trump might conversely be helping secure a change in business mindsets that could eventually favour a switch to climate-friendly policies, despite his own climate scepticism.

“Maybe here Trump is our ally, because by imposing tariffs very suddenly on significant amounts of goods around the world, he’s ... made businesses realise that they can survive if they suddenly have to change business models,” he said.

Within the European Commission, the group was told, the Climate Action department has very good relations with the directorate-general handling international cooperation and development, and that in charge of relations with neighbouring countries. They share ideas on policy making and promoting positive climate outcomes beyond the EU’s borders.

More broadly, the group was informed on the thinking behind the Commission’s climate approach. There is a feeling that, although much was accomplished with the legislative package adopted under Jean-Claude Juncker, more needs to be done. “If we want to stay in the forefront of the battle against climate change, we have to take a new commitment longer-term,” said one participant. Hence Von der Leyen’s drive for carbon neutrality by 2050 and transformation with a scale and pace that “is absolute unprecedented”.

To get there, work needs to start “tomorrow” which means the new Commission will be making sure its new budgetary framework aligns with that objective; that all its directorates-general are mainstreaming climate action in their work; and that the regulatory framework cements irrevocable climate objectives, including in new areas such as CO₂ removal.

Research must be done on new production processes, for example to produce green steel and clean cement, and to make sure they are both affordable and attractive to consumers. Institutions like the European Investment Bank will have to make sure it doesn’t fund stranded assets. EU member states will be asked to produce long-term plans to fit into a “green dashboard” showing what each country is doing to tackle climate change.

Speakers raised the risk that poorly thought-out climate legislation that produces short-term pain to sectors of the community can trigger a backlash, such as the “yellow vest” movement in France that rebelled over a rise in diesel taxes. “That is an argument that is used too often, too strongly and too soon to excuse no action,” said Jacob, who suggested that risk can be avoided by showing how pro-climate policies and technology can bring jobs and welfare: “It is about leaving no one behind, no region behind and saving the planet as a people. We can do this in Europe.”

Involving the individual in the decision-making process on climate affairs, through forms of direct democracy such as citizens’ committees, was one idea put forward to avoid a potential backlash and to produce more agile responses to the crisis.

“People think that the impact of climate change will be mostly elsewhere, that it’s not really going to impact them,” said climate activist Xavier Damman, Co-Founder and CEO of OpenCollective, and European Young Leader. He underscored the need to show “the impact here in Europe ... the likelihood that we are going to see crop failures, spikes in prices for commodities which will probably create a lot of social unrest.”

Citizens can participate in grass-roots campaigning to demand stronger climate action and get more involved politically. They can fight disinformation by pushing facts, scientific-based information and good examples of how climate action has positive social and economic impacts as well as helping the planet, said Jacob.

The importance of each individual citizen playing their part in the fight against climate change in their daily lifestyle decisions came up repeatedly during the day.

“It’s really fashionable to be part of the climate mitigation crowd, that’s where you have to be. It must be fun – it’s not about fear, it’s about fun

Daniela Jacob, Lead Author of the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Special Report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels

Asked to prioritise actions people can take, Jacob urged participants to take trains instead of planes and to eat less meat. Or, if they really cannot do without their Wiener Schnitzel, to check the sourcing of their meat and support local farmers.

She suggested individuals set personal targets for cutting their carbon footprints. To help that along, Young Leaders agreed to pool their talents to research the prospects of creating an app that enables users to track their carbon footprint, similar to those like Fitbit that measures personal fitness metrics, or the travel planning app Tripit.

Jacob argued that cutting emissions should be fun, as people compete with friends to secure greener footprints. “It’s really fashionable to be part of the climate mitigation crowd, that’s where you have to be,” she said. “It must be fun – it’s not about fear, it’s about fun.”



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1. **Alfredo Munoz**, Founder and CEO of ABIBOO and European Young Leader; **Eduardo Portal Martin**, Conductor and Founder of Antares Ensemble and European Young Leader
2. **Ayman Mhanna**, Executive Director, Samir Kassir Foundation and MENA Young Leader
3. **Daniela Jacob**, Lead Author of the IPCC Special Report on the Impacts of Global Warming of 1.5°C and Director of the Climate Service Center Germany
4. **Ozan Yanar**, Member of the Helsinki City Council, former Member of the National Parliament of Finland and European Young Leader
5. **Edoardo Camilli**, Co-Founder & CEO, Hozint - Horizon Intelligence and European Young Leader



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