

Event Report

READY FOR PARIS, PUSHED BY EUROPE'S REGIONS? THE EU'S CHALLENGES AHEAD FOR CLIMATE NEGOTIATIONS

On 23 September 2014, the Rhineland-Palatinate Ministry of Economic Affairs, Energy, Climate Protection and Regional Planning hosted a conference in cooperation with the Representation of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia to the EU, the Heinrich Böll Foundation EU Office and the Rhineland Palatinate Competence Centre for Climate Change Impacts. The discussion focused on EU leadership in international climate negotiations and the role of municipalities and regional governments in climate mitigation and emissions reduction.

The timing of the event was by no means coincidental. It was scheduled to coincide with the 23 September UN Climate Summit in New York as well as the run-up to the European Council's decisions on the post-2020 climate framework. During the much anticipated UN summit, Secretary General Ban Ki-moon requested that world leaders come to the table with "bold pledges" for international action on climate. Once again, the international spotlight turned to the EU and its capacity to forge solutions and make pledges in the UN arena.

Panel participants included representatives from the local representations of Rhineland-Palatinate as well as that of North-Rhine Westphalia. Also among the panelists were representatives from the European Commission and Parliament respectively, as well as civil society organisations and industry stakeholders. The debate was opened by Rainer Steffens, Director of the North Rhine-Westphalia Representation, and moderated by Bastian Hermisson, Director of the Heinrich Böll Foundation in Brussels.

The panelists based their discussion on the following key questions:

- Can the EU gain back a pioneer role through own pledges when it comes to mitigation, adaptation and financing - or is there a risk for the Union to remain a latecomer due to internal tug wars? Does Europe rather need fresh impetus from its regions to reach real climate commitments in the EU, as time runs out until talks under UN auspices have to be finalized in Paris next year?
- With more and more municipalities and regions embarking successfully on climate action, are there chances for these actors to go beyond current achievements, particularly if an ambitious EU strategy does not see the light of day?
- As regional and local entities - directly affected by climate change - would be hit hard by a failure of the 2015 Paris summit, how can local and regional climate action be driven forward and coordinated more transnationally in the near future?

Ms. Eveline Lemke, Minister of Economic Affairs, Climate Protection, Energy and Regional Planning of Rhineland-Palatinate spoke of the region's newly adopted climate protection law, which strives for a carbon neutral economy by the year 2050. She also pointed to climate finance as a potential roadblock to further progress.

Ms. Evelyne Huytebroeck, Chair of the European Regional Executive Committee of ICLEI - Local Governments for Sustainability, stressed the importance of a "bottom up" approach to climate action and asserted that local governments are the best allies for national governments when it comes to long-term sustainability measures. She argued in favor of the expansion of climate initiatives that "foster exchange of good practice and contribute to capacity building at local level."

Ms. Rebecca Harms, Co-President of the Greens/EFA-Group, critiqued the "uphill" nature of climate policy in Brussels and argued that the renewable energy debate of the EU should be reframed into one of energy security: "Wind turbines can be a symbol of freedom, not just a symbol of environmental protection."

Mr. Jos Delbeke, the Director-General of DG Climate Action in the European Commission, focused on EU progress as a global leader in "decisive climate action." The EU, he argued, is a tangible example of how economic growth and emissions reduction can go hand in hand. He also addressed what he referred to as an EU-wide "fatigue" of legally binding climate and energy targets and expressed concerns over issues of internal equity and burden sharing.

Dr Ulrich Matthes, Director at the Rhineland-Palatinate Competence Centre for Climate Change Impacts, highlighted the importance of local and regional climate adaptation. He stressed synergies between mitigation and adaptation measures and the need for stakeholder consultations and best practice exchanges.

Mr. Traugott Ulrich, Startup Projects Director at the KSB Company, reported from his experience with industry regulations in non-EU countries. European climate policies have set an example at global scale, which has the potential to initiate a "paradigm change in the industry."

Audience questions focused on issues of common market rules and a perceived lack of global governance institutions. The Transatlantic Trade agreements and their impact on European energy markets as well as the newly appointed Commissioner of Energy and Climate Change were also topics of inquiry.

The debate was followed by a reception.