

Report



- Date and time: 8 December 2020, 9:00 - 10:30
- Title of the session: **From climate communication to behavioural change**
- Format (select one): Workshop
- Moderator: **Koen Thewissen** (communication strategist, weareDaniel) / Speakers: **Cillian Lohan** (Vice-President, European Economic and Social Committee), **Thomas Froimovici** (Head of Unit, Web Content, European Investment Bank), **Professor Phoebe Koundouri** (Association of Environmental and Natural Resource Economists)

Main topics discussed

This workshop covered how climate communication can lead to behavioural changes, with each speaker exploring from their own perspectives how this is possible and whether it can happen on time to stop the most adverse effects of climate change. Overall, the feeling was that it is possible, as there are many incentives that, if correct deployed, can encourage citizens, businesses, and authorities to make behavioural changes. This session specifically covered the economic, business, and public opinion angles on shifting to more sustainable behaviours.

Key messages from each speaker

Professor **Phoebe Koundouri** explained that there were three incoming tsunamis: COVID-19, the recession, and climate change. Each was worse than the last, but we had the tools to deal with them. Over the years there had been a push for greater global coordination against climate change, and the EU was currently leading with the European Green Deal. It would still take massive financial commitments to achieve our goals, but more work was being done to achieve this. The EU had even published a taxonomy to guide businesses in making themselves more sustainable. If the economic instruments were used wisely, and without leaving some people behind, a sustainable transition was possible.

Cillian Lohan spoke about how we had seen mobilisation for climate ambitions and actions in 2019. The movement was still there in 2020, even if less visible. The message had resonated in policies, and COVID-19 gave us a practical example of what happens when experts and policy-makers are ignored, and what happens when they are listened to: these lessons must apply to the climate crisis. We had also seen that broader participation could generate greater change, not only in climate policies, and could pressure governments to enact change. It was hugely important not to hold citizens responsible for failure to deliver sustainable adaptation, since they were hampered by the infrastructure. We needed to make the healthier and more sustainable choice the easiest and most affordable choice. The sustainable option must not be a luxury choice for the middle class. He also explained that we need to look at this through the lens of culture: there must be a cultural shift in how we value things and how we interact with our environment, and we still lacked literature and communications. We dealt too much in nightmare scenarios instead of looking to the future we were aiming for. Furthermore, the big failing of the environmental movement in the last 20-30 years was that it had not been people-focused: it had always been "save the planet". We needed to put people at the centre, so as to keep the world in the sweet spot where we can prosper.

Thomas Froimovici then explained that the public was becoming more aware of (and sometimes even more knowledgeable about) the climate emergency than politicians. The EIB was the world's largest provider of climate finance and had conducted surveys to see what public opinion on climate change was across the developed world. He also explained that to foster behavioural change and stimulate the intended impact, the focus needed to be on citizens. We needed to show people that climate change is already a reality, leverage different media outlets, reach out directly to local news providers, and provide clear and catchy messages for climate-change communicators.

Questions from the audience

If citizens are keen to move to more sustainable solutions, should government just force companies to adapt?

- **Phoebe Koundouri:** companies are owned by citizens, so I do not differentiate between them. They are different entities of course, but the way to deal with an existential crisis is to get everyone on board and not create two opposing parts. Citizens want a greener future because they understand it is better for their health, but they should realise that it will be good for profits as well. Companies and citizens need to invest in sustainable choices, because at the end of the day it will benefit their bottom line. Money needs to go to those who will commit to trying to become greener.

The current participatory models distract from real change: do you have any examples where they did work and companies were able to achieve positive results?

- **Cillian Lohan:** We have citizens' assemblies in Ireland and we have seen some great results (abortion and gay marriage). I think when participation is strong and if they feel what they say will be acted on, citizens participate more. On climate, there can be a box-ticking exercise by authorities. It still feels like the economy is the number one priority here, so we need to shift our mind-set when designing solutions.

Could you elaborate on what including "indigenous wisdom" in our society would look like today?

- **Cillian Lohan:** In nature, we see more recognition of long-term planning and delayed gratification. We live in a culture of instant gratification and disconnection from nature that does not prioritise long-term thinking and practices. Indigenous cultures did this much more than we do.
- **Thomas Froimovici:** We need to impose rules, which is what is already happening. One thing we did not mention is the risk that some will lose out more than others. That is why we need a JUST transition – to make sure no one is left behind. The new products will probably fall in price. We need to make sure that the number of potential losers is as small as possible or can be addressed as soon as possible.

You said that citizens are more advanced in their understanding of the emergency and are willing to burden their future selves with rules that are not accepted today. Do you think that people will also vote for those parties? Do you see people really moving in this direction?

- **Thomas Froimovici:** Politicians are more confident that they can set stricter rules after seeing the survey results, because they might have the wrong impression about what will lose them votes. If they see it in their own families as well it gives them the confidence to support those policies. Social proof is an important tool.
- **Phoebe Koundouri:** it is important that the rules are not imposed from the outside. It is important to design policies that incentivise in the right direction, that are inclusive and allow the players to make the transition. It is important not to trap people in a dead end. The process has to be based on an understanding that this is the way ahead and that people will get the support they need to make the transition.

Take-away messages

The messages to take away from this session are that there is good reason to be hopeful about climate change in the future, although with some disclaimers. Overall, the crisis has shown that across society we can adapt to adverse situations, we can coordinate on a global scale, and that the economic incentives for sustainable transition exist.