

1st European Day of Sustainable Communities

Connecting citizen-led initiatives and public policies

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(Photos: EESC)

Several hundred citizen-led events took place across Europe on 23 September 2017, the first "European Day of Sustainable Communities". At the political level, the Day was launched on 22 September in Brussels, through a seminar at the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) which brought together grassroots initiatives on climate action and sustainability and EU policy makers.



"I hope someday we'll have a GLOBAL Day of Sustainable Communities", said **Kosha Anja Joubert**, the Executive Director of [GEN International](#), the Global Ecovillage Network, during her speech at the launch seminar of the [1st European Day of Sustainable Communities](#), which brought together around 130 people, including representatives of community-led initiatives and several EU institutions (EESC, European Commission and Parliament).

"It's amazing to see how this global complex challenge can motivate so many people ready to do something in their local communities", said **Robert Hall**, the president of [ECOLISE](#), the European

network for community-led initiatives on climate change and sustainability, which initiated this European Day. "There are for instance around 1,200 Transition Towns, 15,000 'ecovillages' and 3 million people involved in permaculture. A study done by the [TESS](#) project shows that if only 5% of citizens adopted a transition-friendly behaviour, 85% of the EU's 2020 targets for climate action would be achieved."

ECOLISE, which was [initiated by Eamon O'Hara \(AEIDL\) in 2013](#), now has a membership of [38 organisations supporting community-led action](#) in 18 countries. The network has a three-pillar strategy: 1) policy advocacy; 2) knowledge-learning and sharing; and 3) communication and awareness-raising.



Citizen-led action and public support

The 22 September meeting was one of the first opportunities ever for exchanges between local initiatives and policymakers, and as **Brenda King**, the chairwoman of the EESC Sustainable Development Observatory, said: "*The European Economic and Social Committee can act as a bridge between policymakers and sustainable community-led initiatives.*"

A video conference ("*to avoid flying*") allowed participants to hear from five citizen-led initiatives in Ireland, Sweden, France and Belgium¹, Croatia and Portugal. This was followed by **Kosha Anja Joubert** who underlined the importance of the ecovillage movement throughout the world.

Rudolf Niessler (European Commission / DG REGIO) reminded participants of the magnitude of transition-related investments and projects supported by EU cohesion policy (€8 billion for climate action, €35 billion for the environment, €59 billion for sustainable mobility), also emphasizing community-led local development (CLLD), which can directly involve citizens through "local action

¹ "[Fête des Possibles](#)", from 18 to 30 September, consists of more than 1,500 local events in France and Belgium organised by 85 transition groups.

groups". In this regard, Mr Niessler referred to the success of the [LEADER](#) pioneering approach to rural development.



Lifting road blocks

The panel and ensuing discussions focused on the main challenges and obstacles faced by community-led initiatives, on climate change and sustainability, starting with the "lack of funding, capacity building and burnout," said **Filipa Pimental** of [Transition Network](#).

"Engaging in a citizen group takes up a lot of time and energy, which is often difficult to reconcile with one's work..." confirmed **Peter Ulrich** of the [ICLEI](#) association, which brings together 1,500 local authorities worldwide.

[Philippe Lamberts](#), MEP (The Greens/European Free Alliance), summarized the obstacles and sometimes paradoxes that hamper the relationship between community-led action and the local, national and European policy levels. "*The public authorities' top-down approach is contrary to the 'collective intelligence' of citizen-led action. We need to reinvent democracy. But the bottom-up approach is not the panacea either.*" To lift road blocks, obtain support and mobilize funding, one has to be aware that the European level has a 'macro' vision whereas the local level has a 'micro' vision. "*It's easier to find money for an airport than for a transition initiative. We, The Greens, are trying to bring micro expectations to the macro levels, but policymakers lack audacity.*" An opinion shared by the seminar facilitator, **Sarah McAdam** ([Transition Network](#)), who mentioned the example of the LEADER approach, which often serves as an intermediary between the micro and macro levels.

According to **Artur Runge-Metzger** (European Commission / DG CLIMA), "*there is a huge room for improvement*", but it requires a mental shift by public funders: "*We are aware that procedures are too burdensome for a small local group, which does not know if it reaches the right political*

level. *Public funding is not based on trust but on control...*" In short, procedures should be simplified and made more flexible.



Conclusions

Former Director-General for the Environment at the European Commission, **Karl Falkenberg**, acted as 'keynote-listener' for the seminar. He summarized what came out of the debate:

- *"Sustainability should be the brand that unifies Europe."*
- *"You have to recognize that all these good stories remain marginal. One of the main challenges is to disseminate them among the general public and to upscale them to elected politicians, thereby risking to be confronted to political parties. The majority of the electorate is resistant to change, especially to the new behaviour transition requires. In a democracy, political parties and authorities first respond to what the majority demands."*
- *Control bodies tend to trust big business and distrust SMEs, which they consider as potential fraudsters. They closely control them. But the 'Dieselgate' has showed that this reasoning is wrong."*

Another EESC representative, **Öznem Yildirim** (CGT, General Confederation of Labour, France) ended the seminar by stressing its importance and interest of such an event: *"Raising awareness of citizen-led initiatives to an organisation such as the EESC, whose mission is precisely to reflect on societal issues."*

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